

Turning 461

Chapter 461

Though Yuder seemed unaware, there were moments when his expression told a different story.

In instances when an ordinary person might revel in elation and let their emotions soar, Yuder diverged from his usual calm. He displayed a rare blend of tenderness and faint pain.

This hadn't been the case initially. Gradually, though, this aspect of him had revealed itself, until now it was plainly visible even to an undiscerning eye.

It wasn't something that had sprung up overnight. Kishiar thought as much. What Yuder had wasn't a fresh wound that bled openly and clumsily; it more closely resembled a scar, worn down and dulled over a long stretch of time.

Even at the young age of twenty, Kishiar's assistant was unusually shrewd and mature. But when Yuder made that face, that feeling intensified.

The problem was that this expression was not exclusive to moments shared with Kishiar.

It had flickered briefly into existence before his closest comrades, at the tail end of a mission completed without a single casualty, vanishing like a mirage before one could even blink.

The happier he was, the more tormented he seemed.

The sweeter it was, like syrup, the more it felt bitter.

Kishiar couldn't fathom the cause of these conflicting emotions Yuder exhibited, but he chose not to address it or ask about it.

Instead, he offered silent comfort, and with a tender kiss encapsulated a wistful pain.

"Mm, ah...ah."

Yuder accepted Kishiar's lips without hesitation and closed his eyes as he wrapped his arms around him. When he opened his eyes again, the bitterness he had just felt was nowhere to be found.

Kishiar cupped the last of the scented oil into his palm and liberally anointed himself with it. The amount seemed excessive, but perhaps it was still not enough.

There was no sign of fear or tension in Yuder's eyes, yet the future was uncertain. To ease the transition to what was next, Kishiar exhaled deeply to quell the intense heat that threatened to consume his mind. The sensation of a sweat droplet trailing down his chin felt strangely dull.

"Shall we... change positions?"

"How do you mean?"

Kishiar explained that it would be less burdensome for Yuder to turn over. But Yuder quickly made it clear that he had no such preference.

"I don't want to be face down."

Concerns about minimizing pain seemed utterly inconsequential to him. Just as Kishiar was about to say something more, Yuder pulled him close and wrapped his legs around him.

"This is fine. Just, hurry..."

Seeing Yuder's flushed eyes as he bit his lip and swallowed his words, an intoxicatingly potent scent overtook Kishiar's senses.

It was a scent that tugged insistently at all that Kishiar was—a scent distinctly Yuder.

Before such a call, there was no room left for contemplation.

"Ah..."

The plunge was both rapid and slow.

Though no distinct sounds emanated from between them during their union, the world seemed to roar like a tempest in their ears. As their vision swirled into oblivion, their minds struggled to hold on to reality.

And it was Yuder's hands, once again, that pulled Kishiar back from the hot, intense waves that engulfed him.

The moment Kishiar felt the solid touch of those fingers that had slid down his neck, embraced it, and finally wormed their way through his own, he realized with stunning clarity where he stood in a given moment.

It was a moment of unity.

Something that had existed between him and Yuder was violently shaken, turned upside-down, and disappeared in a whirlwind of dust.

As if on cue, time and space lost their meaning, and only the two of them remained in the void that had turned pitch black.

Speechless, Kishiar clenched his hand around Yuder's fingers that had burrowed into his own. Opening his eyes, which until now had only been dampened by physiological heat, he saw a novel glint of light flicker between his dark eyelashes.

Before he could even comprehend what it was, Yuder slowly lifted his hand to Kishiar's cheek. What he stole was a droplet of moisture Kishiar hadn't even known was trickling down.

Kishiar blankly stared at the transparent wetness moistening his fingertips, then reached out to touch Yuder's face. The light that silently streamed down his cheeks soaked his hand in the same hue.

A torrential wave of both immense pain and breathtaking joy surged from somewhere deep within him, a feeling he knew without a word was shared by his partner.

From somewhere deeper than the flesh.

"My God."

How could something like this exist?

So huge, so painful, so perfect.

How could a being like you exist alongside me?

Kishiar bent his back to fully align his body over Yuder's. The realization that he could feel every single part of the other—foreheads, noses, lips, fingers—sent a shiver down his spine.

Though it may have been a brief moment in reality, it felt eternal as their lips finally met, and gradually they returned halfway to reality. The heat that had been boiling endlessly inside Kishiar also began to slowly settle. The coupling wasn't over, but if he were not to ruthlessly penetrate the other's entirety, it was wise for both to stop here and move slowly.

Following his instincts, Kishiar slowly withdrew his hips while maintaining the lingering kiss and holding Yuder's hand for support.

"Huh..."

Yuder clenched his teeth, trembling at the sensation that seemed to drag on endlessly. As he applied pressure to the legs wrapped around Kishiar's body, Kishiar once again gently entered him.

He was enveloped by a warm, soft swamp-like sensation, desperately accommodating him.

"...Ah."

Yuder released a breathless sound, his eyes opening and closing.

Then, they began the rhythm again—retreating and plunging quickly, the wet sounds growing slightly louder as membranes met membranes.

It wasn't a sound that could be produced by Kishiar alone. As he looked up, he saw Yuder's face, his eyes wide open, watching every reaction. Kishiar smiled faintly.

As before, Yuder always acted like he had to see Kishiar's face at moments like this. It even led Kishiar to suspect, almost with certainty, that this might be the extension of why Yuder had said he didn't want to turn around.

People who knew little about Yuder often spoke of feeling a sense of dread when they encountered him. This fear arose from staring into an abyss so vast and pitiless that it seemed beyond any words or force to counter—few other feelings could compare for a human being when faced with such a chasm.

However, a closer look into his eyes would reveal that they contained something purer and more beautiful than anything else in the world.

Though not perfectly unblemished, that abyss had a compelling allure that captivated people all the more for its imperfections.

Despite being told to speak up if he felt pain, there was no need for such caution. Even if Kishiar couldn't fully absorb everything, he felt no sense of discomfort emanating from Yuder. Yuder was wholly alive, raising goosebumps on Kishiar's skin, moving freely, and expressing that he was fully immersed in the moment. That was enough.

Overwhelmed with unbelievable joy that Yuder was so engrossed with him, Kishiar repeatedly kissed and sucked on his flesh.

It was the first time he had ever felt so thankful for having lips.

Not just lips, but hands, feet, and even the sexual organs that he had once found cumbersome—all of it, he was grateful for in their entirety.

For the first time, the fact that his life had continued unbroken to this very day felt like a miraculous blessing.

He lifted himself up and grabbed one of Yuder's ankles. As the angle shifted, Yuder took in a sharp breath and tilted his head. Facing Yuder's questioning eyes as if asking, "What are you planning to do?", he pressed his lips against the inner ankle. Sparks flew between his dark pupils.

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As their eyes met, as if asking what was about to happen, a spark flew between the dark pupils when lips met the inside of an ankle.

"Ah... Hmm!"

It was simply an expression of the joy he was currently feeling, having always wanted to kiss those feet. Yet Yuder's reaction was far more intense than Kishiar had anticipated. Yuder had always been sensitive to every touch and kiss, but this level of heated gaze made every other reaction seem insignificant.

"There....,"

"Didn't you like it?"

"..."

Yuder, who was never one to hide his feelings, couldn't bring himself to say he disliked it. He merely gritted his teeth and mumbled a single phrase.

"It's not clean enough for you to touch with your mouth."

As if there was any part of him that wasn't clean enough for that.

"There's no such place."

Had Yuder said he didn't like it, Kishiar would have stopped immediately, but since that wasn't the case, it didn't matter. With a laugh, Kishiar pressed his lips against the ankle once more. The toes and calf twitched, as if wanting to pull away, but Yuder did not withdraw his foot from Kishiar. Meanwhile, the connection between them continued to transmit a pleasure that felt almost molten, moving smoothly or rapidly as the situation demanded.

Basking in Yuder's gaze, which seemed hot enough to consume him, Kishiar softly squinted his eyes. He'd never put much effort into appearing seductive to anyone, but he felt that if he could relish moments like this for a long time, he could do so quite easily.

Slowly moving his lips up the ankle, he pressed them against the heel and bit the well-defined Achilles tendon like a fruit. Each time, Yuder tensed his intertwined body, closing his eyes tightly and reopening them, and the moans and breaths escaping both of them progressively heightened the atmosphere.

"Ah, haa... Hmm..."

"Ha, ah..."

The body that moved robustly and elastically, savoring the stimulation Kishiar gave, never let go of their intertwined hands. Even while their bodies shook and their mouths tasted each other, Yuder's gaze never left Kishiar.

He seemed intent on figuring out everything—what Kishiar was doing, what sensations he was experiencing, when his eyes closed at a nibble or movement, and what would almost make him lose his rationality. Or perhaps, he already knew half of it.

That gaze.

