

Turning 531

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As if to confirm that his words were no lie, a sudden chilly fragrance wafted up and mingled with the scent that Yuder was about to capture. Although intangible, it insinuated itself unabashedly. Naturally, it was the scent released by Kishiar.

Yuder felt a sensation as if invisible fingers were tickling his very core. He suppressed a voice that almost involuntarily escaped his lips.

No matter how much he bit the inside of his lips and tried to restrain his surging emotions, it was futile. A part of him that had been parched rejoiced as if a drop of refreshing water had finally quenched its thirst. The fragrance that was about to subside abruptly disobeyed his command and rushed towards the familiar scent.

Visibly, neither seemed to move, but in the unseen realm, it was a different story altogether. If another Awakener with a second gender capable of sensing scents had been present, they would have doubted their senses upon detecting two scents that intermingled so freely they filled the Commander's office to overflowing.

Twisted together like two ferocious beasts in combat, yet quickly blending into one intoxicating scent, each fragrance stirred something deeper within its owner.

Yuder, with his uniquely tinted eyes, slowly scanned the man as he rose from his seat.

"Shall I come to you, or will you come to me?"

The voice, lowered to an almost oppressive level, tenderly offered choices. Amidst his boiling impatience, Yuder turned his gaze toward the closed door of the Commander's office.

No one would casually enter. Kishiar had just finished his paperwork, and Yuder had long completed sorting his correspondence. There was nothing left to do until their departure for the Imperial Palace.

'And then...'

As if contemplating something more for any unforeseen situations, the moment he saw Kishiar's tilted head and rising red lips as if awaiting an answer, everything came to a halt.

Fire surged within his chest.

By the time he regained his senses, he was already kissing Kishiar, his arms around the man's neck.

Kishiar entangled their tongues deeply as he pulled Yuder close, his back arching so Yuder could embrace him tightly. Far from feeling restricted, Yuder welcomed the confining arms around him.

The moment their bodies met, a tingling sensation surged from their interlocked tongues, flooding his throat and belly. It felt as if the muscles that had been supporting him were all melting away.

Yuder's dark eyelashes trembled like a small boat in a violent storm as he strained to look into his partner's face. When he tightened his grip around Kishiar's neck, eliciting a faint hum, Kishiar swallowed every bit of that sound, ensuring none of it escaped.

Their legs, tangled in an unyielding desire to get even closer, wobbled. Yet even as he seemed about to fall backward, Yuder had no concerns for what might happen next; he knew the arm around his waist would skillfully guide him to prevent any fall or injury.

As expected, their bodies, swaying and spinning, managed to tumble onto the sofa without parting their lips or suffering any harm. Only then, as if sinking into water, did their lips finally separate with a plush sensation.

"Haah, ha..."

"Haha... There was no music, but for some reason, it felt like those times we practiced dancing, doesn't it?"

Yuder lay sprawled on top of Kishiar, panting for breath. Kishiar, sunk deep into the cushioned sofa, also mixed laughter with his heavy breathing. The absurd sight of a man lying atop another in such disarray should have been comical, but Yuder couldn't take his eyes off Kishiar's golden locks and crumpled clothes sprawled on the sofa.

It was a beautiful sight. Even the few rays of sunlight pouring over him seemed to exist solely to make him look even more beautiful and complete. An absurd thought, but one that couldn't be helped.

Yuder instinctively reached for his face but halted when his arm got tangled in the draping folds of his outer garment. Looking down, he realized he was no less disheveled than Kishiar.

As Yuder involuntarily furrowed his brow, Kishiar reached out and pulled off the entangled garment. Hearing the sound of the black fabric fall lifelessly, Yuder finally touched his face as he had wanted. He gingerly caressed Kishiar's cheek with his rough fingertips, and the man tilted his head slightly as if leaning into it. He let out a breath that seemed to come from a deep place within, and his eyes were not much different from Yuder's.

The eyes, aflame with an entranced heat, yet not knowing what to do with the object of their desire, called out Yuder's name.

"Yuder..."

"..."

