

## Turning 291

### Chapter 291

With a resounding click, Yuder's foggy mind suddenly awakened.

"Falling asleep while playing a game, it must have been incredibly boring."

Yuder stared blankly at Kishiar, who was watching him through narrowed eyes. The sound that had just echoed in his ears was the noise of the man in front of him placing a game piece on the board. He frowned, his gaze scanning the scattered pieces on the black board. At a glance, it was clear his position was hopelessly cornered. The thought of simply surrendering the game and going to sleep was becoming increasingly attractive.

"Is it not natural for me to lose focus? Wasn't it the Commander who suddenly appeared through my bedroom window at dawn and pulled out a game board?"

"The Commander, you say."

"Ah, yes. You're the Duke now, aren't you?"

Kishiar chuckled softly at Yuder's retort, laced subtly with annoyance.

"It seems the title doesn't stick no matter how many times I say it."

"Well, I can't help it. I'm a commoner with no need for formal titles."

Despite Yuder's cold sarcasm, Kishiar did not show anger. In that regard, he was a remarkably generous man.

"Are you tired?"

"Is that even a question?"

Yuder had just returned to the Commander's quarters in the Cavalry after spending a few days at the imperial palace, summoned by Emperor Katchian. He was hardly pleased to encounter an uninvited guest at a time when he had just managed to relax after constant tension.

"I see... you must have had a tough day."

"It's not just today, it's always difficult. If you're going to visit the Cavalry, can't you give some notice instead of constantly sneaking in?"

"You know better than anyone that I can't do that, Yuder."

Kishiar had never set foot in the capital since he left his position as the Commander of the Cavalry and returned to Peletta. Of course, that was only official. Despite the eyes and ears the Katchian Emperor had placed around the Peletta region, Kishiar managed to evade them and intrude into Yuder's bedroom at will. It was a shocking fact that those who reported on the Duke of Peletta as if the world would end even when he simply went to the restroom would drop dead if they knew.

If the people found out that Kishiar La Orr was here alone, the whole capital would be turned upside down. Especially if they knew he was calmly playing a strategy game within the Cavalry.

Since Kishiar only played games, muttered nonsense, and then slept before leaving, Yuder had not reported his unusual behavior until now. But ever since he heard the recent news, he had started to question whether he could continue to tolerate this situation.

The Duke of Peletta was gathering personal Knights and soldiers in Peletta to prepare for a rebellion.

He didn't know whether it was true or not, but the fact that such rumors were circulating was already a dangerous matter. The young emperor, who was receiving praise for his unprecedented attention to his people, showed no mercy when it came to acts of betrayal. The reason why the Cavalry established by Kishiar La Orr, whom he had been cautious of, had been able to hold on until now was because the Katchian Emperor had considered them, and Yuder, useful pawns. But if the Katchian Emperor heard this news...

Yuder observed Kishiar, who was engrossed in thought, gazing at the tactical game board without uttering a word. He wondered if the rumors about Kishiar were true, and even if he inquired, would Kishiar even deign to respond? Kishiar was someone who hadn't shared his plans with Yuder, not even when he was about to relinquish his position as Commander. Yuder wasn't sure whether

Kishiar saw any more value in the Cavalry than a discarded childhood toy. With a heavy heart, Yuder sighed deeply. Whether Kishiar knew what was happening around him or not, he remained his usual inscrutable self.

Yuder found himself yearning for the days when he only had to train and follow orders. Assuming the Commander's role had brought more hassle than satisfaction. The burden he was forced to bear, thanks to the man right in front of him, made his situation even more uncomfortable.

"I thought you were finally awake, but now it seems you're just lost in pointless thoughts."

As if reading Yuder's thoughts, Kishiar murmured. His face, illuminated by the glow of the magic stone stove - the only light in the darkness, flickered in a variety of colors. His sharp jawline, more defined due to weight loss, and the shadows beneath his lifeless eyes might have seemed unattractive, but the man still managed to draw inattention, leaving one breathless.

"I suppose it's not the right atmosphere to continue the game."

Kishiar put down the last game piece he held in his hand.

"But next time, I hope you'll make the game more entertaining."

"I'm busy. There must be plenty of game partners in Peletta."

"None."

None? What did he mean by none? Yuder couldn't counter his dismissive claim without any evidence.

"I can't understand why you insist on this game, knowing I'm not particularly good at it."

"What can I do if I find it amusing to see your gaming habits remain the same, no matter how many times we play?"

Yuder scrunched his nose and stood up from his seat.

"So, you're now indirectly telling me to change my habit of pushing a single piece forward first. Excuse made. So when will you be leaving today?"

Kishiar briefly squinted, before quickly reverting back to his usual expression. That was the only change Yuder could spot, but he felt a strange stirring in his chest, pressing down on it lightly with his hand. Here it went again. Whenever he was with Kishiar, he felt like this. His heart would suddenly ache for no reason, or it would pound painfully fast.

Evading Kishiar's gaze that caused him such distress, Yuder moved toward the magic stone stove. He reached into the container next to it to add more stones, but a firm hand reached out from behind and pulled him back.

A magic stone slipped from his grasp and rolled across the floor, coming to rest in a corner. However, Yuder wasn't given the chance to retrieve it.

"Well... when will I be leaving?"

One thing's certain, it won't be anytime soon.

Golden strands of hair cascading near his ear tickled his cheek. A low, husky voice resonated deep within his waist. Yuder shivered as he felt the cold touch penetrating through his clothes. The sensation of leather gloves tracing his bare skin never became familiar, no matter how many times he experienced it.

However, despite his denial, his body reacted instinctively to the intoxicating body scent that wafted from the figure pressed against his back. Sweat began to pool on his body, as if it had been waiting for this moment, and heat started to rise. With the sensation of his mouth becoming dry as though he had placed food before it, and a fiery sensation growing in his lower abdomen, Yuder bit his lip and cast his eyes downward. The man who gently pulled his weakening waist into his embrace, and who caressed the inside of his wrist that he held with his lips, led him towards the bed.

"Yes... maybe the game was just an excuse."

The man who held his collapsing body on the white sheets, so closely that there was not the slightest gap, and buried his nose in his neck, had breaths so ragged they felt painful.

"I feel like I can live now."

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Even after awakening from the dream, Yuder lay still for a long while. It was due to the bandages wrapped around his eyes, making it hard to distinguish between reality and dreams.

'Why did I have to dream about that time?'

In his dream, he saw a time not long after he had become the Commander of the Cavalry. It was a time when Kishiar, despite his retirement, would frequently pop into the Commander's office, startling him. He had thought that their physical relationship would not continue once Kishiar returned to Peletta, a realization that was foolish to have believed, taking less than ten days to recognize. Looking back, it was an utterly ridiculous event, one of the few in his life.

Recalling the chest pain he had felt while conversing with Kishiar in his dream, Yuder let out a deep breath.

'I'm sure my memory only carried irritation...was I really so familiar with such pain?'

A very foreign sensation, yet at the same time, oddly familiar. It felt as if a piece of a puzzle that had been missing had just fallen into place.

And Yuder had experienced that sensation before. It was after he had defeated Pethuamet, when all his energy was drained, and his sense of his entire body was briefly disconnected. The confusion and questioning he felt when an emotion he had no memory of suddenly inserted itself naturally to fill a void had returned in exactly the same way.

What exactly was that sensation, that emotion?

A poignant pain that felt like it belonged to him, yet didn't.

As he touched his chest in a daze, as if tracing that pain, a soft voice came from beside him.

"Are you awake?"

Yuder stopped moving. He slowly turned his head toward the direction of the sound, but all he could see was darkness.

"...Commander."

"You seemed to be having a nightmare. Your breathing changed several times."

Kishiar's voice was as calm as that of a person who was not angry. Yet, that peculiar calmness had a power to it that made it chilling for the listener.

"What did you dream of?"

"...I don't know."

Honestly speaking, it was closer to a lustful dream than a nightmare, so Yuder lied. Kishiar did not ask any further.

The surroundings were very quiet. Even when he strained his ears, he couldn't sense anything. The presence of Kanna and Lusan, who were next to him before he fell asleep, and the noisy sounds from outside seemed as if they had never been there, it was just so silent.

Was it because of the silence, or was it because he dreamt of the past?

Yuder became acutely aware of his hypersensitivity to the man's presence beside him. It was different from when others were around. Even in the darkness, he could feel his presence as sharply as if it were piercing his skin. In order to escape from this unfamiliar sensation, he forced himself to speak.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"About a day."

Kishiar responded curtly.

"It seems like it's night, Commander. Aren't you going to sleep?"

"...Are you worrying about me now?"

A dry counter-question came back. His voice carried no trace of amusement.

"I apologize."

Yuder promptly apologized.

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"I'm sorry."

But his apology seemed to provoke an entirely different emotion in the other party.

"Sorry, you say... what are you sorry for?"

An even more bitter whisper than before faintly knocked on his eardrums. If he reacted impulsively and apologized again, he feared the voice might shatter. Struggling to speak, Yuder opened his mouth.

"Before... I broke my promise that I wouldn't get hurt. You told me not to act recklessly, but I did anyway..."

"..."

"And then..."

His mind felt clouded, making it more challenging than usual to gather his thoughts. On reflection, his mouth felt much drier than usual, and his breath felt hot. As if confirming what Lusan said before he fell asleep, the pain reliever's effect seemed to be wearing off, leaving the monster's venomous effect to permeate his skin. As his drawn-out words halted and silence descended,

Kishiar let out a long sigh. The inconsequential sound of breath strangely felt like a stabbing sword to his heart.

"So you broke all of them, knowing full well what they were about. It must mean you considered the task at hand more important."