The look that seemed ready to devour and relish every nuance of the pleasure the other felt was, for Kishiar, more intensely stimulating than the physical pleasure their union was bringing.

Never had anyone scrutinized his pleasure so closely, so greedily.

If anyone else had tried to do so, he would have closed himself off, feeling it to be too intrusive. But because it was Yuder, he gladly opened up.

As time passed, the rhythm of their breathing began to change, becoming shorter and faster. While Yuder's physical pleasure seemed to be more focused toward the front and other parts of his body than his rear, it was somewhat natural given that his primary gender was male. Nevertheless, his body, dutifully receiving and storing up pleasure, finally sent an urgent signal to Kishiar as it neared its limit.

Sensing Yuder's impending limit, Kishiar repositioned the ankle that had still been resting on his shoulder.

Then, as if to show off, he opened his lips that were tightly sealed, kissed the curled toes, and while looking into the slightly enlarged eyes, bit them with his tongue and teeth.

At the same time, he moved his waist and penetrated deeper than ever before. Reflexively, Yuder's insides, which had been soft to accept him, smoothly opened up, making way. The sensation of his body pushing in without any resistance and hitting a wall deep inside sent shivers down his spine.

A heat that seemed to pierce from the top of his head to his toes flashed white before his eyes.

"..."

Both of them were immersed in the intense shock and pleasure, and Yuder's mouth opened silently. His wet eyelashes trembled uncontrollably, and the strength inside his body was incomparable to before. The toes that Kishiar bit seemed to have been struck by lightning, curling up and then stretching out, and a moan filled with desire flowed out.

"Ah... Ahh..."

Yuder tried to hold himself, but before he could stop it, it started between his stiff fingers. The unstoppable liquid not only wet his palm and thighs but also splashed between his chest and Kishiar's body.

The beautiful line drawn by his desperate and stiff body, the moment when the climaxing flesh seemed to melt, Kishiar watched it all without even taking a breath. The sight of his sweaty neck pulsating with his heavy breathing, the chest that had lost its original pale color and was now heaving, and the fingers wet with the hot and pungent liquid trembling and twitching.

Until the very end, when Kishiar's trembling body finally calmed down and his closed eyelids opened again, he didn't want to miss a thing. He couldn't afford to.

And only after he was certain that he had witnessed all of it, Kishiar, with eyes shining with joy, released the strength with which he had bound his body like chains. The thing that slid out of

Yuder's insides immediately ejaculated in his hand. As he exhaled a long breath and opened his eyes that had been closed for a while, he saw Yuder's eyes staring at him with a peculiar expression.

"...Why didn't you just do it??"

The cold voice that came out between the breaths that hadn't yet fully subsided was terribly provocative.

He had expected some words after it was over, but he hadn't expected such a question, so Kishiar jokingly replied, "I thought you'd complain about me biting your toes, but is that your first question?"

"I don't care about that. I'm more curious about why you didn't just do it."

To the lovely and honest question, Kishiar willingly answered, "Our primary genders are the same, but our secondary genders are different. Do you remember the research of Beltrail Shand Apeto?"

Beltrail Shan Apeto, now dead in prison, had committed horrific acts against the Awakeners in a quest to remedy his own cursed body.

He had gathered powerless commoners who had Awakened from all over the empire, almost kidnapping them. Initially, he attempted to transform himself into an Awakener by exchanging his blood with theirs, but after failing, he moved on to forcing Awakeners with second gender to conceive children, with the intention of observing the process. It was a brutal course of action born from the belief that only by understanding how certain children were born could he produce offspring not cursed with his tainted blood.

In this process, many were either killed or disposed of; half of the survivors were rescued by the Cavalry, while the other half were taken by Nahan's forces.

Kishiar had read all the research journals Beltrail had written. Speaking with survivors who had come into the Cavalry, Kishiar's conclusion was as follows:

"The chance of a child being born between Awakeners with second gender is extremely low. And even if conception occurs, the likelihood of the child being born safely is even slimmer. Beltrail noted in his journal that he had never seen a child born successfully. Every verified case ended in miscarriage or in the sudden death of the experimental subject."

Two years had passed since the Awakeners had revealed themselves to the world. Beltrail had been conducting his research for nearly a year. Since the experiments were not conducted under proper conditions, there were no instances of a child being born safely. However, Kishiar did not have even a shred of desire to associate this matter with Yuder Aile and embark on an adventure.

He looked up at Yuder, who was gazing at him with a peculiar expression, and kissed Yuder lightly on the forehead, smiling faintly.

"So, please understand."

"...Commander, um, I see."

Yuder, uncharacteristically for him, chose his words with great difficulty. Sensing what Yuder wanted to ask, Kishiar spoke again.

"It's hard to be certain whether my body is capable of having a child or not. Before I became an Awakener, it would've been definitely impossible, but after Awakening, it's uncertain. And it's not something I can test with anyone."

Even Mick Shuden, who had the ability to see the essence of things, could not provide a definitive answer on this matter, because what he could see did not pertain to the ability to conceive a child.

"..."

"Rather than that, would you come lie down next to me?"

Kishiar lay down beside Yuder and pulled him onto his body. Yuder hesitated for a moment but did not resist; he quietly and carefully rested his cheek on Kishiar's chest. The overlapping warmth of their bodies offered a deep sense of comfort, and the lingering sensation of pleasure was pleasantly felt.

In a cocoon of overlapping body heat, a deep sense of calm mingled with a tingling pleasure, making for a pleasantly comfortable sensation.

Yuder had said he didn't want to engage while turning over, but touching like this should be fine. As he gently ran his hand down Yuder's back, the warm skin beneath twitched but accepted Kishiar's touch.

A moment later, Yuder also lifted his hand to caress Kishiar's cheek. It was much like his previous gestures: the initial contact barely felt heavy, awkward even, but gradually grew more confident, eventually finding a stable rhythm and completing the movement.

From the cheek to just above the ear where a slight imprint remained, then to the forehead where the hair clung, and then back to the cheek again. Observing and feeling this process, Kishiar suddenly realized something.

He hadn't noticed when he'd received similar touches from Yuder before, but this touch strongly resembled the way he stroked Yuder's back.

'And what this fact implies is...'

From now on, every time Yuder's hand caressed something else, this moment and all of Kishiar would become invisible traces etched forever in that touch.

Whether Kishiar himself was present or not, it would remain as an unchanging shadow.

It was a small, insignificant thing that nobody would pay attention to, but this assurance struck Kishiar as profoundly special.

"Why are you smiling again?"

Yuder tilted his head slightly, as if he had sensed Kishiar's mood through the contact of their skin, even though Kishiar had smiled without making a sound.

"Because I'm happy. Ah, don't stop touching. I'd like you to keep going. Feel free to touch me however you want; I'll continue doing the same."

"Is it that good?"

"Absolutely. Do you know how special it is to be able to freely touch something?"

Though he answered cheerfully, his tone had a shade of darkness. Kishiar briefly thought of his brother who wore thick gloves throughout the welcoming ceremony, and of his own childhood hands encased in gloves twice as thick.

Power that was not properly controlled could indiscriminately hurt those around it, eventually tearing even oneself apart. Loved ones, childhood pets—none could escape it.

For those like him, whose power grew frighteningly quickly and became unpredictable, numerous secret barriers had been installed in various palaces of the imperial palace. Walls imbued with protective spells to minimize the impact and damage of any internal incidents appeared as nothing more than ordinary walls from the outside.

In his own bedroom in the palace, there were as many as three layers of such walls.

Always doubt yourself; never be sure.

Doing nothing is the best way to help everyone.

That was the best method to slightly delay a terrifying future, in which he might one day burst from not being able to bear his own power... Those useless yet still deeply imprinted warnings flickered in the corners of his mind, disappearing as soon as he looked into Yuder's eyes.

Kishiar skillfully hid his thoughts, and smiled.

"Hmm... so, how are you feeling? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"No pain anywhere?"

At this, Yuder glanced briefly downward with a subtly complex expression.

"...I'm fine now."

Seeing such words, it was clear that Yuder had felt overwhelmed when he had inserted himself, but the underlying meaning seemed far more positive than anticipated.

"More importantly, are you alright, Commander?"

"As far as I can tell from feeling around just now, I'm fine."

At those words, Kishiar's hand, which had been caressing Yuder's cheek, paused for a moment. It wasn't that Yuder was particularly oblivious, but he couldn't fathom why Kishiar had started by touching the areas that were easiest for checking body temperature.

"...In addition to the heat, the lower region as well."

"Lower? I'd say that's just how it normally is."

Yuder had briefly lain down to assess his condition and converse, but Kishiar remained in an unyielding state even after their activity. Unless forced, it seemed unlikely that it would wilt on its own in this situation.

So what? There was still plenty of time. Kishiar was a man who wanted to savor every sensation he could feel in life, be it pain or agony.