The warmth felt against his palm soon turned into another kiss. The electrifying first brush of their lips became a searing imprint by the second, and by the third, it was as fluid as water on the skin, leaving them both speechless.

As if the utterance of his name had pulled the trigger on something, Yuder collapsed into Kishiar's arms. It was as though the man had been waiting, as he took Yuder in his arms and kissed his cheeks and neck.

The intensified scent enveloped them, and in response, sweat broke out. Yuder moaned as he hungrily explored the man while simultaneously being explored. His entire being seemed to open up toward him. He had no way to stop the cascade of sensations flooding him from within. It was as if he were standing at the edge of a massive waterfall.

Even the heat he felt below his waist couldn't stop him. Yuder willingly spread his legs, pulling Kishiar closer through the opening in their clothes.

"Mm... Ah..."

Though still separated by cloth, the intense contact momentarily blurred his vision. Yuder recognized the sensation. It was the same pleasure that had taken root in his body throughout their vacation, becoming as familiar as another hand or foot.

With swift and rough movements, he cleared the obstacles between them. Both of them were hard to the touch, as if poised for a climax. Despite the illusion that Kishiar's was too large for Yuder's not-so-small hand, the moment he touched it, it twitched noticeably, and unbelievably, it grew even larger.

The moment they touched, Kishiar, who had been pressing his lips to Yuder's rapidly beating chest, suddenly let out a feral breath and tensed his body. Hands that had been wrapped tightly around Yuder's waist moved under the fabric. Even without touching the same area, the intention behind each caress was unmistakable as their hands continued to explore.

He had gripped her sweat-soaked waist and back, and every time he caressed her, Yuder flinched reflexively, moaning at the sensation of the touch. Their lower bodies, pressed together, rubbed against each other, offering pleasure. This repeated motion soon became a familiar rhythm.

"Ah..."

Yuder, having forgotten even the thought of removing his clothes, continued to sway his body, following the movement of the hands caressing him. The liquid that flowed from the front soaked his underwear, and the two intimate parts made a continuous, slippery, and lascivious sound.

It wasn't just the front that was wet. Inside, where he knew the sensations that would follow, it felt as if sweat was oozing out, accompanied by a feeling of yearning, contracting and relaxing repeatedly.

Yuder moaned, feeling as if his head was about to explode, and buried his forehead in Kishiar's shoulder. As he gritted his teeth and rubbed his waist, the hand that had been caressing his back pressed gently somewhere between his spine and wing bone.

"...!"

That spot had always been one where Yuder reacted strongly ever since they had been intimate. The moment it was pressed by the fingertip, an intense sensation erupted, making his body convulse uncontrollably.

Gasping for breath, Yuder bit down on Kishiar's neck. An illusion of burning overtook his vision as something hot exploded within him.

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"Ah, hhhhh...!"

"Ah, hhhhh...!"

The climax was long and intense. It hadn't been that long since Kishiar and he last intertwined, yet the sensations he felt were as strangely refreshing as a long-awaited liberation.

Leaning his trembling body against Kishiar due to the aftershocks of pleasure, Yuder resumed his halted breathing. Despite having released what needed to be released, his mind still felt hot and foggy.

Was it because the end came so unexpectedly, and too quickly? Instead of the clarity one should feel after climax, lingering warmth swirled around his skin like a haze. Yuder looked down at himself, his breath not yet fully returned, and then shifted his gaze to the solid warmth of Kishiar still held in his hand.

His mouth felt dry, and the scent of his sweat-soaked body grew stronger. Kishiar, no doubt, must have sensed Yuder's reaction keenly. A deep scent, almost a response to Yuder's own, enveloped him gently, stimulating his body as if to say everything was okay.

Kishiar, who had kissed Yuder's temples and hair, spoke softly with eyes flushed from arousal.

"Have you calmed down? Shall we stop?"

"Don't talk nonsense... just don't."

Yuder knew better than anyone that the fire within him had not yet gone out. He contradicted the intention conveyed by the scent he gave off. Even if there wasn't enough time left to satisfy him, it was no reason to stop now.

Drinking even a sip of water was better than bearing the unspent flame. At least that was the case for Kishiar. When Yuder responded with a grimace and threw off his gloves and upper clothes, soaked with bodily fluids, Kishiar chuckled softly.