He did, to be honest, but Yuder decided not to answer.

If given the same chance again, he would undoubtedly act to kill Pethuamet. As the only one who knew what disaster the monster could become, it was the best choice he could make, and he didn't regret the result. With Pethuamet dead, countless people would now survive, and long-standing cities and towns would continue to thrive, unbroken.

And the Cavalry members who had bravely fought and fell without anyone's help, and their Commander, who had single-handedly confronted Pethuamet, bloodied and battered, would have been spared from the start.

Although he couldn't explain this to Kishiar, the fact alone was more than enough to justify the ordeal for Yuder. In the darkness that veiled his sight, Yuder cleared his mind of the vivid memory of the white robe at the cliff's edge. And he resolved that, whatever anger Kishiar might express, he would humbly accept it as a deserved punishment.

"When I was young, my dream was to be a hero."

But the reply that came back contained an unexpected story.

"I read stories about the First Emperor of the Empire and the heroes who helped him every day. I couldn't bear to suppress everything I had for the sake of my body, as the people around me advised. I wanted to be a hero who would willingly sacrifice his life for the right cause, who wouldn't regret any sacrifice, and who would move forward..."

His quiet monologue paused momentarily after the last phrase. A faint, empty laughter trickled out.

"Back then, I didn't know how the people around a hero felt."

"..."



"Do you know that after the first Emperor, who achieved a historic task, was called early by the God, the Empress who succeeded him requested in her will that their graves not be placed side by side, but instead laid facing each other forever?"

Yuder slightly shook his head. That simple movement seemed to make his entire brain sway, the inside of his eyes becoming unbearably hot.

"People naturally didn't comply with her will. So she was simply laid next to the Emperor's grave. I couldn't understand it then, but now I have an inkling of why she might have made that request."

"...Commander."

As he faintly called him, a hand reached out and gently caressed Yuder's cheek. Though he was not usually one to run hot, right now the fingertips touching his skin felt unnaturally cold. It seemed his own physical condition was far from normal.

"Yuder Aile, you've performed a heroic feat. You have saved us all from a great disaster without fear, standing in place of those who, blinded by their momentary greed, nearly doomed both themselves and everyone else. This is an admirable deed, certainly deserving of praise. As your superior, I too should commend such an action."

Despite the formal language he consciously used, he could feel the faintest, almost extinguished emotion transmitted through the hand on his cheek.

"...But I can't."

His fingers on his cheek started to tremble slowly.

"How can I praise your near-death with a smile on my face? I can't even comprehend how I could have previously performed such actions without thought. I'm overwhelmed with relentless regrets and recollections... whether it would have been right to let you go as you wished, or if it would have been better for me to remain... even after contemplating it numerous times, I couldn't find an answer. While I kept telling myself it's alright because you're safe, the situation has concluded well, and we can turn the tables far better than we initially planned, I couldn't forgive myself for thinking that way. It was all unbearable. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The pain in Kishiar's voice was heart-wrenching. He was in the midst of doubting himself, resenting himself, and not wanting to be angry at Yuder. The moment he realized his anger was directed at himself, not him, and he was in torment, Yuder found himself speechless. Suddenly, he couldn't breathe.

"Commander."

Yuder called out to him with difficulty. The trembling hand that held his cheek stopped. He had never wanted to see his face, which must have been looking down at him, more desperately. His chest hurt terribly as if his previous thought that he didn't regret what he had done was a lie. It was like a sculptor hollowing out his ribs with a chisel. Swallowing pain worse than the monster's venom, he hastily licked his lips.

"Commander, it's not your fault. Please just get angry at me. Isn't it my fault for not waiting for you to arrive and only thinking about resolving it quickly, not considering the surroundings? I said the mages could figure out how to cancel the amplification, but when the situation arose, I didn't even think about it..."

"It was wise not to wait for them."

His muted voice coldly interrupted him.

"...Pardon?"

Kishiar didn't respond. In the silence, heavy as boiling water, the touch of his five fingers on Yuder's cheek was the only reminder of his presence.

"I thought I'd gotten used to accepting the disappearance of someone from the world... It appears I was wrong."

His long fingertips very carefully yet frantically stroked over the bandage covering his closed eyes, his forehead, his hair. It was a gesture both Lusan and Kanna had done, but Kishiar's touch felt fundamentally different from theirs. It was the first time Yuder had ever felt such a painful, caressing touch from someone.

"In the moment I thought you had breathed your last in my arms, until you opened your eyes again, I couldn't think of anything."

"..."

"Truly, nothing at all..."

As the man repeated his whispers, his hand ceaselessly stroked Yuder's hair over his ear.

"And when you opened your eyes and smiled, oblivious to everything... what do you think I felt then?"

Yuder had tried to mutter an apology once more, but the fingertips pressing gently beneath his lips halted his words.

"You always teach me feelings I've never felt before. Sometimes you seem to be the only one like me, at other times, you make me feel like a helpless fool unique in this world. But still... I guess that's okay. As long as you're alive, nothing else matters..."

The hand that was softly pressing his dry lips withdrew. Yuder, feeling an odd sense of loss, swallowed the pain throbbing deep inside his chest.

Indeed, he would have preferred to endure a few blows or the shouting of his anger. Seeing Kishiar, who was as lifeless as burnt ash, call himself a helpless fool was more painful than any punishment in the world, especially since Yuder was unable to respond.

What was Yuder Aile, who killed him in his previous life, compared to a man like Kishiar La Orr? The words were unbearably painful and so strange he could hardly bear it.

The certainty of his sincerity squeezed his heart even more.

'...Sincerity.'

As he mulled over that unfamiliar word once again, a dream he'd had before waking up surfaced in his mind. Thinking back, the Kishiar from his previous life who came looking for him wasn't always playfully teasing. It didn't make sense for him to break through the strict guard from Peletta

to here just to play a game or make love with someone he could do it with anyone, just because he wanted to tease his successor.

At that time, he didn't want to know why he kept coming to him. However, within the desperate warmth of the arms that embraced him tightly in his dream, there was surely a sincerity that he had not expressed in words.

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Suddenly, a sensation Yuder had felt in his dreams once again pierced his heart. It was a pain that set his chest ablaze, hotter than the heat rising from his skin, and he belatedly realized its name - regret.

What if, back then, he had asked Kishiar why he kept coming to him? What if he had inquired more about his increasingly frail state? Perhaps things would have been different. Of course, the likelihood was high that he would not have answered honestly and instead erected walls, as he had suspected at the time. But in retrospect, compared to the countless enemies who attempted assassinations against Yuder Aile, these barriers were not so formidable.

Now in front of Yuder, Kishiar La Orr, who was not yet even thirty years old, was writhing in self-reproach and self-loathing. He was younger than the Kishiar in his dreams and far younger than Yuder was before he died.

Yuder had never thought about the time Kishiar spent in Peletta after his only blood-related brother, Emperor Keilusa and the Empress, passed away. More precisely, perhaps he didn't dwell on it because he did not bring it up. However, there was no doubt that those times had been hard for Kishiar. As he thought that perhaps the Kishiar in his dreams had come to him to endure this, the pain in his heart grew like a flame fueled by oil, reaching his solar plexus.

In his previous life, Kishiar seemed an entity too distant and difficult to reach. In the eyes of a just-turned-twenty-year-old country bumpkin, Kishiar the Duke was a person from a world too strange to understand by his known standards.

But now, things were different. While his outer appearance might still be that of a twenty-year-old Yuder Aile, the inner core was long worn away from the greenness of that time. In contrast to Kishiar, whose time had stopped almost as it was now, Yuder had aged more than a decade after the time in his dreams.

“ ... ”

It was bitter to realize that even after traveling back in time, he unconsciously treated Kishiar as a much more mature and difficult entity due to the remaining memories from his previous life.

Kishiar also had a childhood, and he must have dreamt naive dreams. He was a common human who could suffer for those he cherished and could not overcome his boiling emotions, revealing self-reproach and hatred toward himself.

He too, was just a human...

Yuder knew what his face would look like in eleven years. He would grow a bit taller, his face would become more gaunt, and several large scars that never faded would appear on his body. On gloomy days, his right hand sometimes became numb.

He could envision the appearances of the other members of the Cavalry several years from now. Ever would cut her long hair short and a long scar would appear on her cheek. Before the Eldore siblings left the Cavalry, they would grow so tall that no one could treat them as children. He knew what Prince Katchian would look like as he aged, and how the members of the four ducal houses, which Kishiar wished to overthrow, would change.

But he could never imagine an aged Kishiar La Orr.

Every breath he took stirred a stinging pain in his heart, which, combined with the heat from his skin, reminded him of the day he faced death. Since his return, he never deliberately looked back on that last day. What had he been thinking on that day?

Lying beneath the guillotine, the face of someone he had last thought of in his silent rage and despair bloomed once more in the darkness that veiled his vision.

The face that had surfaced only at the very last moment when he could no longer suppress his agony.

It was Kishiar's face.

" ... "

Pain cascaded down his spine like tremors. Was the punishment for not being able to see really this gruesome? No matter how he turned his head, he couldn't escape from himself.

Although Kishiar probably didn't intend it, Yuder gasped for breath, feeling as though he was being punished more harshly than anything else. His head throbbed as if it would split open.

"Are you in pain?"

Kishiar, noting Yuder's labored breaths, murmured something and removed his hand from Yuder's face.

"... Bring ... for a moment..."

Feeling Kishiar's presence fading, Yuder thrashed about in the torments that consumed his body. He didn't want Kishiar to disappear. But he couldn't properly move his mouth.

'I...'

His consciousness, which had been erratically wavering, darkened again. Yuder was cast into the darkness.