Lying beside each other, Yuder, who had felt Kishiar's heat the entire time, seemed somewhat baffled by his attitude but soon sighed and lowered his head. Once again laying his cheek on Kishiar's chest, he broke the silence.

"I can hear your heartbeat."

"Well, you must've heard how excited I am right now."

"...Yes. I didn't realize it would be beating this hard."

The tone encapsulated in the faint murmur was slightly different this time—a voice hazy like a dream and oddly melancholic.

Kishiar threaded his fingers through Yuder's hair and whispered.

"Exactly. But it was even more intense earlier. I never thought I'd feel something like that in this world. Did you?"

Tears that had unknowingly flowed from both of them, the astonishing sensations that breathed new life into their flesh, even the oddity that made it seem as if everything existed solely for this moment—all were assuredly not felt by Kishiar alone.

Yuder did not respond, but it was okay; it wasn't a question that required an answer.

Sometimes, words aren't needed to understand.

Perhaps it was a part of the 'connection,' like a thin thread, that had existed between them thus far.

There were no other explanations.

Before pondering the identity of that connection any further, Yuder sat up. He placed his lips against Kishiar's and then straddled him, his eyes ablaze. Somehow, Yuder himself was also half-rejuvenated.

"...I've thought about it."

Yuder, whose hand now securely gripped Kishiar's, which was larger than his own face, murmured as he looked down.

"I'd rather you didn't worry so much."

"About what?"

"As far as I know, relationships between Awakeners with second gender aren't that risky, so long as their heat period don't overlap. I'm certain of at least that. And I..."

With a gaze as piercing as a flash of lightning, Yuder spoke.

"I came here wanting every part of you, Commander."

Ah, what a bold declaration.

In that instant, the smile vanished from Kishiar's face.

Any plans for additional rest were immediately abandoned.

With a strange sense of a burning ache deep in his throat, Kishiar pulled Yuder into his arms. Their entwined bodies rolled over, this time in the opposite direction from before.

Kishiar, with fingers raised, felt the touch greedily caressing his body and moaned with eyes half-closed. Yuder, biting his lip anxiously, guided him.

"Hmm- Ah..."

The insertion was smoother than before.

Muscles, naturally toned from the traces of life and long training, writhed and clung to the other. Instead of the ecstasy felt from their previous union, a desperate desire to reach even a little more took its place.

Every moan that flowed out, revealing pleasure without filter, was met with an increasing pleasure from the other, in an endless cycle. There was no room for thought.

Suddenly, Kishiar thought their moving bodies, overlapping like white waves, seemed as if they were dancing together.

Come to think of it, maybe soon, I could really dance with you.

He wanted to say that, but the heat of the lips, biting and clinging roughly, swept away all thoughts. Every time Kishiar tried to think of something else, Yuder, as if sensing it, touched his face and pulled him closer. In front of those staring eyes, nothing could be hidden or avoided.

A towering wave surged, scratching and engulfing everything inside.

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Awakening to the sunlight streaming through the skylight, Yuder opened his eyes.

For a moment, the familiarity of the sparsely furnished bedroom almost chilled his heart. However, a strange sound he felt as he tried to move a little quickly snapped him back to reality.

It was the sound of the magic stone furnace burning stronger than usual. Each time it spewed its multicolored flames, a warm and peaceful air tickled his skin. It was a sensation Yuder had never felt in all the time he had spent here.

Yes, he was not the Commander of the Cavalry, and this was not Yuder's bedroom but Kishiar's. And the reason he woke up here was...

"..."

Turning his head slightly, Yuder soon found a blond handsome man lying beside him with his eyes closed, his arm comfortably wrapped around Yuder's waist. Even though he wore not a shred of clothing, he exuded no sense of vulnerability. His body radiated sculpted beauty under the light. As he breathed rhythmically, the shadows between his long eyelashes swayed like fruits, capturing one's gaze more intensely than any jewel.

Just as his regained sense of reality almost faded again, the sight of vivid, rugged marks on the man's chest sharply brought him back.

'...Yes.'

This was reality. More than anything, it was proof that everything that had happened yesterday was not a dream.

Yuder brushed his face with his hand and exhaled briefly. Even that small movement prompted a dizziness and lethargy in his muscles that he couldn't attribute to any particular part of his body.

The moment his body hesitated, the large hand wrapped around Yuder's skin twitched.

With barely audible breaths, the man who had been lying still with his eyes closed suddenly opened them.

"..."

Eyes met, and silence flowed. A few blinks later, a smile softly broke over Kishiar's face. The man, who seemed as inanimate as a mineral untouched by the passage of time, became a warm, living being in that moment.

"...Did you sleep well?"

"...Yes."

"Good."

The hand that had been wrapped around Yuder's waist moved up and playfully swept the disheveled hair off his forehead. The tips of his long fingers then traveled from Yuder's warm forehead down to his pale cheek, and finally paused below his swollen lips.

It was a touch they had shared multiple times before, yet somehow this time it took on an entirely different hue.

"I can't believe I slept in longer than you. This has never happened before. Even the time..."

Kishiar's gaze moved towards the ceiling as he mumbled cheerfully, looking up at the sky through the window.

"...It doesn't seem like an illusion that the sun is about to set in a few hours."

True to his words, the sunlight beaming down was decidedly different from morning light. Given that their lovemaking had started yesterday afternoon and only ended when the sun had risen and set again, it was no surprise.

A whole day had passed confined to this bedroom, yet it didn't feel as if that much time had actually elapsed. Neither was he hungry nor thirsty. Aside from a slight lethargy in his limbs, astonishingly, there was no problem at all.

Yuder looked down at the finger that continued to slowly trace his lips and quietly opened his mouth. As he stuck out his tongue to lightly lick the tip, the movement of the finger stopped. When he gently bit the end and looked up, he saw that the red gaze meeting his own had shifted, taking on a slightly different light.

And the same was true for Yuder's face reflected in those eyes.

"...Hmm. I was thinking we should probably start with a meal," Kishiar said.

He smiled as if it were difficult, but from the beginning, it was Kishiar who had stoked this fire between them, cautiously touching his lips all the while. It was evident that they both shared the same impulse, the same joy. Yet the fact that Kishiar remained restrained until the end felt both impressive and somewhat provocative.

If there were even a slight hint of hesitation here, the man before him would certainly pull back. He would expertly cloak all traces of emotion, extending a relaxed hand as if he'd never felt any impulse from the start. And that would have been fine.

But that was not what Yuder wanted.

Yuder recalled a sensation he had briefly felt for the first time just yesterday, when their bodies had overlapped.

It was an incredibly faint and ancient feeling.

Within the invisible currents emanating from the one who touched him, Yuder suddenly felt emotions that seemed both his and not his, bursting forth like sparks.

Though he had half-forgotten this sensation, having not felt it for so long, he immediately knew what it was. It was different yet similar to the feelings of another that he'd often experienced after becoming physically intimate with Kishiar in his past life.

Among the many changes he'd experienced after physical intimacy in his previous life, he'd also felt the sudden emotions of the other person. That unfamiliar sensation was accompanied by a phantom pain that felt as if something inside him had been torn to shreds, and it made Yude suffer by making it impossible to tell whether it was his own pain or someone else's pain.

But this time was different. The moment he connected with Kishiar, Yuder felt an ecstasy similar yet far more intense than his own, a strange and warm gratitude, and at the same time, a rigid and chilly emotion directed at Kishiar La Orr himself.

That was the very source of Kishiar La Orr's patience. It was the final safeguard he had set up so as not to ruin this moment, and it was also the most secret part of him that Yuder had only vaguely sensed until now.

Even in that intensely vivid moment, it was the only thing that kept a cool eye open, targeting not the surroundings but Kishiar himself.

Yuder was not lacking in patience himself, but his own patience often led to a good compromise with his own desires. Some baselines existed, but if something urgent enough to cross those lines appeared, he would not restrain an explosion.

This was the strength of teachings layered over innate disposition. The one who taught Yuder patience had instructed him on how to use enormous power judiciously, how to make rational decisions before emotional ones, but also said that if something more important than all of that appeared, it was alright to prioritize oneself.

And who was the one who taught him this?

It was none other than Kishiar La Orr.

The thought that the one who taught Yuder to be this way didn't apply the same principles to himself was both astonishing and somehow fitting.

Kishiar had certainly promised not to hold back, and he kept that promise. However, the cold voice directed at himself in his core was not included in that promise.

With an inexplicable feeling, Yuder's heart throbbed largely, and tenderly.

It was only then that Yuder wanted all of Kishiar La Orr, including that cold patience.

If he verbalized the knowledge he had from his past life about the Awakener, Kishiar would surely begin to suspect or notice something more, but that didn't matter.

'You taught me to be this way,' he thought.

Yuder quickly gathered his thoughts and spoke, "I'm not hungry."

"What about water?"

"Are you thirsty?"