Yuder kissed Kishiar forcefully on the lips to make it clear he had no intention of getting up until every last bit of heat between them was resolved.

"All right... I understand."

As if knowing Yuder's intentions without further words, Kishiar responded softly through their intertwined tongues.

"You should know how much I want you. What a foolish question to ask."

Long fingers slid below Yuder's waist and into his clothes, gripping his buttocks tightly. Just that minor contact made his half-erect body feel completely invigorated again.

When did he become such an embodiment of desire? Although he felt a bit silly, it was still better than satisfying himself alone and snuffing out the fire prematurely.

Yuder let out a faint moan while looking at Kishiar's perfectly straight nose, pressed firmly against his wet, robust chest. His chest, which initially felt almost numb, now seemed to transform into an entirely different organ just by the touch of Kishiar's breath. His nipples, continuously stimulated by Kishiar, had completely lost their initial pale color.

Kishiar repeatedly crushed and licked them with his tongue. Focused on those sultry movements, Yuder inadvertently let out a breath. Just then, a finger slipped into the gap between his buttocks. Yuder stifled a short moan, bit his lip, and soon relaxed his furrowed eyebrows.

"...Ah."

Despite not using any lubricant this time, the invading presence did not feel difficult to accommodate. It wasn't just his front that had gotten wet during the climax.

The sound of something sticky echoed every time the welcoming fingers brushed against the inside. It was an indescribably strange sound, but Yuder didn't find it embarrassing. As more fingers entered, the sound grew louder, but what mattered more to him was the presence of Kishiar, who had lost all laughter and was entirely focused on him.

By the time more than three fingers began to explore inside, he felt a tight sensation from the widely stretched interior. The pressure was so immense that it was hard to believe it wasn't from a male organ. However, holding Kishiar's, Yuder knew how much bigger the real thing was, and he was certain this wasn't the end.

"Does it hurt?"

"It's fine," Yuder replied.

Far from pain, the unusually long fingers intertwined and moved, causing a sharp sensation in an unknown place, making it hard for him to hold back his moans. There was a sensitive spot deep within him that he wasn't aware of. It usually lay dormant, but in front of Kishiar, it swelled immensely every time it was touched.

Suppressing his moans, Yuder responded, and Kishiar exhaled deeply. Realizing that it was Kishiar's way of controlling himself, Yuder spread his legs wider and wrapped them around his waist before Kishiar could take another breath.

"Yuder?"

"Don't think of anything else," Yuder whispered.

He tightened his grip, and their bodies came even closer, sending shivers down their spines from the intense stimulation.

"Ah..."

Their mutual moans were swallowed as their lips met in a desperate kiss.

Yuder felt even more intoxicated than when he had drunk Quelochet. Perhaps the real feeling of intoxication was closer to this.

He felt Kishiar's fingers slide out from within him. The sensation of emptiness was both familiar and strange. The man, with his hand wet from Yuder's fluids, moistened himself and finally positioned himself at the entrance.

Biting his lip, Yuder relaxed his lower abdomen as much as he could.

"Ah..."

He couldn't believe that something of that size could enter him. Even though he was fully prepared, he felt like he was on the verge of tearing. Kishiar filled him completely. Overwhelmed by the intense sensation, Yuder tightly gripped Kishiar's shoulders. He felt sweat dripping from his forehead and back.

"Ah..."

Kishiar paused when he was halfway in, giving Yuder time to adjust. Even then, Yuder felt completely full.

Once Yuder's breathing steadied, Kishiar began to move slowly. Even the slightest movement made Yuder gasp, and his body screamed in pleasure.

Yuder moaned softly, instinctively moving with Kishiar. Every time their bodies rubbed against each other, he felt the muscles in Kishiar's lean body tense. In front of Kishiar's genuine reactions, Yuder felt an exhilarating and wild sensation.

It didn't matter that this place was an office, where no one could enter without knocking, or that sound could leak out. The overwhelming desire to make the beautiful being before him his own agitated his senses, tightened his body, and involuntarily brought a smile to his face.