When he regained consciousness, his surroundings were still quiet. But instead of Kishiar, there were others by his side.

"Yuder. Have you come to your senses? If you have, try opening your mouth."

"...Gakane."

"Yes. It's me."

In the darkness that still obscured his sight, Gakane held his hand. He felt the deep relief Gakane was experiencing through the warmth of his hand.

"Where are the others?"

"They're out for other business. We're taking turns looking after you, so as not to disturb your rest. Oh, are you thirsty? Shall I give you some water?"

As Yuder nodded, Gakane cautiously poured water into his mouth. Then, Priest Lusan appeared, asking about his physical condition, and informed him of the situation in a weary voice.

"While you were unconscious, your fever kept fluctuating, rising high then dropping low. We were worried if you would come to your senses once you woke up because the temperature changes were so extreme... It's fortunate that you're not feeling pain now."

According to him, Yuder's fever was so severe that the damp towel on his forehead would warm up quickly, and when it fell, he would shiver endlessly, as if frostbitten. Currently, his body temperature was falling, and a fever was starting to come again, which was why he felt quite alright. He added this explanation.

"The divine power is still inconsistently flowing. If poured, the venom seeping into the skin disappears a little, but it returns to its original state as soon as the treatment is over. Although it does not seem to spread as much as before... I don't know how effective this treatment really is."

"I'm... sorry."

Yuder apologized to Lusan with a feeling of regret.

"Gakane, could you bring new damp towels and herbs? They are in the place I told you before."

"Yes."

After Gakane left, Lusan sighed deeply.

"I heard from the Commander, Yuder, that you are weak against monsters. Is that true?"

As soon as Kishiar's name came up, Yuder's chest welled up again. He tried to suppress it and slightly nodded his head.

"Yes."

"I would have stopped you from confronting the monster alone if I knew beforehand... I really regret it."

"Why do you regret, Priest? That was my choice. It's true that my strength is weaker when dealing with monsters... but I went because I was confident that I could definitely defeat it."

After speaking, Yuder hesitated for a moment and then added another word.

"I never thought it would come to this just by being splashed with blood..."

This was truly a major question. No matter how special the situation from which Pethuamet emerged was, even if it was a monster, it wasn't likely that one's body would react this way simply by being splashed with venomous blood. Pouring in divine power had no effect, and the fact that he had been lying in bed for days, unable to even see, was strange to attribute solely to venom. The likelihood of another cause being involved was high.

Lusan agreed with Yuder's words, his voice sounding slightly stronger.

"You're not the only one. The Commander said the same thing this morning. He mentioned that it's not an issue of divine power or method of treatment, but that the cause of the unchanged condition seems to be elsewhere. He said we need to figure that out. Hence, he is now meeting with the mages of the Western Mage Union."

The mention of mages, a term Yuder hadn't heard in quite a while, surprised him. His last memory of them was of the loud explosion outside when he woke up after being injured.

"Come to think of it, what has been happening since I fainted? I've been in here the whole time and I don't know anything about the situation... I'm still confused even with your explanation."

He was worried that by saying this, Lusan might try to divert his attention again by giving him a sedative, but fortunately, he did not.

"Hmm... the Commander said he would have a conversation with them, so I suppose I can tell you now. He ordered me to try and avoid causing you any unnecessary strain when you wake up."



At his words, Yuder felt a churn in his stomach once more. Whether Lusan knew of this or not, he began changing the bandages wrapped around Yuder while speaking.

"How much have you heard from the Commander?"

"I didn't hear much. He mentioned something about my independent handling of the monster having worked out for the best..."

"Well, you've pretty much heard it all then."

Lusan's short response was followed by a brief pause as he continued changing the bandages.

"While you were away dealing with the monster, the leader and others upstairs were working on finding a way to separate the absorbed magic power from the tongue, and the other mages were tasked with holding down the fort. You remember that, right?"

"I do."

"Shortly after you left, we got news that you had nearly lured the monster to the vicinity of the Magic Spring Ruins. Upon hearing this, the leader ordered several mages to dismantle the amplification and protection circles in advance. He wanted to be prepared even though we hadn't found a complete way to lift the spell."

This order was properly executed until a certain point. However, issues arose when some of the mages heading towards the ruins, where the Magic Spring was, discovered a small Pethuamet and a fleeting spark of greed ignited in their hearts.

Among the mages of the Western Mage Union, there were those like Yuder who had strived to maintain their honor. Yet, others held more considerable rage and determination at the prospect of their research potentially failing in this dangerous situation.

They came to the conclusion that capturing the small Pethuamet alive would prove beneficial for future research. Once they started indulging in their greed, even the act of dismantling their magic circles started to feel unjust. The thought of having to give up when it was uncertain whether Yuder would succeed or fail clouded their judgment.

They secretly captured several Pethuamets by rendering them unconscious. And without fulfilling the task ordered by Micalin, they returned to their base.

This fact was swiftly brought to light by Kanna, who had been meticulously going through the mages' reports under the command of Kishiar.

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"So... what happened?"

"The Commander had not yet returned, so we first confiscated the hidden monsters and isolated the involved mages."

"They wouldn't have complied willingly... Was there any resistance from the other mages?"

At Yuder's anxious inquiry, Lusan fell silent for a moment.

"There was... But the members captured and imprisoned those people as well."

"I see."

Yuder realized anew that his comrades were not as naive and weak as he had thought. The firmness with which they had acted, despite his fears that the newly appointed members might be overpowered by the mages in Kishiar's absence, was almost laughable.

"Thankfully, many mages, including the leader, helped, so there wasn't much quarrel during the process. After all, if one has any sense of honor or shame, they couldn't cover up for them."

The priest, who began wrapping the bandages again, seemed to be putting much more force into his hands than before. It was not a misperception. Lusan made no attempt to hide his anger towards the mages who had captured and hid the monsters.

"After the Commander brought you, Yuder, I spent all night treating you and couldn't properly report on it. I only reported after daybreak..."

Only after Yuder's treatment had somewhat concluded did Kishiar finally emerge from the room. The mages, who faced him as he boldly removed his hat to reveal his face — a contrast to when he first arrived — were all struck dumb and opened their mouths wide in surprise.

There was certainly a tall man among the Cavalry members. But since he was so silent, no one had taken much notice of him. Who could have imagined that such a breathtaking face was hidden beneath his rough hat and cloak? Even Gakane Bolunwald, who had melted the mages' guard with just his face, lost his luster next to him.

The unidentified man responded briefly to the mages who asked about his identity.

"Commander of the Cavalry, Kishiar La Orr."

The entire mages present were shocked by his words. Mages, being more traveled than ordinary people, were surprised that they were seeing a member of the Empire's imperial family up close for the first time. Even if that member was Duke Peletta, notorious for being a headache to the imperial family due to his lack of wit.

They had known that Duke Peletta was the Cavalry Commander, but they had not thought he would be in such a dangerous place. While the mages were swallowing their confusion, their leader Micalin stepped forward to confront him.

"Have you been hiding your identity?"

"I had to, given the circumstances. I trust you'll understand."

Even with just a few words exchanged about the current state of the base, the mages quickly realized how different the man in front of them was from the rumors. Kishiar looked at them not with his usual smile but with eyes as cold and dark as frost.

"It seems like it's time for us to have a frank discussion about how the situation turned out like this."

After receiving reports from Kanna and the other Cavalry members about the information they had gathered and the story Lusan had told Yuder, Kishiar asked Micalin to confirm the truth. Micalin could not refute it. Among the facts that Kanna had discovered were even dangerous statements and actions by the mages under him, facts that even he, their leader, hadn't been aware of.

"Someone is risking his life to save you, to the point of lying there on the brink of death, while others can't even make the bare minimum effort for cooperation and are so engrossed in their own greed as to find this matter amusing. What do you think?"

"...As the Leader, I have nothing to justify. The failure of the mages under my guidance is entirely my responsibility."

Behind Micalin, who clenched his eyes shut in sheer embarrassment, the mages of the Western Mage Union lowered their heads in silence.

"As the Cavalry Commander, I have no intention of letting this matter slide easily."

Originally, the punishment of a mage who committed a crime was traditionally and conventionally decided by other mages. The tightly-knit group of mages, bound by secrets and obstinacy, was not lightly open to outside interference.

However, Kishiar declared he would participate in the punishment of the guilty mages alongside Micalin. In the face of his unilateral notification that he would inform the Court Mage Office and the Pearl Tower in the capital if they refused his involvement, the mages of the Western Mage Union couldn't make any excuses.

Kishiar met with the guilty mages, leading his Cavalry. The icy gaze of the man who smirked coldly at those who couldn't hide their complaints and disrespect towards the Cavalry in their furious eyes was filled with chill.

"Try and kill me if you dare. But immediately, the Cavalry will become the common enemy of all mages," was the rash curse spat out by a mage, to which Kishiar merely nodded.

"Indeed, death would not serve as a proper punishment. You shall personally experience what you considered insignificant and thought you could control."

The punishment he announced seemed superficially simple, but its content was anything but.

At Kishiar's command, the Cavalry members dragged out the mages. They brought forth a small monster that the mages secretly captured, who had been fed part of the magic stones from their amplification circle and left unconscious, and placed it before them.

“If you defeat this monster, no matter what the Leader says, I will not punish you. I won't even ask you to take any responsibility for this incident.”

The mages froze. They had only captured it for research purposes; they never imagined they would have to fight and defeat it. But they couldn't just back down without even raising a hand in front of the Cavalry and their comrades. Gritting their teeth, they surrounded the Pethuamet. They began preparing their most difficult and powerful spells.