Without lifting a finger, several droplets of water silently appeared and disappeared between them. Seeing this, Kishiar chuckled as though he had asked a foolish question and finally their lips met properly.

The instant their tongues tangled, their bodies rapidly warmed. The subtle scent emanating from Kishiar grew richer, and Yuder's senses became keenly alert. Yuder felt a gradual firmness in the softness between his legs and twisted his head slightly.

Sliding down to Kishiar's neck, Yuder sank his teeth in just as Kishiar leaned his neck forward and pulled him closer, their lower abdomens nearly colliding. To penetrate while lying face to face... A vague thought flitted by as a firm hand gently lifted one of Yuder's legs and placed it on his own.

Only after another lengthy bout of lovemaking could they finally rise from the bed to prepare for a meal.

"Western food was good too, but eating back home is always better, don't you think?"

Yuder nodded slightly, chewing quickly on the bread and fruit that Kishiar had brought on a tray, wearing nothing but trousers. Yuder was in no better state, his attire consisting only of an untied robe.

If the Cavalry had seen their Commander and his assistant sitting side by side in such disheveled attire, eating haphazardly at a table that wasn't even in the dining room, they would've been shocked. But the Commander's room remained quiet that day. There wasn't even a single messenger bird pecking at the window, as if it were a lie.

Kishiar took the last sip of the remaining tea and set the cup down. Yuder silently refilled it with hot water, and Kishiar gave a brief, grateful squint. "Thank you. My thirst is quenched now."

Kishiar's slight fever had almost completely subsided. Whether it was because he had sated his burning desire, there wasn't a trace of fatigue on his radiant face.

Therefore, Yuder planned to examine his internal state once again after finishing their first meal of the day, post-sunset. Upon his suggestion, Kishiar readily agreed. In fact, it was something they should've done yesterday, but had unintentionally been delayed until now.

"What do you plan to do after you finish examining me?"

"I'm not sure."

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If the mood had struck again, Kishiar and Yuder might have continued to tussle on the bed. However, Kishiar seemed to have something else on his mind.

"Do you have other plans in mind?"

"Resting here is fine, but it's a rare break for us. Given it's night, we could slip out unnoticed. How about a short walk? That is, if you're not too uncomfortable."

"That sounds good."

Yuder readily accepted the suggestion. Though he had spent all day carrying something as heavy as his arm, the strain wasn't so much that he couldn't walk. He would have agreed even if it had been daytime.

"Let's begin."

After the meal, Yuder sat next to Kishiar, who was lying on the bed, and placed his hand on his exposed abdomen. A force he had grown somewhat accustomed to through two prior experiences began to pulse along the veins of his right hand, swelling and slowly emanating from them. The dark-red veins climbed up from his hand, over his wrist, and beyond the elbow.

'Strangely... it's smoother than before.'

Whether it was due to eating and resting well, he didn't know. But controlling the innate power of the Red Stone had never been so easy or responsive. Before long, complex energies began to manifest within Kishiar's body once again.

Though the jumbled nature of the energies remained, the red force that enveloped them seemed more concentrated and abundant than before. As the force encompassed the central vessel, Yuder didn't get a negative impression but decided to inquire cautiously anyway.

"The energies flowing within you have all manifested. The Awakener power seems to have increased in volume. Does it hurt?"

"Not at all."

As Yuder's eyes began to gleam a bright gold, Kishiar looked up and offered a faint smile.

"Understood. This time, I'll examine whether I can manipulate this Awakener energy. If something feels off, please let me know immediately."

Yuder slowly moved his hand, which was enveloped in red energy. The Awakener energy located below the abdomen pulsed in rhythm with Kishiar's heartbeat. As Yuder cautiously touched the tip of it, Kishiar's fingertips twitched.

"..."

After a moment, the red energy began to move ever so slowly along Yuder's fingertips. The energy, following the trajectory of his finger, ascended along the skin and disappeared among other red energies that enveloped the vessel. The movement was impeccably clean.

'It seems I can manipulate the existing Awakener energy within.'

He had thought it wouldn't resist, being of the same nature, and indeed it didn't. Even though he had been confident, a wave of relief washed over him after succeeding. Concentrating to that extent had made his eyes and body feel fatigued.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I saw the movement, and there's no problem."

Some finesse would still be needed, but that was a matter for time and effort to resolve. Yet what Yuder wanted to try wasn't over. Ignoring the sweat on his brow, excitement shone on his otherwise calm face.

"In that case, may I attempt one more thing? The chance of variables occurring will be much higher this time..."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I want to insert my own energy into the Awakener energy that you possess."

"Your energy?"

"Yes. After considering it for some time, I've concluded that this is the most suitable method to test for the well-being of both you and the Emperor."

Within the bodies of Awakeners, small amounts of energy were stored—energy that had been emitted by the Red Stone that influenced their world. While the amount and nature of this energy varied from person to person, Yuder uniquely possessed its most pure form.

As the mage Thais Yulman had done—separating energy and storing it within a medium for later use—it was also conceivable that this energy could move between people. The variable was that, as Yuder had experienced, the potency of this pure energy could disrupt the balance. However, Yuder believed that the energy stored within him had weakened to some extent through adaptation, making the experiment worth attempting.

Rather than directly manipulating the energy stored in the medium separated by Thais Yulman, it would be easier and less risky to try moving the energy that Yuder could easily handle himself.

After listening to all this, Kishiar pondered for a moment before nodding his head.

"Alright. Let's try it."

However, he added one more condition.

"But to absorb the energy from elsewhere, the receiver also needs their own will and strength. Since my Awakener ability facilitates such an exchange, can we try using it together?"

Kishiar La Orr's power was either to pull something towards him or to push it away. Contemplating this, Yuder's thoughts momentarily swirled.

"...Can your power affect things that are intangible?"

Yuder had only seen Kishiar use his power to avoid injury when leaping from great heights or to ascend a tree as if walking on flat ground. To Yuder's knowledge, in his previous life Kishiar mainly used his power to enhance physical attacks against enemies. Although it was a formidable power, it was directed at tangible objects, not intangible ones.

"I haven't tried it yet. But if there's a will, it's not impossible, is it? Haven't I often said the same to the other members?"

Kishiar's smiling face sent a jolt through Yuder's heart.

After a long silence, Yuder slowly nodded.

"If it starts to seem even slightly dangerous, we'll stop immediately."

"That's what I wanted to hear. Good. Let's begin."

Both of their energies began to activate. As Kishiar's power started moving, it became apparent that the energies on his body, resembling a mapped pattern, were also shifting in response.

Watching the red energy smoothly fluctuate and extend, Yuder felt as if some invisible force was drawing his hand toward Kishiar. The sensation was similar to the feeling of the Earth pulling him back down after leaping into the air.

Moving energy already inside Kishiar was not the goal; instead, Yuder aimed to transfer his own energy to another. It felt like groping through an utter darkness with only a sense of direction. Yet, as one side pushed and the other pulled, a direction slowly became visible.

Inhaling deeply, Yuder focused on the energy that stained his hand red. If he could transfer even a small amount of the most pure energy that he had struggled for so long to assimilate, everything could change. However, the energy was reluctant to follow Kishiar's pulling force; it didn't quite obey.

After much effort, he was drenched in sweat. Kishiar was no different, but his gaze never wavered from Yuder for even a moment.

Though he hadn't uttered a single moan, it didn't necessarily mean he was untroubled.

Yuder's face concealed an indescribable sensation, one he bore without revealing.

The moment he saw those eyes, which still held a quiet resilience, a sudden torrent of intense emotion surged within him.

What was the point of all this strength and effort if he couldn't succeed for the man who would willingly sacrifice his own body to save his last remaining kin, and for the sake of Yuder Aile?

If his body had become another conduit for the Red Stone, shouldn't he rightfully be able to wield its power as he pleased?

He wanted to move this power.

He wanted to endlessly chase after the force that Kishiar so desperately called to him.

"...Ah."

The moment his agonizing thoughts concluded, a sudden surge of power tingled through the muscles of his hands and arms. A crimson energy, emanating from Yuder's fingertips, swiftly spread across his shoulders, chest, and neck. The appearance was grotesque, but he didn't care. Something had finally begun to move.

An unseen energy surged from Kishiar's body, pulling in something akin to a tiny speck that had left Yuder's hand, swirling it in like a vortex. Completely engrossed to the point where he didn't even feel the tingling in his swollen eyes and hands, Yuder watched this miraculous spectacle unfold.

And then, a moment later.

A clump of red light, smaller than a fingernail, revealed itself as it swirled around the forces within Kishiar.

It was a success.

"..."

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In a state of rapid breath, Yuder watched as the sight of the tiny light melted into the red aura that had been enveloping the vessel. Only then did he relax his muscles and lower his head. His body was drenched in sweat, as if he had never bathed at all.