Had it always been like this? Wasn't it strange that despite doing it multiple times, each time felt like a new surge of pleasure? Such thoughts fleetingly crossed his mind, but they were quickly submerged, washed away by the tide of sensation.

Yuder was thoroughly engrossed, clinging to him as if wanting to explore not only the depths within but go even deeper. Their intertwined bodies shook and jerked increasingly faster. In his hazy mind, nameless emotions circled and disappeared in repetition.

In those indescribable sensations, beyond the simple expressions of "feeling good" or "feeling bad," Yuder saw an illusion. A thin thread-like something seemed to waver between himself and the man entangled with him. That something existed in Kishiar's red eyes.

A single thread. No, two threads.

No, perhaps a bit more than that...

For a moment, it felt as if all the internal barriers had opened up, making a flinching sound.

His vision turned white...

When he came to his senses, he found that the sun streaming into the office was almost set.

"...Did I fall asleep?"

"Just for a moment," the man replied softly, holding Yuder's naked body tightly against his own. It was then that Yuder noticed the bite marks on his skin. Judging by the clear impression of teeth, it must have hurt, but Kishiar looked utterly calm.

"...We should get going soon."

"Yes, we should."

But neither of them moved, a first for feeling so reluctant despite knowing something must be done immediately.

"You seemed a bit more sensitive than usual today. Any idea why?"

The scent was stronger than before, too. The man murmured, rubbing Yuder's back, locking eyes with him. Though the glance seemed light and weightless, Yuder knew it was anything but.

"No."

"Then it must be because some time has passed since your second gender manifested."

This was unexpected. Yuder blinked slowly, pausing before speaking.

"It's not my heat cycle yet."

If he had to be reminded of the time that had passed since his second gender had manifested, there was only one reason.

"Right. It's not yet. But it's not something that will never come," Kishiar softly replied, embracing him. A feather-light kiss touched and left his temple.

"It won't hurt to be prepared for anything, especially since you're somewhat insensitive to your own body."

This would be the first time since the manifestation. Kishiar probably just meant what he said, but for Yuder, who had not even experienced a single proper heat cycle from his previous life, excluding the week he couldn't remember at the time of manifestation, the words felt both unfamiliar and heavy.

"True enough..."

In this lifetime too, the heat had come as soon as he awakened his powers. But he hadn't felt a thing, having slept it off after taking painkillers. Although the frequency of the heat cycles varied for each Awakener with a second gender, enough time had passed that, by Kishiar's account, something should be on the horizon. Yet for someone who had never experienced it, the concept of his own heat cycle felt awkward, as if he were hearing tales of something that didn't even exist.

Yuder suddenly realized that he had never seriously thought about his heat cycles or symptoms since his awakening.

‘Certainly... I've been feeling a bit off lately, so it wouldn't hurt to keep that in mind.’

The sensations he had just felt while entwined with Kishiar were undeniable, and he had reached his peak far too quickly. Perhaps his unquenchable heat wasn't solely due to his desire for Kishiar.

"I hadn't considered it, but I will keep it in mind."

"Good."

Kishiar smiled, as if to say that was enough.

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After that, Yuder unknowingly dozed off again. By the time he jolted awake, unaware that he had even fallen asleep, Kishiar had already taken care of all the aftermath. He didn't know how it had been done, but his body was clean, and apart from a lingering sensation between his legs that felt like they were still slightly spread apart, everything felt incredibly soft.

The only remaining evidence of what they had done here was a sofa whose cushions had irreparably sunk into the floor. The intact sofa across from it, which looked like its twin, only highlighted the damaged one's pitiful state.

"The frame is sturdy, so that should be fine, but I think the cushion will be difficult to repair. I'll have it replaced by the end of the day, so don't worry about it."

"...Yes."

Yuder hoped that Nathan Zuckerman would not be the one to handle the replacement, but what could be done? What had happened had already happened.

Late as it was, Yuder resolved to restrain himself from losing control around Kishiar in the office from then on. However, that resolution dissolved like sand before a wave when confronted with the man's vibrant cheerfulness as he handed over a fresh uniform and gloves, saying they would be leaving soon.