“Was that alright? What if that monster grows again because of what they...”

It wasn't surprising that the mages tried to create another Pethuamet for their research, but it was shocking that Kishiar not only didn't stop them, but also told them to fight it properly. Lusan chuckled softly at Yuder's astonishment, as if he understood it.

“Don't worry. Before it began, the Commander told the members and the Leader of the Western Mage Union how to act and guaranteed that he would take responsibility for anything that happened.”

The result came very quickly. The mages were instantly terrified when they saw the Pethuamet swell a bit each time they attacked it. Most of them could count the types of magic they could use without a magic tool on one hand.

Although the monster, initially the size of a palm, had grown only slightly, a few attacks from it mercilessly shattered the protection circle and the remaining buildings that they had managed to restore at the base. Looking around for help, they found no one willing to lend them a hand.

There were those overwhelmed with fear, trying to flee, but the members of the Cavalry did not allow them to escape so easily. They blocked the mages trying to escape and several times coolly drove them back towards Pethuamet. Some, like the Eldore siblings, took advantage of the situation, pretending to stumble and destroying more magic circles than even the monsters could.

The guilty mages resisted and tried to fight back, but there was no one soft enough in the Cavalry to be defeated by such weak attacks.

Amid the chill and wordless response, the mages finally started to feel the bone-aching difference between themselves and their opponents and the terrifying power of a monster that could not be controlled by human strength.

In the midst of the gruesome spectacle that forced them to feel the recklessness of their actions, other untouched mages wore bitter expressions but none stopped the carnage until the end.

"It was around then that Sir Yuder woke up."

Assuming Yuder would be startled and rush out if he knew what was happening, they kept the unfolding situation a secret.

Kishiar watched the mages writhing on the ground, finally falling, never showing a hint of pity or laughter. The same was true for the members following him.

The situation finally ended after all the mages expressed their intention to surrender. They held out for quite a while, but in the end, no one could defeat the monster. All they could do was act shamefully, fleeing to prevent the monster from growing and trying to protect their bodies.

After everything was over, Kishiar personally drew his sword and cut down the small monster. The monster, which the mages could not even touch properly, he neutralized with a gesture and quickly transformed into a cold corpse by cutting out its tongue.

In the silence where no one dared to speak, a low voice echoed.

"Remember what it means to try to control the uncontrollable. A fortune like this doesn't come twice."

In the end, the guilty mages were expelled from the Western Mage Union and punished by being sent back to the Pearl Tower. Upon returning to the Pearl Tower, they would be faced not with the hospitality of their colleagues, but with a proper investigation and cold punishment.

The Pearl Tower existed within the Empire, but its status encompassed all mages across the continent, not belonging to any single nation. Being expelled from such a group, there were barely

any places left to go. It was both an advantage and a disadvantage of the seemingly broad yet narrow mage community.

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As soon as Micalin announced his decision to expel the guilty ones from the Union, Kishiar seemed to have been waiting, calling in a portion of the Peletta Knights stationed near the base. He ordered the Knights to immediately move to the Pearl Tower with them, ensuring the ousted mages would not set foot in the base even for a moment.

Lusan stated that this move was actually beneficial to the mages.

“If they had not disappeared from our sight immediately, we wouldn’t know what might have happened after their punishment. The look in the eyes of the other members was no joke, including the Commander, of course.”

Included in this group were several others. They were the assassins Yuder had captured and locked away on his own. Being escorted with those willing to kill anyone for money, the lowest of the low, was an unbearable humiliation for the mages who had enjoyed their own privileges.

Nevertheless, Micalin, the Leader of the Western Mage Union, accepted all of this in silence. No one could deny the fact that he was sincerely taking responsibility.

He pledged full cooperation in all future dealings between the Cavalry and the Western Mage Union. If Kishiar wished, he was willing to step down from the position of the Union Leader and cease all research, a statement that shocked the mages under his command. However, Kishiar had only one request of the senior mage.

“Do nothing until my assistant Yuder Aile recovers.”

Although it was an excellent opportunity with the opposing side promising to bend to every demand, all he wanted was silence, not formal negotiations or an outburst of anger.

Thus, the mages could do nothing until Yuder recovered. That is, until today, when Kishiar requested another conversation to understand Yuder's persistent condition from a different perspective.

“So, that's how things turned out. But... what happened to the Star of Nagran?”

Even after all his questions were answered, he knew nothing about the Star of Nagran, the last organization involved in this incident. Lusan only informed them about what had happened to the mages, leaving a void regarding the Star of Nagran. Given that Yuder and Kanna led the investigation into the Star of Nagran, meeting Kanna seemed the best way to hear more detailed stories.

'No news is good news, I suppose...'

"Priest, I brought the items you mentioned. Should I put them here?"

Just then, Gakane returned. He assisted Lusan in carefully changing the bandages on Yuder's limbs and applying medication. Although he said he was angry like Kanna and that it was okay to hit Yuder, he maintained his usual cautious attitude. Yuder hesitated for a moment before addressing Gakane.

"Gakane."

"Hm?"

"I heard about what's been going on from Kanna and the Priest. I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused."

They had traveled a long way for Yuder, their bodies weary. They were sincerely saddened and angered by his severe injuries. Despite having met most of them in his previous life, the emotions they held for each other were completely different now. Initially, he only acted to prevent Kishiar from dying as before, but somehow, the existence of others had grown so significant within him. It was strange. Yuder wanted to convey a heartfelt apology to them, an emotion he had not felt in his previous life.

Then, Gakane came to a halt. After a brief moment, he replied in a voice slightly strained from exhaustion.

"Yuder, after all that you've said, you must have really been hurting this time."



"..."

"I know you went out there alone, trying to protect everyone. I thought that was really impressive. But if you had died as a result, none of us would have been happy. Do you understand?"

"...Yes."

Gakane might have asked like Kanna, questioning what he understood, but fortunately, he didn't push that far.

"You know, because of what happened this time, everyone's begun to dislike the mages. Me too. For the first time in my life, I realized that I could despise people in such a way. Even though I know that there were many who tried to help you... It felt so unfair that it made my blood boil. And it's worse because all this is due to our weak standing..."

As he spoke, Gakane forced out a weary laugh, patting Yuder's shoulder gently so as not to cause pain.

"I can't even begin to imagine the Cavalry without you. So get well soon. The Commander is calling the second dispatch unit, so you must be fully recovered by the time you meet the others."

"The second dispatch unit?"

The faces of those they had left behind in the Capital floated up in the darkness. Kishiar, who had requested silence from the mages of the Western Mage Union, must not have completely dropped the other tasks after all. His thorough approach was reassuring and typical of Kishiar, but it also reminded Yuder of the last time he saw him trembling, causing a wave of nausea to rise again.

What kind of emotions was he feeling as he handled all that while Yuder was unconscious?

"Yeah. They're dividing them in half. Half will come to the city of Tainu, and the other half will come here."

Yuder had thought that after capturing Pethuamet, Kishiar would reduce the size of the second dispatch, but he apparently had no such intention.

'Is there something else he's considering?'

"You're... thinking about work again, aren't you?"

As if he had read Yuder's mind, Gakane spoke up.

"No, Yuder. You can't get involved in anything until you're healed. Rather than focusing on anything else right now, you should think about getting some rest."

"..."

If even the easygoing Gakane, who usually avoids unpleasant remarks, said such things, there seemed to be no need to hear the reactions of the other companions. As Yuder let out a small sigh, both Gakane and Lusan scolded him with one voice, asking why he had acted so recklessly. While it was a painful listen, it did brighten the atmosphere to a certain degree.

"Oh right, Yuder. It seems like the Commander will be handing over the monster subjugation-related tasks to me when the second dispatch arrives. You were supposed to do it originally... but the situation can't be helped."

"Monster subjugation tasks to you?"

Suddenly, Yuder remembered that Gakane was one of those who didn't know about his future. Unbeknownst to him, Gakane was among the earliest to die among the Cavalry members Yuder knew.

The time Gakane had died in Yuder's previous life was after the death of Pethuamet, later in time. After Yuder's deployment was stopped due to the nobles' and various powers' obstruction and protest toward the Cavalry, who had achieved an astonishing victory in the West where everyone was about to give up, Gakane had gone to finish off the final stages of the subjugation and died in an accident.

Back then, he had found himself unable to genuinely sympathize with the mournful words lamenting the tragic death of promising talent. After all, it was hard enough dealing with the trials directly before him, let alone concern himself with the death of someone he hardly knew.

But now, things had changed. Gakane Bolunwald, a truly precious talent, had left this world at such a young age in such a place. He was a genuinely good man, someone who indeed held enough worth to fight for life in this world.

'...I can't help but worry, remembering how an accident occurred after Pethuamet died back then.'

Reading concern in Yuder's tightly pursed lips, Gakane chuckled.

"I'm not a Deputy Commander, just an ordinary member, so I'm not sure if I'll do well... But Kanna told me it would be disrespectful to you, my mentor, if I just kept saying that I couldn't do it. So, I'm going to try my best."

Gakane, despite appearing otherwise, possessed a tenacity that allowed him to train harder than anyone else. However, he lacked confidence in his skills relative to his diligence. If Kishiar had chosen him for the expedition, it was likely to fill in that gap. Yuder, if he had been in the Commander's position, would have made the same decision.

Yuder exhaled quietly, gazing in Gakane's direction. All the hard work had led to everything around him changing. He understood that now, more than ever, he needed not just to soldier on alone, but also to rely on those around him.

To trust those around him, he had to let go of himself. This was the hardest thing for Yuder, who had always tried to shoulder all responsibilities, to be first to stand up and get things done. But given his current situation, which would leave him immobilized for some time, he figured he'd have to get used to it, even if forcibly so.