Yet his mood was considerably relieved. He wasn't planning to end things here; he would observe the progress and try again. As he raised his head to check on Kishiar, he paused at the sight of an unexpected expression on the man's face.

"Commander?"

"Well, why don't you lie down for a moment?"

As if he had been waiting for this moment, Kishiar calmly smiled and pulled Yuder onto the bed where he had just been lying. The movement was so fluid that Yuder didn't even have time to ask why.

"Is there anywhere that hurts?"

"None."

"That can't be."

With conviction, Kishiar placed his hand over the exposed chest of Yuder. Only then did Yuder realize that dark-red marks had spread across his chest. Midway through their operation, he felt a force suddenly breaking through, and suspected this might be the reason.

"Um... how far have they spread?"

"Seeing for yourself would be faster than asking me."

Kishiar picked up a desk mirror nearby. Reflected in the beautifully silvered mirror was a face that looked as bad as a plague patient's. Besides one eye that still shone golden, crimson streaks swelled and spread from his neck to his chin.

Yuder finally understood Kishiar's reaction.

"It does look serious, but I assure you, it doesn't hurt. Really. See, it's fading."

The pain he had felt in his eyes and body had disappeared as if it were a lie as soon as everything was over. All that remained was an afterglow. Moreover, the dark red marks that had extended to his chin were subtly fading, promising to subside to its previous level if left alone.

However, Kishiar seemed reluctant to judge the situation just by his words. Smiling after hearing the explanation, he immediately opened the drawer of a dresser and took out a resplendent ruby holy symbol and a purification stone, both of which were familiar.

"This is..."

"Priest Lusan is not here now."

Kishiar, the only one who could wield divine power, wound the gold chain attached to the holy symbol around his bare arm and tugged it tightly.

He handled the precious artifact so casually it might have been considered sacrilegious, but Yuder was the only other person present. To Kishiar, his body was far more important than any historical relic.

Would it really be okay to use divine power right after the experiment? Just as Yuder thought he should suggest leaving it be, Kishiar reached out and gently patted Yuder's head.

"It's fine. Now, stay still."

Effectively nullifying Yuder's concerns, Kishiar held the purification stone and poured his divine power into it. The stone glowed softly, and as he held it against Yuder's skin, a refreshing sensation began to sweep through his body.

The pain he'd felt when he'd first used it was completely absent this time. On the contrary, it felt as if strength was gradually returning to his weary body.

After a while, the dark red veins that had spread across Yuder's body had mostly faded, just as he'd expected. Rather than diminishing, they seemed to be absorbed deeper into his flesh. Only after most of the dark red energy had disappeared did Kishiar finally cease using his divine power. By that point, about ten extremely expensive purification stones had been reduced to useless rocks.

"..."

The man examining Yuder's face set down the last purification stone he'd been holding and released the spell. A moment of silence passed as his gaze seemed to scrutinize the results. Yuder was about

to reflexively apologize, but then remembered advice he'd received in the West, which warned him not to diminish a just decision with a momentary apology. He closed his mouth.

It was clear that Kishiar was shocked by what had happened. However, Yuder didn't regret what he'd done. That didn't mean he had forgotten his promise to continue cooperating with Kishiar.

Kishiar, too, must have known this, and his decision to use the purification stones was likely his own way of settling his startled feelings and concerns. Therefore, Yuder felt he should also make an effort to understand Kishiar's actions.

Yuder felt that something more needed to be said than just assuring he was alright.

After a moment lost in thought, Yuder spoke first.

"I did say I would stop immediately if it seemed like a problem would arise, but it seems that the criteria were weighted too heavily towards you."

"..."

"So I think it would be a good idea to have a mirror beside us during these kinds of events, so we can quickly check any changes in our bodies."

"...Alright."

Instead of apologizing, Yuder spoke these words and held a mirror. Only then did Kishiar smile again. The smile that raised the corners of his lips and slightly furrowed his brows was different from the beautiful one he'd displayed just moments before. But this one felt more natural and conveyed a more genuine emotion.

"Good idea."

Kishiar grasped the hand that held the mirror.

Although he couldn't quite put it into words, Yuder felt that Kishiar also understood the meaning behind his words in that moment.

It felt as if they had exchanged something invisible.

"...Yuder. Shall we postpone our nighttime stroll?"

"No, as long as you're not tired, I'm fine."

"Alright. Let's go then."

After another bath, Yuder put on the clothes that Kishiar had provided. The casual clothing with a hat that was good for covering the face fit Yuder surprisingly well. When Yuder asked where he'd found such new-looking clothes, Kishiar replied that he'd prepared a few sets just in case for days like today.

'Days like today...'

The phrase seemed to have multiple meanings.

Using a magic tool to change his face, Kishiar led the way through deserted streets, ghost-like, before finally heading into the bustling nightlife of the Seventh Wall District. Drunks, seemingly enjoying the night, were seated at outdoor tables set up outside bars, loudly singing songs.

'The night's quite chilly, yet they're in high spirits.'

Just as he was about to pass by, Yuder heard a familiar voice among the drunkards.

"Everyone stop drinking now! If you drink any more, you'll pass out before you even get to Steiber's house!"

"Ah, Gakane. What's that? Need more booze? Fine. One more bottle, please!"

"No. I said no."

"..."

Astonishingly, they were members of the Cavalry. Gakane Bolunwald was busy patting their backs and shoulders, trying to recruit at least one person while the familiar, though not particularly close, members laughed and drank. Gakane seemed keen on stopping them from drinking any more, but his attempt was thwarted when a new bottle of liquor made its appearance from within the establishment.

"Ah, look at these familiar faces," Yuder mumbled softly, seemingly realizing who Gakane was looking at.

"Want to join them?"

"No, I'm considering strengthening our training schedule once the vacation ends."

Drinking was fine, but one should never lose oneself in it. Most members knew their limits even when inebriated, but those hanging out with Gakane were notorious for their love of alcohol among the members.

It might not be a problem now, but it could be in the future. The best way to teach self-control was through training.

A bigger smile spread across Kishiar's changed expression, perhaps sensing the sincerity in Yuder's words.

"Reassuring," he said.

They walked past the tavern where Gakane and the members were seated, heading deeper into a darker alley. The noise faded, gradually replaced by darkness and silence.

Kishiar continued to stride confidently, as if he knew exactly where he was going. Yuder was a bit curious about where this walk would ultimately lead, but he silently followed behind.

And finally, crossing a certain alley, something they had seen before revealed itself.

It was a broad wall filled with numerous sword marks.

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‘This...’

"Do you still remember the promise I made when we were last here?"

Kishiar approached the starting point of the wall, placing his hand on the ancient stone and looked back. The night wind brushed his now light brown hair, making it dance before vanishing. The sight felt as distant as a dream.

Yuder stared blankly at Kishiar's smile and gave a slight nod.

"...Yes."

When they had previously visited this place, Yuder had asked whether Kishiar had left any sword marks amongst the many etched on the wall. Although no one had surpassed the long mark left by the First Emperor, Yuder thought that maybe Kishiar could.

Back then, Kishiar had laughed and said he was overestimating him, but promised that he would try it some other time. He had intended to show it after the relationship between him and the divine sword was made public, but they were already in the west when the new owner of the divine sword was announced, making it impossible to keep the promise.

"I wanted to show you as soon as we returned. I'm glad I can now."

And now, he was reaffirming that promise.

Yuder had been curious all this while what sort of mark Kishiar would have left, but he had half-forgotten about it due to numerous other events. Yet, Kishiar had not forgotten that small conversation from back then. This realization struck Yuder as profoundly surprising.

The meaning of that small promise still occupying space in Kishiar's memory, despite his mind being filled with so much other information, gave Yuder a newfound sense of certainty that sent shivers down his spine.

Yuder looked at Kishiar's smiling face and slowly opened his mouth.

"Is it possible... even without a sword?"

"A sword? Who said anything about not having one?"

Grinning, Kishiar surveyed the surroundings. Seeming to discover something in the darkness, he muttered, "Ah, there it is," and soon returned from a nearby thicket with something in hand.

It was a discarded wooden stick.

"Do you know that after the announcement that someone had become the new owner of the divine sword, challengers to this wall suddenly increased? Some people seemed to think it was a rather stylish form of protest, but it caused headaches for the capital's security forces who had to clean up these broken wooden swords."

Hardly anyone would retrieve a broken wooden sword after using it. Kishiar whispered as if telling someone else's story. Although the reaction had not been positive after Kishiar was announced as the owner of the divine sword, he hadn't known that it had led to such a situation.

'That's unbelievable,' thought Yuder as he took a closer look at the wooden stick Kishiar held. The discarded stick was so poorly carved that the handle and the blade seemed indistinguishable. The end was broken and frayed.

Kishiar lightly held the stick, resembling more a club than a sword, and swung it around a few times with a refreshing smile.