"...Give it your best. With your skills, it shouldn't be too hard."

After hesitating, Yuder managed to muster words of encouragement for Gakane. Taken aback, Gakane remained silent for a moment, before softly whispering a joyful 'Thank you.'

Thinking back, it was the first time Yuder had said such words to someone, despite his long tenure as a Commander. With a pleasant feeling, he decided to propose to Gakane the recruitment of an aide that he had been contemplating while he watched Gakane wrap a fresh bandage.

"Gakane, I have something to tell you once I get better..."

"What is it?"

"Gakane! Come out! It's time for a shift change!"

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"Gakane! Come on out! It's time for the shift change!"

Even before he could finish speaking, the abrupt entrance of the Eldore siblings cut short the conversation between Yuder and Gakane.

"Ah, Yuder is awake. Are you feeling better now?"

"How's your body?"

"I'm okay. Thanks."

"Okay? You're far from okay."

Following Yuder's response, Lusan grumbled, to which the Eldore siblings chimed in agreeably. It seemed that the proposal he had intended to make to Gakane would have to be postponed.

"Wait, just a moment. Yuder was about to say something. Just let him speak, and then we can go."

"What was he about to say?"

Yet Gakane persisted. The Eldore siblings showed interest in his grumbling, which he muttered out strenuously, bearing the weight of the siblings hanging on his arms. Yuder felt a wave of awkwardness as he sensed the eyes around the room turn to him.

"I was going to ask Gakane if he would consider working with me once he has successfully completed this mission."

"Work? What work?"

"Why is the offer only for Gakane?"

"For... for me?"

The clamorous voices of the Eldore siblings and a stunned Gakane filled the room. Unable to withstand the persistent questions from the Eldores, Yuder finally disclosed his secret, the right to appoint aides, granted to him by Kishiar.

'It's alright. I can trust everyone in this room.'

He had not used any of the five appointments yet. Upon Yuder's orders, they would work together, but that didn't mean they could skip their regular Cavalry training and duties. The members fell silent upon hearing this.

"So... it means we can be appointed as long as we're below Deputy Commanders rank?"

"Yes."

"What? Then we want to do it too. Include us!"

"But you just heard him. It won't be a pleasure cruise. Currently, he's considering gathering information for the Cavalry, but we might end up doing other things too."

"Even better! Gathering information sounds cool! We're stronger than Gakane, so include us too!"

With a loud yell, something under the bed started to shake. Yuder heard a sorrowful murmur from Gakane, who was laughing awkwardly beside him.

"I admit I haven't won a single duel yet, but hearing you say it so directly hurts, Hinn..."

"There is no one who doesn't underestimate us when they see our appearance. We are neither Deputy Commanders nor Commander, but skilled, acknowledged by the Commander himself. We can do everything without missing out on training, and we're full of enthusiasm. Aren't we just the right fit? Who else could be more suitable?"

Listening to the Eldore siblings' outcry, Yuder began to feel swayed by their arguments.

'They aren't wrong.'

Enthusiasm is important, whatever the task. It could be better to include someone who knows Yuder well and wants to work with him, rather than forcing someone who doesn't want to do it.

"Alright. If you're so insistent, I'll consider it. Let's see how well you perform your duties in the west first."

"Great!"

The Eldore siblings seemed satisfied with the same conditions as Gakane.

"Gakane, what about you?"

When he turned his head towards where Gakane should be, he heard a voice full of warmth, following a moment of silence.

"I'm in too, sounds good."

Gakane returned, his passion incomparable to before. Yuder silently accepted the touch of Priest Lusan undoing the bandage over his eyes, while listening to the Eldore' siblings chatter away. Just a bit of conversation with his comrades and re-bandaging his arms and legs had left him utterly exhausted.

"Sir Yuder, this is the last part. Even if you're sleepy, please bear with it a little longer."

Priest Lusan seemed to notice Yuder's condition. It dawned on Yuder that not only his arms and legs were afflicted by the venom.

"Are the other parts... not needed to be re-bandaged?"

"Yes. Since you had it changed last night... um, it's all unwrapped now. Would you like to open your eyes?"

Something tugged at his nerves, but Yuder followed the command and exerted force on his closed eyelids. A dizzying pain spread, and something faintly wavered in the darkness. No matter how many times he blinked, the dark spots blurring his vision remained unaltered.

"How does it feel?"

"There's a black spot... I can't really tell what's what."

"As expected, there's no change yet."

With a sigh, Lusan applied medicine over his eyes and wrapped them in a new bandage.

"That black spot is the venom seeping into your eyes. It seems it wasn't good that you kept your eyes open after the venom overtook you."

Until then, he hadn't really considered it a great inconvenience, but as his vision darkened again, he remembered the touch of the round candy rolling in his hand. Yuder reached out to touch his clothes, but naturally, his pockets were empty.

"What are you looking for?"

"By any chance... wasn't there something in my clothes when I came back here?"

He asked, thinking that even though they had changed his clothes for treatment, if they had found something in his pocket, they might have taken it out. However, Lusan responded that he didn't know.

"I was too out of it to notice... Ah, the clothes soaked with the fluids were changed by the Commander. Should I ask? If you tell me what you're looking for."

"No, it's nothing. It wasn't anything important."

Yuder closed his mouth immediately. However, he could not suppress the question burning within him and eventually let out another remark.

"Did the Commander really... change my clothes?"

"Yes. It was really amazing."

Lusan responded nonchalantly, gently wiping Yuder's neck and cheeks with a wet towel.

"I actually thought it was amazing that such individuals know how to change their own clothes, but this incident made me rethink my prejudice. If they hadn't been by my side the whole time, I don't know how I could have recovered so quickly..."

Listening to Lusan's words, Yuder's breathing gradually heated up. He could clearly feel a fever coming on. He absently fumbled with his empty pocket with his fingertips, and then Yuder surrendered his consciousness to the vague darkness.

His dream was terribly messy. Everything was jumbled, and he remembered nothing, but even after waking up, it took a while for him to regain his senses.

Yuder groaned at the splitting headache and gasped for breath. It was too cold. It felt as if his body was filled with cold ice shards that were shaking him from the inside. He wanted to scrape out the ice filling him, but his hand wouldn't move as he wanted. It was only after several failed attempts to move his arm while curled up that he finally regained full consciousness.

"..."

Struggling to steady his labored breathing, Yuder tried to grip his hand. Fumbling and trembling a few times, he finally recognized the large hand clenched immobile between his fingers.

There was no one else with such large hands. Late to arrive, the faint but familiar musky scent made his heart pound in an instant.



"Commander."

His dreadfully hoarse voice slowly seeped out. Only then did the fingers that had been tightly squeezing Yuder's hand slip away.

"What... is this...?"

"I had no choice when you tried to tear off the bandage I had wrapped."

A voice, lower than usual, came in response.

"It seems you had another nightmare."

"..."

"I brought some food; can you swallow it?"

Only upon hearing those words did Yuder realize it had been a long time since he had a proper meal. Although he had no appetite, he was always aware that, for survival and recovery, he had to eat regardless of his desires. As Yuder, who barely nodded, tried to sit up, an approaching hand helped him sit by supporting his shoulder. Every part of his body throbbed painfully.

"You should drink some water first."

Yuder reflexively extended his hand.

"Let me drink."

Kishiar was silent for a moment, but soon handed him a cup. However, Yuder could not overcome the weight of the cup, even before bringing it to his lips, and dropped it. In a blink of an eye, the cold liquid drenched his body and the bed.

Overwhelmed with confusion, he opened his mouth, and the approaching arm swiftly lifted him.

"As I expected."

At words that seemed to anticipate him dropping the water cup, Yuder turned his head, a cold wind-like chuckle brushing against his cheek.

"What do you mean by 'as expected'?"

"If I had said that you wouldn't even have the strength to hold a spoon, my assistant would have definitely disagreed."

"So you gave me water first?"

"Since I had to reapply the medicine and change the bedding anyway, I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone."

Holding Yuder, Kishiar headed somewhere. As he sat down, the faint scent of food tickled Yuder's nose. It was then that he realized that Kishiar had never intended for him to eat in bed. Yuder was flabbergasted, but at the same time, a small ache throbbed in his chest again.

"Please put me down now. I can at least sit on my own."

"Normally, when a person with several broken ribs says such a thing, we discourage them."

"But."

"There."

With a slight adjustment to his posture, Kishiar, who had neatly ignored Yuder's request by merely changing the way he held him, began to spoon the soup he had brought into Yuder's mouth while sitting him on his lap. At a glance, he seemed as composed as usual, but his demeanor lacked the usual light-heartedness and intense emotions he had previously shown. Caught between confusion, a mild sense of shame, and the reflexive relief from the warmth wrapping around him, Yuder swallowed in a daze.

As far as he could remember, even from his youngest days, he had never experienced being cradled in someone's arms while eating.

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As far back as he could remember, Yuder had never experienced being cradled in someone's arms while being fed. The fact that this someone was Kishiar made the situation all the more surreal.

In his previous life, Kishiar had never done such a thing. Similar to the dream he had once had, during the early stages of the western monster subjugation, when Yuder had sustained injuries to both arms, Kishiar had shown no more concern for him than for any other member. Yuder had accepted this as normal.

Had Kishiar attempted to cradle him and feed him as he was now, given the excessive closeness they had shown due to the effects of the accident during manifestation—something that had led to jeering even within the squad—Yuder would likely have been the first to firmly reject it.

While they managed to deal with the fallout from the accident that had changed everything about the two of them over the course of a week, Yuder Aile's image in the eyes of others remained unchanged. He was seen as a cocky, young Omega Awakener who had easily secured the position of Deputy Commander and the succession to Commander, despite showing little qualification as a leader or winning the acceptance of his peers, apart from his slightly superior abilities. This perception persisted until Kishiar's death.

Back then, he had neither the will to change the situation nor the inclination to persistently make excuses. So he chose to retaliate firmly, either ignoring such views or forcefully suppressing them when they became too irritating. Of course, such an approach typically only made matters worse.

Whenever Yuder clashed with other Cavalry members, Kishiar would sigh and offer advice. However, Yuder of that time, a willful child, preferred to force compliance rather than try to understand and follow the advice. He would become faintly infuriated whenever Kishiar, presuming to understand his situation, would add more and more to his counsel.

Until his death and for some time after his return, Yuder rarely doubted the things he remembered. But now was different.

To what extent were his memories true? To what degree could he trust the emotions and thoughts he believed he had felt and thought?

Although he had always suspected that the dream he had been having was not a mere dream, after catching Pethuamet, his suspicion had transcended conjecture and became an indescribable, profound conviction.

There were many gaps within Yuder Aile. These gaps, located somewhere deep beyond the reach of sight, were so numerous that even he didn't know the extent of them. To be honest, Yuder still found it hard to believe that he had lived all this time unaware of these gaps within him.

But if these gaps weren't real, then how could he explain the familiar yet strange fragments of memory and emotion that he felt each time he recalled the past or dreamt, ever since he had killed Pethuamet?

The appearance of these tiny puzzle pieces, seemingly filling the gaps one by one, symbolized something he had been losing. He didn't know exactly what it was, but he had a painful hunch that it had a deep connection to Kishiar.

If he could not trust his own memories and feelings, what could he use as a basis to move forward in this returned situation?

Reason whispered to him that what he had done so far was right, and that he needn't harbor such deep doubts. Yet, the spark that had been ignited in his heart showed no sign of dying out...

"What are you thinking about?"

Although Yuder's expression was hidden by the blindfold, Kishiar softly asked, as if he had read something from him. Yuder remained silent for a moment before parting his dry lips and speaking.

"I was thinking... you seem overly accustomed to situations like this, Commander."

He couldn't tell the truth. At the moment, Kishiar was displaying such exceptional feelings towards Yuder that no one could doubt it. The whispering voice expressing fear of losing him and sharing agony still lingered in his mind. Just the sensation of being in contact with him simultaneously evoked deep pain and self-doubt within Yuder.

"Don't misunderstand. It's the first time I've done something like this for anyone."

Thankfully, Kishiar didn't notice the thoughts roaming in Yuder's mind.

"If anyone sees me like this, I'll be arrested immediately."

"As long as I'm here, that's not going to happen. Rest assured."

"What if the other comrades come in..."

"Stop."

Kishiar cut him off sharply, put down his spoon, and gently pressed Yuder's head into his arms. The sigh he exhaled sounded extremely loud.

"Instead of using your imagination on such trivial matters, how about thinking more realistically and constructively?"

In a situation that could be considered an insult to an imperial family member, what could be more realistic than this if this was an unnecessary imagination? As if he had read the unspoken question that couldn't escape Yuder's lips, Kishiar answered.

"There must be other things you're curious about. You've asked so many questions to Priest Lusan and others about what has happened so far."

"If I ask, will you answer?"

After asking without thinking, Yuder stiffened his fingertips. Even now, Kishiar promised to tell him anything he could, and he was aware that he kept his promise. Yet he unknowingly asked unnecessary questions, probably due to the continuous dreams and shocks over the past few days.

"Yes."

Kishiar's serene voice echoed in his chest like ripples on the water surface.

"As long as you're not constantly asking why I'm doing this to you."

There was no way anyone with emotions could ask such a question. Even during meals and conversations, Kishiar continuously brushed Yuder's hair between his fingers and gently caressed his neck. It was hard to understand what was so pleasing about ruffling short hair, but he never ceased the action. Yuder slightly bit his lips, recalling the touch of the hand that stroked his cheeks and ears tirelessly on the day he woke up.

"I heard... you summoned the second dispatch team."

"Yes. I split them into two groups, one for Tainu and one here."

Although it was information Yuder had already heard from Gakane, Kishiar added words they didn't tell him.

"While monster subjugation is important, the second dispatch team will be doing more investigation-related tasks. Because there will be many tasks requiring a diverse personnel."

"Investigation?"

"You have an idea, don't you?"

"About the Star of Nagran and the Magic Spring Ruins?"

As he answered, long fingers lightly stroked behind his ears as if in praise.

"And one more thing. Matters related to the Tain Duchy."

With just those terse responses, a flood of numerous pieces of information and memories surged in the darkness behind his bandage.

"I've heard from the mages that the Tain duchy is establishing a new trade hub within the Great Sarain Forest... Do you believe the rumors that they're engaging in illicit trade?"

"It's not just a belief anymore; this incident has solidified my certainty. I was aware of the rumors even before we arrived in the West."

The voice of Kishiar, who muttered about his good fortune, didn't sound particularly pleased despite his words.

"The Peletta Knights, whom I had assigned to investigate the Star of Nagran outpost covertly, sent a report. It stated that among those who stayed there, several nearly fell victim to the illegal trade. I plan to delve deeper into this matter now."

It seemed that the rumors the mages had conveyed were not unfounded after all. The meticulousness of not overlooking the task of investigating the Star of Nagran outpost in such a short time was impressive, yet it was frustrating to have to hear about such matters without being able to participate directly.

"So, do you intend to continue investigating the Star of Nagran outpost covertly?"

"There were no Awakened individuals who seemed to harbor similar intentions to those we encountered at the Apeto household, based on my direct observation."

Kishiar had judged that most of those staying at the outpost, located within the Great Sarain Forest, wished to live ordinarily and safely. The majority of them were even unaware of the deeper actions of the group they belonged to.

It was far better to naturally gather information rather than needlessly tracking and investigating the oblivious individuals in a dangerous situation. Yuder sighed lightly at the explanation that the Peletta Knights would handle this task.

There would come a day when such work must be done solely by the Cavalry. His journey was far from over, and his condition hadn't improved at all.

"How did your meeting with the mages today go?"

"Only now you ask."

His voice remained flat, but Yuder imagined the corners of his lips curving up in bitterness. It was a look he was familiar with, one he could easily picture.

"I can't say for certain yet, but I suspect that these spots on your hand, which have caused a number of astonishing incidents so far, may have had an impact on this occasion as well."

Kishiar held up Yuder's hand with his own, which had been empty.

"Right before we headed westward, you said it felt as if you had absorbed energy from within my body. What if the same phenomenon occurred this time as well? That thought suddenly occurred to me."

Yuder understood what Kishiar intended to say from his story alone. Then, he understood why Kishiar had wanted to meet the mages and seek their advice.

"So, you think I absorbed some kind of power from the blood of the monster I vanquished."

"Exactly, two kinds to be precise. The power of venom and amplification."

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"Specifically, there are two forces: venom and amplification."

Yuder felt the tips of Kishiar's fingers gently wrap around his index and middle fingers.

"The monster absorbed the amplification magic circle, crafted by the mages of the Western Mage Union. The magic it absorbed affected the monster's flesh, which meant....."

"You're implying that it seeped into its bodily fluids as well."

"That's correct."

Then, Yuder recalled the moment when he was soaked in the liquid, which had absorbed those two forces. He vaguely remembered the black and cold fluid that had covered his body when he cut off Pethuamet's tongue.



"Even though I keep pouring in divine power, the venom that seeped into your body doesn't disappear, but keeps returning, even expanding. I think that's because of the influence of the amplification. You can understand why the abilities that should have recovered with rest have not yet returned, it's probably because I'm spending more energy on blocking the roots of the venom that have burrowed into your body."

True to his words, Yuder was still far from fully recovered. It was a bit better than the first time when he barely summoned a drop of water, but it was still just a few more drops, barely an improvement. It was even hard to say that he had recovered at all.

"So I met with the mages and reviewed the records they had left when they created the amplification magic and its overall structure."

After a few days, Kishiar, who had reappeared, asked the mages for information about the structure of the amplification magic. Micalin thought that the time had finally come. He had been worrying about what to say if the Duke of Peletta, filled with anger, ordered to eradicate the very existence of the amplification magic from this world. But after the conversation, Kishiar, who had been lost in thought for a long time, spoke unexpectedly.

"...I asked them to find the answer to the question that you wanted to know that night."

Kishiar, briefly explaining what he had said to Micalin, spoke with an entirely different stiffness in his voice than Yuder had ever heard before. Would he have spoken in such an emotionless voice even in front of the mages? Yuder tried to guess Kishiar's attitude, which he had not seen, just from his voice and slowly questioned.

"That night, you mean..."

"The task of exploring the traces of magic that remained on the monster's tongue that you gave them and finding a way to neutralize it."

Micalin hadn't finished that task until Yuder had killed Pethuamet. He had to stop and hadn't resumed the work because he had to deal with Kishiar and the Cavalry after that. The mages, who had thought that task would remain useless and had forgotten about it, were surprised as if their eyes would pop out at Kishiar's request to resume the task.

"If the problem is the amplification force interfering while trying to eliminate the venom that has penetrated your body, finding and eliminating the traces of the amplification magic within might be the solution."

That was the conclusion Kishiar had come to while watching Yuder's treatment. Yuder thought about the words he had just heard while firmly holding his body in his arms. Kishiar knew more about magic than him, so his words could be the solution, but there was a bit that bothered him.

"It's true that I've absorbed energy before, but back then, I could clearly see and feel what I was doing. But I didn't feel the red energy leaking from my hands until the end of this battle..."