"There, now we have a sword. No problem, right?"

"Are you really going to do it with that?"

"Yes. This should be enough."

While he spoke as if joking, Kishiar's eyes did not betray any signs of jest. He was serious.

Yuder had often heard the saying that a true swordmaster doesn't choose their weapon. He had even seen a foreign swordmaster in a previous life who had picked up a broken blade, cloaked it in sword energy, and charged back into the fight.

Even so, the shattered black sword was hardly a sword at all, and the stick in question didn't even qualify as a wooden sword. There was doubt as to whether such a child's toy could withstand Kishiar's sword energy.

'It would be fortunate enough if it doesn't explode.'

Though thankfully no one was around, if the stick couldn't withstand the sword energy and did explode, the first to bear the consequences would be Kishiar himself.

Unaware that Yuder was gearing up to unleash his power at any moment, Kishiar casually slung the stick over his shoulder. Scanning the countless sword marks etched into the wall, he walked with the leisure of a predator finding its ideal spot. No sign of worry or anxiety could be discerned in his gait.

"This should be a good spot."

Where he stood was far enough from the wall to take in all the sword marks at a glance. Most eye-catching among them was 'The Emperor's Sword Mark,' the very reason the wall existed in the first place.

Stretching from one end of the wall to the other, the mark was so long that dozens of people would have to hold hands to span its length. Though it had dulled and corroded over the passing millennium, it still offered an overwhelming sense of awe to those who beheld it.

Gazing at the mark so enormous it defied belief that a single sword could have created it, Kishiar suddenly spoke.

"Yuder."

"Yes."

"Do you know why the First Emperor left this mark?"

"I do not."

"During the construction of the capital, Archmage Luma, who directed the entire process, declared that he would leave upon completing the final wall. He actually packed and prepared to leave. However, the Emperor and Empress found out and caught up with him."

Kishiar's sword hand was rock-steady.

"The Emperor sliced through the nearly completed city wall with his sword, blocking the Archmage's path. Thanks to this, the Archmage had to abandon his departure and return. In other words, The Emperor's Sword Mark is..."

His voice gradually lowered, and a soft yet intense energy emanated from behind him.

"A testament to desperation."

A testament so desperate that nothing else mattered, neither front nor back, nor the surrounding area.

A blue aura began to flow like a stream down Kishiar's hands, tightly enveloping the wooden stick. The aura continued to intensify, eventually surging higher than the stick itself.

In a world where countless people have died unable to handle even a wisp of sword aura, such a bright and distinct aura was extraordinary.

Amazingly, the stick he held neither exploded nor wavered. Yuder's entire body reacted to the aura, every hair standing on end. The spectacle was so overwhelming that it was difficult even to breathe.

"...Now, shall we test just how desperate I am?"

Kishiar slowly lifted the wooden sword and, exhaling deeply, changed its direction sideways. To any trained eye, it was an unassailable, textbook-perfect ready stance.

It may have looked simple and easy, but Yuder knew how immensely challenging it actually was.

Among all those learning the sword, perhaps one in ten could train consistently every day without stopping. And among them, finding someone who could maintain a flawless, textbook-perfect stance, without the slightest deviation, for even an hour was a one-in-a-thousand occurrence.

It was a beauty that could only be achieved through relentless practice, not innate talent.

That beauty stood like a shadow behind Kishiar La Orr.

How much had he practiced? How many hours had he endured to reach this level, only to suppress it again so that no one would know? The weight of it was so heavy that it was impossible to even guess by looking; it compelled the eye to remain fixated.

And finally, Kishiar took a deep breath, gripping his wooden sword tightly. His arm moved, the broken tip of the wooden sword cleaved the air horizontally, and following it, a silent azure sword aura illuminated the darkness...

"..."

The blue light gently covered the ancient wall's ruins like moonlight.

After the sharp yet soft light cut through the wall and disappeared, Yuder saw a new sword mark left just above the Emperor's in the trembling earth.

At a glance, it was strikingly similar to the Emperor's sword mark—a tremendously long trace clearly covering the wall.

Words could not capture the sensation that made his fingers and toes tremble minutely. Kishiar, his wooden sword now sheathed, simply looked at the sword mark he had left in silence.

Since there was no momentary sharing of emotions like when their bodies had intertwined, Yuder couldn't know what Kishiar was feeling right then. Yet there was no regret in not knowing.

It was enough just to have seen this moment, to have watched Kishiar La Orr.

With a sigh, he exhaled the breath he had been holding, tinged with emotion. Reacting to the sound, Kishiar turned his head. The moment their eyes met, he smiled with an almost boyish face.

"...The surroundings are getting noisy. Shall we run?"

As he said, a small disturbance was indeed unfolding around them as the anomaly was detected. Yuder wordlessly took the hand Kishiar offered. With a smile, Kishiar gripped his hand and they ran.

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The next day, as soon as morning broke, astonishing news spread throughout the capital.

"What? Another 'Emperor's Sword Mark' has appeared?"

The wall where the first Emperor had left his sword mark had actually been one of the less popular relics among the people. Most commoners hardly knew what the wall was, and those who did generally showed little interest unless they had a particular fascination with swords.

Recently, young people had started to show up to challenge the wall in the name of 'the honor of the new sword' or some such thing, but their efforts had largely been ignored, amounting to little more than additional trash to be cleaned up.

But today was different. Since The Emperor's Sword Mark was made a thousand years ago, it was likely the first time so many people had flocked around the wall.

People craned their necks and pushed their way closer, trying to get a better look at the massive parallel sword marks engraved on the wall. Such was the level of interest that even the 'Emperor who had revealed himself after so many years,' who had been the focus of everyone's attention just a day ago, was temporarily pushed to the background.

"Really, another mark has appeared on top of the original one! Could a human have done this?"

"Who could it be? Is there a knight capable of such a feat?"

"The only Swordmaster in the capital is General Mook, right? So it must be him!"

"What are you talking about? His mark is right there! It even has his nameplate attached! It's much smaller than the Emperor's mark! And if he did it, why would he hide the fact?"

People who claimed some knowledge of swordsmanship argued loudly among themselves until someone secretly passed on a rumor.

"I heard from the person who discovered it last night that when they felt an unusual vibration and came to look, no one was here. If you don't believe it, you can ask the shopkeeper over there."

The individual who had suddenly left a sword mark on a wall that had shown no change until the previous evening had vanished like a mirage. Soldiers who had come to investigate, initially skeptical and expecting to deal with drunkards' nonsense, had promptly returned in total disbelief.

"Geez, if it's not General Mook, then who could it be? And why did they leave without revealing themselves?"

The evidence was there, but the identity of the person who had performed such an astonishing feat was unknown. It was unbelievable, but the reality before their eyes couldn't be denied.

"Make way, all of you!"

Just then, a few knights forced their way through the crowd. The commoners, upon seeing their gleaming armor and spotless uniforms, backed away in fear.

"My God, it's the Imperial Knights."

Leading the knights was a man with red-brown hair, his face as emotionless as ice. A few people gulped as they noticed the insignia on his armor, indicating he was the Commander of the Imperial Knights.

Commander Theorado of the Imperial Knights stood in front of the sword marks, seemingly indifferent to the throng around him. His gaze was fixed intently on the wall before him.

As if by doing so, he could somehow discern the identity of the one who had made the mark.

"Did he come to investigate the sword mark...?"

"Maybe, or maybe he's the one who made it."

"...Let's go."

However, Theorado soon turned around. As bewildered as the crowd was, the knights who had followed him looked equally puzzled.

"Commander, have you already discovered something?"

"I don't think there's a need to investigate further."

"Ah, was it just magical trickery after all? I knew it. I thought it would be nothing more than a rude prank, not worth our attention."

"No, it's genuine."

Theorado replied in a subdued tone.

"It was drawn properly in one go using sword aura; it's a genuine Swordmaster's sword mark. That's why there's no need to look further."

The knight who had loudly speculated that it was fake closed his mouth, visibly chastened. Other knights, who had been quietly harboring similar thoughts, discreetly rolled their eyes, grateful they hadn't spoken out first.

As they followed behind Theorado, noticeably more subdued than when they'd arrived, the stifled voices of the onlookers erupted almost in unison.

"Did you hear that? It's genuine!"

"A mark left by a Swordmaster! Who on earth could it be then?"

"Having given him a day off to rest, and he pulls off something like this?"

Leaning against the back of his bed and reviewing documents, the Emperor sighed and pushed his hair back.

"Ever since he was young, whenever he received an order he didn't like, he'd commit some outrageous and nonsensical act. No matter how old he gets, that disposition shows no signs of changing."

Spread out on his lap was a detailed report about the mysterious sword mark that had suddenly appeared last night. While nobody had yet identified the culprit, the Emperor instantly knew who it was.