"Isn't it a different law for attack and defense even in the same battle?"

The soft voice continued to speak.

"Think of it this way. Your body is a battlefield, where the internal forces you possess are fighting off the toxicity of the monster that has invaded from the outside. Right now, it's a fierce struggle of survival between the reinforcements of amplification and divine power."

Yuder recalled something Enon had once said. There was a strangely consistent part in Kishiar's explanation with Enon's words that the process of detoxifying with divine power is not to erase it, but to weaken and harmonize it.

'But even so, I don't know whether the answer found by the mages will definitely have an effect on me.'

Was it really the right path to make the mages touch the Amplification circle and Pethuamet's tongue again for an uncertain outcome? Thinking that Kishiar might be doing unnecessary work because of that, he felt a suffocating sensation in his stomach.

As Yuder let out a small sigh, Kishiar asked him quietly.

"Do you think my decision was wrong?"

Kishiar's choice. The weight of those words pounded heavily on Yuder's chest.

Since he returned from death, he had never doubted Kishiar's choices. However, this time it was related to Yuder himself, the greatest cause of differences between his two lives, and a choice about an event that had not occurred in his previous life.

After hesitating for a long time, Yuder spoke.

"Isn't there another option besides this method?"

"Such as?"

"Maybe...we could reveal it to others and seek more sufficient answers."

What flitted across Yuder's mind was Enon. He wondered if Enon's insight and knowledge could give a more unique and clear solution to this situation.

"Well... I have called the only remaining medical officer in the Cavalry. That was one reason why I called for the second dispatch early. But even if they come as fast as they can, we still have to wait for a few more days, and there is no guarantee that they will immediately provide a solution."

At the unexpected words, Yuder, who turned his head, suddenly felt a much stronger grip on his hand than before.

"Then isn't it better to try something we can do more quickly? I..."

His calm words trembled oddly at the end.

"I don't want to see you suffer in front of me any longer."

He felt as if something had dropped heavily inside his heart.

"So...please don't call that a wrong decision."

His arm, which had been holding him, grew stronger, pressing their bodies closer than before. The body that was touching him conveyed a strange heat and pain at the same time. Listening to the

dark voice as deep as the bottom of the deepest sea, Yuder recalled his painful breath in his dreams. With gritted teeth, Kishiar continued as if he couldn't bear it anymore.

"Even more than when I felt my vessel was gradually breaking every hour, in some ways, I feel it's harder to endure now. If you don't get better soon, I don't know what I'll end up doing. Even though I try to be patient, it seems like this is my limit..."

A whisper pleading not to reject him if he cared about him even a little echoed in his ear. Yuder said nothing, suppressing his boiling emotions.

The soft touch of the arms that embraced him evoked feelings he could hardly put into words. The pull he felt was irresistible, the heat he felt then was far stronger than the one he felt when their lips first met, and it felt like his breath was taken away multiple times over.

Rational thinking would have him distance himself a bit and try to calm Kishiar down. After all, he seemed to have lost some of his usual calmness due to excessive worry.

But, so what?

All the countless holes inside him that caused him worries and fears, the anxiety that would creep in when he thought about the past and future, all of that disappeared into the distance when he was close to Kishiar. The situation where Kishiar, who didn't hide his distressed state caused by worry for him, held him so tightly that he could barely breathe was strangely comforting. It seemed that he, too, had lost his sense of calm...

Yuder forgot about the worry of someone coming in. Maybe it was okay to keep being like this.

It was the first time he was aware of this desire since he felt the pull toward Kishiar.

Perhaps thinking that the trembling mixed in with his bewildered breath was due to pain, Kishiar loosened his tight hold on him and moved away a bit.

"I'm sorry. You must be hurting..."

At that moment, Yuder managed to raise his arm and embraced him. Even without seeing, he knew exactly where to hold him. At Yuder's words, Kishiar's body stiffened, and his speech stopped altogether.

"When did I ever say that your choices were wrong, Commander?"

Even though it felt incredibly hard to utter a single word, he didn't stop.

"I don't care if you cast a magic spell to release the amplification power, or whatever you do. Do anything, but... stop doing this. My heart keeps hurting... I think it would be better to face it."

Usually, his tongue moved effortlessly, but at that moment, it struggled to convey what he wanted to say. But, he didn't need to worry.

Soon after, Kishiar, who had been rigid and still, held him even tighter.

"...Right. I can't do that."

Kishiar whispered with a smile.

"Because it won't do if I hurt you more when you're already in pain..."

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Afterward, Kishiar lowered his head onto Yuder's shoulder, lightly resting it there, and remained silent for a while. Yuder, too, left Kishiar's hand, which was wrapped around his shoulder, just as it was.

From the edge of the chest where Kishiar leaned, he could feel the regular yet rapid beat of a heart - the most certain evidence of life that could never be felt from the dead.

Although they seemed to bind each other, an odd tranquility, free from suffocation or strangeness, briefly wrapped around the two. Despite knowing that reality hadn't improved, for a moment, an absurd feeling visited them, as if everything had become perfect. It was a highly deceptive emotion to experience, embracing the man he had killed in his previous life.

Where did this bizarre satisfaction come from? Yuder quietly pondered. Naturally, he could not find an answer. A wave of bitter and unfamiliar emotions kept surging and receding.

'Do others also feel this way when they embrace each other?'

Was it normal to endure the shock of the self, that one believed until now, melting away under an irresistible attraction and impulse?

Yuder thought it was unlikely. Had there been another person in front of him, there would have been no chance that he would have felt the urge to reach out, squeezing out the remaining strength in a situation where it was difficult to move even a finger. It was because it was Kishiar that he had moved. Despite the bitter pain, the reason he didn't remove the embracing hand was because a greater desire resided within Yuder.

"Emotions are strange."

Suddenly, Kishiar opened his mouth slightly.

"Armed with logic and patience, compared to reason, it doesn't hold a single weapon yet it defeats the target faster than anything else, turning it into a loser. If the result of being defeated by emotions is always this sweet, nobody would want to fight from the beginning..."

Apparently, he was having similar thoughts to Yuder. The man who sighed, making his skin tingle, leaned his head on Yuder's shoulder like a weary deer.

"To be unable to think of anything because of this mere thing, the arrogance I've had so far is laughable."

"It's not laughable."

If the fact that all emotions were melted by the hand of the other person, who reached out first, was laughable, then Yuder himself should have been the butt of a joke many times over. He had always lost himself at the mere gesture of Kishiar.

"Even if I say that I don't want to do anything else because I want to sustain this moment?"

"That is... I feel the same, so it's not laughable at all..."

As he hesitated and replied, he felt a low chuckle through his shoulder as a vibration. Yuder felt his arms hugging him tighter than before.

"Right. Then let's indulge in this desire a bit more."

Each time he took a deep breath, a good scent, strong enough to numb his head, subtly emanated from their touching bodies. It was the unique body scent of Kishiar, completely different from the perfume created by humans. The fact that the scent, which was only occasionally perceived usually, seemed so intensely filled in an instant was probably due to his emotions moving so intensely.

When he inhaled it, something inside him also seemed to move as if it was being drawn in with it. It was a tingling yet hot sensation, like an invisible hand that seeped in like smoke, gently kneading and tangling something asleep inside.

Yuder was once again aware of the fact that he and Kishiar were Omega and Alpha Awakener respectively.

"...Sweet."

He thought his own thoughts had slipped out of his mouth, but it was Kishiar who had spoken. He slowly rubbed Yuder's nape with his hair, taking a deep breath.

"I never understood why such a scent came to be... but now, I feel like I understand a bit."

As his nose gently grazed below his chin, a shiver ran down his spine.

"If I had not known this sweetness, I probably wouldn't have been able to find you then..."

Upon hearing 'then', his puzzled mind soon found an answer. Kishiar was talking about the moment when he found Yuder, who had single-handedly faced Pethuamet by piercing through the Great Sarain Forest in the darkness.

Yuder, rather blankly, felt a belated question arising, 'Come to think of it...' The late arrival of Kishiar at the precise location so quickly was almost miraculous in the Great Sarain Forest. The color-changing magic that the mages had hung on the trees to guide Yuder was a temporary measure and would have disappeared shortly. Kishiar had no one to guide him. So, how was he able to find him without any hesitation?

"Did you... Did you find me so quickly back then... because of the scent?"

"Yes."

"How..."

"Well... Even I am not exactly sure how it was possible."

However, the moment he thought he had to find Yuder, he felt as if something beyond his senses from within his body had awakened.

"All I know is that at that moment, everything felt different than before. Suddenly, I realized there was a thin thread inside me, unknown even to myself, that was connected somewhere. I could feel that you were at the end of it, somehow... even without any reason, a conviction so strong I couldn't doubt it."

He ran through the forest, following the direction that sense pointed to. As he ran along the frail thread that seemed to break at any moment, he felt closer to the answer he had been searching for. From the thin, invisible thread, a faint sweet scent wafted.

"It was certainly your scent."

Kishiar murmured, once again taking a deep breath.

"That sense disappeared after I found you... but I'm sure it wasn't a dream."

It was an enigmatic experience, literally. He had never heard of anyone experiencing such a thing in all the memories of his previous life. Scent was a characteristic that most who manifested a second gender had. As the heat period approached, it became stronger against their will, attracting the opposite sex, but it did not play the role of finding someone specific.



'A thread... and a connection.'

He had a feeling as if he knew something, but his mind was so fuzzy that it was hard to continue thinking.

"It's strange..."

Kishiar smiled faintly.

"But it's a good thing. After all, thanks to that, I found you."

It would have been better if he had found him a little earlier. The murmuring voice sank once again. Yuder felt a hand gently stroking the bandage over where his eyes were.

"....I never knew that not being able to meet your eyes would be such a regrettable thing."

There was undeniable self-reproach for not having arrived a bit sooner in his voice. This made Yuder feel a sudden pain in his heart. What expression was Kishiar making as he said these words now? Even if he tried to imagine, he couldn't depict it.

Looking at the silent Yuder, Kishiar quietly asked.

"Are you... scared of not being able to see?"

He was not scared. Even though he couldn't see or exert strength, he didn't regret it. Not at all.

However, he did feel a twinge of regret that he couldn't meet Kishiar's gaze, so vividly felt through his skin, with his own eyes.

"...I'm not scared, but I do feel a bit regretful."

"What aspect?"

Yuder turned his head towards where the beautiful, sunlight-breaking red pupils likely were. A thought skimmed across his mind, questioning whether he was even qualified to speak such words, but his mouth moved faster.

"I can't see... what expression you're making now."

Kishiar said nothing for a moment.

Soon, a surprising burst of heat flared between their touching skin. Before Yuder could react to the sensation, a trembling breath echoed in his ear.

"...Now I understand what it means to go mad."

The feeling of hot lips brushing just beneath his ear was spine-tingling.

"To say such things without knowing how much I'm holding back... don't you think that's terribly cruel?"

His trembling arms, which had been holding Yuder almost painfully tight, finally relaxed after several breaths.

"Don't turn me into a shameless person, asking if it's okay to touch someone who is hurting."

Kishiar's heated desire was conveyed vividly beyond the darkness veiling Yuder's eyes. It felt as if he could physically touch it.

He wanted Yuder.

His emotions had not wavered, not even when Yuder was covered in venom, horrifically battered and bruised.

The sight of such a resolute man revealing himself so candidly in front of him touched Yuder's heart painfully.

"So, is it alright if I touch you instead?"

"Where?"

Driven by an irresistible impulse, Yuder strained to move his hand. He thought he could discern the expression Kishiar was making if he could just feel it, even if he couldn't see it. As the tip of his fingers lightly touched Kishiar's jaw, he felt the skin there stiffen slightly from tension. He wanted to feel more, but he lacked the strength in his arm. Then, Kishiar caught his slipping hand, gently pulling it and helping him to caress his cheek.

"...Alright. If you want, anywhere is fine. I'll help you."

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"...Alright. If you want, anywhere is fine. I'll help you."

His overlapped hands slowly traced his face.

There was no particular sensation when Kishiar touched his face. But when Yuder felt the touch of the other's skin in his hands, it felt strangely unfamiliar. As his hands glided across the smooth cheeks, the straight nose, the warmth hidden behind the strands of hair, and the soft forehead, Yuder traced the features of Kishiar in his mind.

The sensation of the long eyelashes brushing his fingertips tickled. From just that fleeting touch, he knew Kishiar was smiling with his eyes closed. His heart began to race faster. When Yuder's hands grew slightly firmer, Kishiar gradually withdrew the force from his hands that were supporting him. Yuder, who had been too weak to move independently just moments ago, was now touching Kishiar's face entirely on his own volition.

His cautious movements gradually quickened as if bewitched. He hadn't even realized when one hand had turned into two.

'So, this is what his face felt like.'

Every touch drew a new image of the face in his mind. The things he thought he knew felt utterly unfamiliar. Kishiar didn't resist, no matter where Yuder touched. He just passively surrendered, exhaling hot breaths sporadically.

Finally, Yuder's hands moved down past the nose, towards the lips. A part he had consciously avoided, but now it was the only place left untouched. As he gently caressed the upper lip and fumbled towards the end, a sigh, as though waiting for him, arose.

A smile-filled breath flowed out through the slightly parted lips.

"...That tickles."

The whispering lips brushed the tip of Yuder's fingers, then pulled away. In that instant, Yuder felt he could no longer resist merely touching him. The once gentle feelings boiled over into a fervent hunger.

He pulled at the hands that were cradling Kishiar's face, moving closer, as though if he came any nearer, he'd be able to see past the bandages. Kishiar's previously smiling cheeks tensed up.

The moment their lips overlapped, regrettable heat consumed his mind. Kishiar, who had seemed to be gently trying to push him away, froze.

"..."

Feeling the laughter disappear from Kishiar's lips through his own was a strange sensation. Despite having touched these lips countless times, the mere fact that he had been the one to initiate the touch made everything feel new.

Kishiar tried several times to remove him, placing his hands on Yuder's back, but he could only grab onto the hem of Yuder's clothing, not being able to stop him.

Awkwardly, he parted the lips and touched the stiffened tongue. When Kishiar hesitated, releasing his breath and attempting to pull his head back, the hand that had been pushing Yuder away suddenly changed its direction and pulled him closer. In the unending darkness, only the tangible heat felt like a vivid reality.

Breaths, heavy with unsatisfied desire, intertwined, flowed from their locked lips, paused and resumed. The pounding heart he could feel against his chest was so intense it felt like it would burst. Whether it was his heartbeat or Kishiar's, Yuder couldn't tell.

All he wished for was that the presence held desperately in his hands would not disappear.

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Until now, all the kisses between Yuder and Kishiar had been initiated by Kishiar, reaching out first. But this time, it was the other way around - Yuder was the one who moved first. A deep sense of self-loathing stirred within him, yet on some level, it felt as if he had long yearned for this moment.

Despite the realization that it was wrong, he could not contain his desire. In the moment of contact, he even forgot about his own physical condition. He was oblivious to how far he might have gone if he had not felt the sting in his cracked ribs from his intense breathing.

It was as if he had become a blind man lost in his emotions.

'...No, I am indeed blind now.'

Yuder sighed softly, feeling the rustle of the fresh bandages that Kishiar had changed for him. He had not known until then that Kishiar had been the one to change his clothes and bandages while he was unconscious.

Such a task could have been entrusted to Lusan or others, yet he found himself speechless against Kishiar, who replied curtly that the one caring should be the one most certain.

"Is it over now? Does it hurt?"

"...Yes."

Finally securing the bandage around his waist, Kishiar threaded a new shirt on his arm and quickly buttoned it up. Though his touch bore no warmth, each time Yuder felt his gaze brush against his skin, his swollen lips tingled in response. Yet each time, his ribs also throbbed, so Yuder endeavored not to focus on his emotions.

"Are you still hungry?"

"I'm fine."

"Your fever... seems to be rising again."

The cold that had filled his body when he first woke up, as if he was encased in ice, had long since dissipated. The hand that touched his burning forehead dropped away with a sigh.

"I regret it. I should have refrained."

"...I'm sorry."

"Save your apologies until you're fully healed."

The hand that had been sweeping back his disheveled hair dropped away. The cold wind that he hadn't felt while they were close together seemed to belatedly chill his heart. Yuder opened his mouth slowly amidst his clouded senses.

"Still, I'm sorry."

"What do you have to be sorry for?"

He couldn't say what he was sorry for. Because he himself didn't have all the answers. As Yuder remained silent, Kishiar let out a small sigh.

"I'll stay here until you fall asleep. Then, I'll go find a way to remove the traces of the amplification circle with the mages."

"There's no need for you to do so much..."

"There is. I can't trust them completely. Once we find the answer, I plan on removing the traces of the amplification circle myself."

"...But won't that reveal to everyone that you possess the power of a mage?"

"That's true. But it doesn't matter. Have you forgotten? I came here to announce that I'm the owner of the divine sword."

His pleasing voice emitted a dry chuckle.

"It's time everyone knew. Who I am, who we are."

So that no one could ever take them lightly again.

He seemed to hear the unspoken words in his head.

"In order to do that, I need to know exactly how much of a weakness you possess. I need to gather as much information as possible about your current state... Are you okay with that?"

When Yuder remembered Kishiar's expression upon discovering the fact that his power did not properly work against monsters, an image of it flickered across his mind before disappearing. He had expected him to be upset about the concealed weakness, but instead, his surprising request to be the one to share it caught him off guard.

"Of course."

"So far, only I and Priest Lusan are aware of this. Others might have figured it out on their own, but officially, they'll act ignorant unless you bring it up."

his casual way of speaking was possible only because, even in the urgency of the situation, he tried his best to respect Yuder's will.

Suppressing the sharp pain that sprang up again in his chest, Yuder nodded.

"Thank you. I'll tell the others."

"Good."

"I will tell Commander now..."

"What do you want to discuss in this heat? Let's talk about it next time."

"But..."

"Is it because you're still concerned about what was said before?"

Kishiar hit the nail on the head. he sighed and continued speaking.

"It's okay. Of course, when I first noticed, I wished you had told me earlier. However, I don't think knowing in advance would have been able to prevent the situation we're in now."

"..."

He could feel his gaze sweeping over his bandage-covered body.

"It's not a matter of trust, it probably just seemed natural to you. You, accustomed to being alone, couldn't have changed your nature overnight."

Yet again, he asked nothing of Yuder. The weight of that fact pressed heavily on his chest.

"I..."

The advice that briefly crossed his mind was one that Kishiar in his previous life had often given. Despite having the same meaning, it felt much weightier than when he'd heard it in his dreams. As he struggled to come up with something to say, opening and closing his mouth in stupor, Kishiar gently intertwined his fingers with his.

"It's okay. I'm already satisfied that you reached out to me first. So you don't need to push yourself today. There's still plenty of time..."



Plenty of time? What a strange thing to say. It felt even more odd to Yuder than being told he didn't need to try harder. He exhaled deeply, feeling his tension unwind.

"I hope you don't have any nightmares this time..."

his faint voice was the last sound before all became silent.