There were, officially, two Swordmasters in the capital besides General Mook. One was the cautious and devoted knight who would never do such a thing. The other was that knight's master and, for whatever reason, someone entirely capable of this sort of stunt—the Emperor's own brother.

The Emperor thought he'd be more surprised if the perpetrator wasn't Kishiar La Orr.

"If Commander Theorado left the scene right after checking it out, it means he's already figured out who it is. Have others not come yet?"

"None so far," replied the chamberlain, refilling the Emperor's cup with freshly brewed tea.

"That's fortunate... He has no interests other than the sword, so he won't gossip about this. The situation in his family has conveniently settled down, and as for other interested parties..."

Muttering to himself as he sipped his tea, the Emperor's thoughts were a flurry of complex matters fusing and breaking apart in a continual cycle. Knowing well what state the deep-thinking Emperor would get into, the chamberlain skillfully interjected.

"Your Majesty, my apologies, but the tea will cool again. Her Majesty the Empress did send over the last harvested leaves of the year, and didn't you say you wanted to enjoy it while it was hot?"

"...Right."

The Emperor finally broke away from his train of thought and turned his attention back.

As he resumed drinking his tea, the Emperor's gaze, however, remained fixed on the same page of the report. But this time, he was not lost in thought; his mood had subtly but surely softened.

"...To think he'd protest in this manner to convey that he's perfectly fine. I really hadn't considered it."

"Yes, it's truly remarkable. A sword mark that can match that of the First Emperor himself. It's something nobody has achieved in a thousand years. It will certainly be remembered throughout history."

"Indeed, if the former Emperor and Empress knew about this, they would be both shocked and pleased just like me."

A faint smile touched the corners of the Emperor's lips before quickly fading away. The warmth of his smile was replaced by a chilling solemnity, as if touched by a winter wind.

"I had planned to showcase Kishiar's strength as soon as he returned anyway. Fortuitously, he took the initiative to act first, so that saves us some effort. Bring me fresh parchment. I need to write a letter to the Cavalry."

"Yes."

The chamberlain, who had been smiling, exited the room. The Emperor slowly rose from his bed and walked toward the window. A dull ache emanated from somewhere within his body, but it was a tolerable pain.

The view outside his window had changed somewhat from before. The palace grounds, once empty, were now bustling with people. Most were there to prepare for a party under the Emperor's orders, but among them were nobles who stood there every day, hoping to gain an audience with him.

They were curious about the Emperor's health, how much he had recovered, whether he would resume direct involvement in state affairs following the Cavalry's welcome ceremony, and a myriad of other matters. Of course, the Emperor had no intention of indulging their curiosity.

'They must be incredibly curious. They thought I was quietly sinking into oblivion, and now, suddenly, I've made a move. They must wonder if this is the last twitch before death, or if something has changed.'

The fact that the nobility was not responding to this 'new incident' was proof enough that their attention was wholly fixated on the Emperor's well-being and were unable to pay attention to anything else.

'How delightful it is to easily guess the inner workings of the enemy without even making a strenuous effort to infiltrate their core?'

Kishiar must have also acted with this kind of impact in mind.

'Even though it looks like he acts without thinking, he's never actually done so.'

Their preoccupation with the Emperor's condition would soon become an opportunity for the Emperor and those who followed him.

Soon, the chamberlain returned, offering up parchment infused with a pleasant fragrance. The Emperor sat down at his desk, dipped his pen in ink, and began to write his letter without hesitation.

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"His Majesty has expressed that voicing complaints about the forced vacation this way is more than sufficient. Apparently, they've set up barriers around the area because so many people have been gathering and it nearly caused an incident. Ah, everyone must've had a tough time."

On the third day of his vacation, at midday, Yuder lay down, staring at Kishiar's face as he casually read the letter brought by the courier pigeon that had arrived for the first time in three days. Listening to Kishiar's soothing voice, Yuder felt as if his eyes were heavy, sprinkled with sleeping powder.

'I had planned to read the translated research journal of the First Tain Duke today... Was it because I didn't sleep well last night?'

Last night, after Kishiar had carried out the extraordinary feat, Yuder had spent the night half-awake in a blend of excitement and anxiety. He was thrilled by the incredible miracle he had witnessed, yet concerned whether Kishiar would be alright after absorbing his energy.

However, even after watching all night, he had found no issues with Kishiar's body. Even after a day had passed, not just his cheeks and lips but even the blood flow between his legs appeared overly vibrant.

Just to be sure, Yuder opened up the flow of energies in Kishiar's body again first thing in the morning. He even attempted to maneuver one of the tiny streams of energy entangled in Kishiar using the Awakener's power.

If Yuder had done it alone, it would have been a very cautious and difficult process. However, Kishiar assisted him with his own power, making the task much easier than expected.

It felt like he would soon get the hang of it to be able to do it alone with a few more tries.

'After moving the energy, I could also untangle it directly, strengthen it, and lastly... perhaps I could correct the elements that disturb the balance from my end.'

Thinking such thoughts, he quietly closed his mouth, waiting for the continuation of the conversation. But no voice came. When Yuder turned his head, Kishiar finally added, as if he had been waiting for it:

"While I can't say that I had absolutely no intention of complaining, don't misunderstand. What happened last night was to fulfill a promise I wanted to keep, and His Majesty is not yet aware of that fact."

Yuder blinked a few times before mumbling quietly, "I'm fine with it."

He had suspected Kishiar would do something ever since he wasn't particularly submissive about the forced vacation order. If one could achieve two purposes with one action, it would be stranger not to do so.

Yuder was more than satisfied just by having witnessed last night's miracle up close, so he didn't care about the rest.

"Instead, if His Majesty bothered to send a letter himself... is he alright?"

"Are you worried about His Majesty?"

Kishiar responded softly.

"Of course, I am."

"Then let's dine at the Sun Palace tonight."

The suggestion was so natural that even Yuder, who considered himself immune to Kishiar's usual charm, took a moment to understand its implication.

"Excuse me?"

"The letter says so. If you have nothing else to do, come and have the dinner we couldn't share because of that unfortunate incident."

"Is His Majesty saying he will lift the ban on you entering the Sun Palace?"

"No. The ban remains. But going to the palace boldly on my own accord, and sneaking in to just have dinner at His Majesty's invitation, are slightly different things."

So it was that the Emperor had discreetly written for Kishiar to make a brief visit to the palace.

In his previous life, Yuder Aile had often received similar instructions from Emperor Katchian, so understanding the message wasn't too difficult. Of course, Emperor Katchian had never extended the invitation for something as warm-hearted as a meal.

"Understood. Please proceed."

"Proceed? Didn't I just say? Tonight's dinner is to be at the Sun Palace. That invitation includes my assistant as well."

Only then did Yuder realize that he had slightly misunderstood Kishiar's intention.

'...He wants us both to join him for dinner at the palace?'

Although it was a casual, unofficial meeting during a vacation, the palace was not a place one could easily visit on a whim. This was especially true for Yuder Aile, who was merely a member of the Cavalry. He had considered that they might eventually meet to discuss Emperor Keilusa's treatment, but he had never imagined that their first meeting would be like this.

Yuder swallowed his astonishment before replying.

"I doubt His Majesty would have specifically invited me."

"Of course not."

Kishiar calmly nodded, his lips curving into a slight smile.

"However, every time I've entered in this manner before, I've usually been accompanied by Nathan. I assume His Majesty will think the same about you accompanying me this time."

"You mean you've dined with the Emperor, with Nathan before?"

"Quite often. In the past."

Kishiar's words left Yuder speechless, and Kishiar studied his expression with squinted eyes.

"Don't fret. If you're planning to heal His Majesty, isn't it better to get to know him first?"

"..."

"If I've learned anything from yesterday and today's experiences, it's that manipulating the energy within someone else's body is not an easy task. The reason it worked relatively smoothly for us is likely because we know each other well."

Yuder had vaguely reached the same conclusion himself. Kishiar softly brushed Yuder's cheek with his finger and leaned in for a kiss.

"In any case, I'll need to inform His Majesty about this and give him time to prepare and decide. The sooner we start, the better. An informal setting like tonight is perfect for this sort of discussion."

"...Understood. Then I'll join you."

At Yuder's heavy, yet resolute reply, Kishiar grinned briefly.

"Good. But there's one more thing I'd like to say."

"What is it?"

"I intend to participate in treating His Majesty as well."

For a moment, Yuder's mind went blank.

Ever since he first decided to heal and save Emperor Keilusa, who was fated to die, Yuder had imagined countless scenarios. But none of them had included Kishiar saying something like this.

"What... are you saying? You, joining in? That's absurd."

"Why is it absurd? Think about everything we've done so far."

Kishiar's face remained calm, as if he had anticipated Yuder's objection.

"Tasks that were difficult alone became much easier when we combined our strengths. My power complements what you're trying to do exceptionally well. I've tested it on myself, and it worked; I think it would be worth attempting on His Majesty as well."

"Did you really expend your power to confirm that?"

"Yes. I had planned to step back if my powers were ineffective, but now that I've learned they also work on intangible targets, there's no reason to do so."

Kishiar was unyielding. But the composure in his eyes unmistakably signaled that he had made up his mind.

Yuder bowed his head slightly before speaking.

"However, using the power that you wield on yourself is different from this situation. If we're not careful, both of us could be in danger."

"That risk exists for you as well. You should be aware of that."

"I am, but..."

It didn't matter what happened to him. He had grown fairly confident that the pure power of the Red Stone, which he had manipulated multiple times, would bring him pain at times but would not kill him. But Kishiar's life was different. He wanted to say that, yet the words wouldn't come out easily.

The expression that the man before him would wear if he said that had vividly flashed in his mind.

"Yuder."

Kishiar called his name. He reached out and gently stroked Yuder's furrowed forehead.

"I'm not suggesting that we try this today. All we're doing today is formally introducing you to His Majesty and having dinner together. To treat His Majesty, we need to first make a thorough diagnosis and consider the best options, and we also have to listen to his opinions."

"..."

"And I have no intention of letting you handle everything alone, knowing that I can help. If you were in my position, you would have told me the same. Wouldn't you?"

Yuder lightly bit his lip.

"Think it over. I'm not asking you to choose this option because I don't trust your capabilities as an assistant, but because if there is a way to increase the chances of success, I'd like you to consider it. If there is a better method than what I've suggested, I will willingly step back."

He had lost. Yuder realized that there was no way for him to win against the well-prepared argument of Kishiar.

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As he had said, Kishiar possessed a power that was effective even against invisible forces, a fact Yuder had experienced firsthand. Moreover, the potential of this power seemed to increase in such circumstances. If they could combine their strengths as they had done yesterday and today, and if that strength could also be applied to Emperor Keilusa... the chances of success would become exceedingly high.

Although he acknowledged the rationality of Kishiar's words, emotionally it wasn't easy for Yuder to give a quick response.

Kishiar quietly stared at him, as if willing to wait for his answer indefinitely.

Gone were the worry and pain that Kishiar had shown on his face last night. What could Yuder say when confronted by eyes filled with unwavering confidence, trust, and resolve? Eventually, he let out a slow sigh.

"...I can't be sure that His Majesty will heed your words, but for now, I understand."

"Good. It's naturally my responsibility to persuade His Majesty. Don't worry."

With a joyful face, Kishiar hugged Yuder.

"Thank you for giving me the chance to help."

"..."

Yuder closed his eyes, feeling the heartbeat pulsating through their touching skins.

"Let's have a good meal tonight then. Maxia, the chef at the Sun Palace, is exceptionally skilled at creating special desserts. You can look forward to that."

Changing the mood, Kishiar stood up with renewed vigor, turning to find his pen. Yuder watched as he finished composing his message and sent it off via a courier pigeon. Then, Yuder finally spoke softly.

"Commander."

"Hm?"

Perhaps anticipating a complaint from Yuder, Kishiar turned around with a teasing smile. But Yuder had no intention of adding anything more to his earlier decision.

"This endeavor, whether I opposed it or not, is not a result of any 'opportunity' I have given. It is an achievement of your abilities and your efforts for His Majesty the Emperor. So please, think of it that way."

To say that Kishiar had achieved this through mere means would not be right. This was not a matter of choice; it was the result Kishiar had gained based on his own capabilities.

For a moment, the man looked blankly at Yuder, not even blinking. His face then turned serious, a blend of multiple emotions.

"...That's problematic."

"What?"

"I thought I had lost everything, but it seems I still had something left to lose."

Before Yuder could fully understand what he meant, Kishiar stepped closer and kissed him deeply.

...

Up until the moment he summoned Kishiar, the Emperor's mind had been unusually at peace. He had sent his steward to the secret passage through which his brother could enter the Sun Palace and had instructed Maxia, the chef of the palace, to prepare a formal dinner.

When Kishiar responded that he would come with his assistant, the Emperor was not surprised. He remembered the days when he recognized the talent of his then-subordinate Nathan Zuckerman and took him everywhere, treating him like a child playing at being a leader.

'And I also have quite a few questions about that man.'

Yuder Aile, who had been appointed as the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry, had recently distinguished himself in the western front. He had single-handedly dealt with a massive monster, and Kishiar had gone against his usual character to make all kinds of excuses just to treat and protect his assistant.

After crossing into Tainu, a somewhat tremendous speculation had arisen between Kishiar and him. The Emperor considered it a part of another noble family's scheming, but couldn't help but think it extraordinary.

Indeed, it was extraordinary. All the affairs involving Yuder Aile and Kishiar seemed extremely rare and mysterious in the Emperor's eyes.

For that reason, during the welcoming ceremony, he had discreetly examined the Cavalry but could deduce nothing more than the black-haired young man who alighted from the carriage with Kishiar was likely Yuder Aile. His brief memory from after their previous mission to recover the Red Stone was hardly sufficient to even recognize someone's face.

In any case, he had intended to make proper time to meet the person responsible for the recent accomplishments. It wouldn't be bad if Kishiar brought him along first.

'I trust Kishiar's judgment of people, but there's always an 'if,' he thought.

The Emperor felt a mix of relief and bitterness that he could meet the person who had brought about his brother's new changes while he still had the strength to move himself.

And then, just a few hours later, that sentiment completely flipped.

"Your Majesty, I've been waiting."

Yuder descended from a carriage disguised as a simple cart. They were greeted by the Emperor's chief steward, whom they had met once after the Red Stone recovery mission.

The carriage they had arrived in was sent by the Emperor. It didn't travel directly from the 7th district where the Cavalry was stationed to the 1st, but instead followed a secret passage located in the 3rd district leading to the imperial palace. Though it looked like an ordinary road, it would divert back to the original path if not traversed correctly. Yuder had to put in some effort not to show the strange feeling he had while passing through the secret passage he had used countless times in his previous life.

Kishiar greeted the chief steward with a light smile.

"Likewise, Yuliver. How is His Majesty?"

"He's already waiting for you."

"Very well, let's go. Ah, before that... Though we've met before, let's introduce ourselves anew since this is a personal occasion. Yuder, this is Chief Steward Yuliver, who has been close to His Majesty since before his ascension. Yuliver, this is my assistant, Yuder Aile. You'll probably see a lot of him, so remember him well."

The old man with impeccably groomed white hair scanned Yuder. It was an incredibly brief moment, but his gaze was so fast and sharp that it stung.

'I thought so before, but he's really not someone to be taken lightly,' Yuder thought, maintaining a placid expression. The chief steward soon bowed his head respectfully, as if he hadn't scrutinized Yuder at all.

"It is an honor to meet the hero of the Great Sarain Forest, Sir Aile. I am Yuliver Ark, the chief steward to His Majesty the Emperor."

"I am Yuder Aile of the cavalry."

The last time Yuder was here after the Red Stone recovery mission, the chief steward had not disclosed his official role and had simply guided them without much interaction, disappearing afterward. He must have considered them people he would never meet again.

But now Yuder had encountered him again, this time through Kishiar. Yuliver even subtly indicated that he already knew about Yuder by including the word "hero of the Great Sarain Forest" in his greeting.

What Yuder felt from this was a slight sense of caution, and more subtly, a touch of goodwill.

'His Majesty the Emperor probably views me the same way,' thought Yuder.

It's common for subordinates to reflect the thoughts of their superiors. This realization made him acutely aware of the changes between the past and present.

Kishiar confidently followed the Chief Steward into the palace, choosing only passageways where no one was visible. Eventually, the Chief Steward, as if knowing exactly where to go, stopped in front of a door and knocked politely.

The door soon opened, revealing the room inside.

"Come in."

The space looked more like a library than a dining room. The sight of a dining table covered with a flowered tablecloth placed in the middle of bookshelves was quite peculiar.

The Emperor sat at the head of the table. He looked much more gaunt and tired than when Yuder had seen him at the welcoming ceremony. It was obvious at a glance that he wasn't well, making him wonder how he hid it during the ceremony.

The Chief Steward naturally approached the Emperor, bowed his head, and stood behind a chair. There were other attendants and maids to help with the meal, but their number was far less than what one would expect in an ordinary noble household during a meal.

For the Emperor's dining area, it felt surprisingly modest, even to the point of loneliness. Yet, Kishiar approached without any sign of surprise and greeted the seated Emperor.

"Your Majesty, as I've already informed you in my letter, this is my assistant, Yuder Aile."

"Yuder Aile of the Cavalry, at Your Majesty's service."

Yuder immediately knelt on one knee and bowed deeply.

"You may raise your head. Please, take a seat."

The Emperor spoke softly, then looked at Yuder intently, saying, "We've met before, Sir Aile. Seeing you now, I remember."