Though they had spent hours entangled on the sofa, Kishiar looked as fresh as ever. Naturally, considering that he was someone with whom Yuder could easily spend the entire night, his stamina was truly impressive.

"By the way... When did you prepare these new clothes?"

"After the vacation."

Kishiar responded as if it were obvious, flashing a playful smile.

"I kept an extra set ready in case something like today happened. If you find it difficult to dress yourself, just say so, and I'll help."

"I can dress myself."

Yuder declined and put on the clothes himself. Once fully dressed, Kishiar looked at him with satisfied eyes.

"I had them tailored to your height, so as expected, you look even more elegant. Is it more comfortable than before?"

...Is it? Yuder furrowed his brows, looking at the sleeves of his new uniform. Although it did feel a bit more comfortable in terms of movement, the whole notion of "looking elegant" still felt like a foreign concept to him.

"Um... yes, it seems so."

"You look like you wouldn't know the difference as long as you can wear it."

"I never said that much."

At that, Kishiar burst into laughter. Hearing it, Yuder suddenly felt an overwhelming, tender, and loving sensation flood into his chest.

It was something unfamiliar, permeating through his skin and mind as if in resonance.

It was Kishiar's emotion, conveyed more vividly than ever before.

What did he look like in Kishiar's eyes? He hadn't said anything that should elicit such a gentle emotion, yet for the first time, he was curious.

...

As dusk fell, they arrived at the Sun Palace, where they were greeted just as before by the white-haired chief steward.

"Welcome. I trust your hasty journey was without inconvenience?"

"No inconvenience at all. His Majesty has finally given his permission, so what could possibly be inconvenient?"

Kishiar's cheerful answer seemed to relax the steward's brow a bit. His gaze then shifted to Yuder, who was standing behind Kishiar.

"I've heard that you've been granted the title of Baron. Congratulations."

There was no sign of discomfort in his elegant and formal tone. Yuder silently bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"Thank you."

"Her Majesty the Empress is also waiting for the both of you today. Shall we go?"

The Empress, who had miraculously swayed the heart of the once relentless Emperor, arrived early at the Sun Palace. She sat at the spot nearest to the entrance of the second palace, waiting for them.

"Welcome, Duke. And... Yuder."

She gave a small smile in Yuder's direction. However, that smile quickly faded, obscured by her deep, thoughtful gaze.

"I assume you have heard. His Majesty has granted permission for you to assess the current condition of the vessel. However, discussions regarding the healing are strictly forbidden."

This was something they had already heard on the way. After Yuder had responded that he would be cautious, Kishiar interjected with a sly smile.

"Will Her Majesty be accompanying us throughout this process?"

"No. I plan to wait in another room nearby. While I certainly would like to see it for myself, I doubt His Majesty would approve."

Kishiar seemed to easily guess why she had come all this way despite that.

"Understood. Once we are done, we will meet with Her Majesty again."

"I would be most grateful if you do."

"Your Grace, Duke Peletta. His Majesty has informed us that he is ready."

At that moment, the chief steward who had disappeared earlier reappeared to signal that the time had come. The Empress also stood up, glancing at Kishiar with a look that said, 'Don't forget our agreement,' before firmly grasping Yuder's hand.

Her slender fingers trembled, but so subtly that only someone in contact with them could tell.

"...Yuder."

Though the grip was neither painful nor imposing, it felt oddly powerful.

"The only help I can offer you is this. I sincerely pray that you will perform the same astonishing miracle for His Majesty that you did that day."

"..."

Yuder looked down at her hand gripping his, then met her eyes and nodded.

"...Yes. I will honor the faith you have placed in me."

Emperor Keilusa was in the very bedroom-cum-office where he had visited to receive treatment after retrieving the Red Stone mediums some time ago.

Although the room was still small and modest for a place where an Emperor resided, filled with clutter, it all looked different now, given he was managing affairs even while ill.

The only changes in the room were chunks of Red Stone mediums, filled with power and placed in a basket on the desk, and the Emperor, who looked a little more frail than he had a few days ago.

"You're here. We're not meeting to engage in elaborate formalities right now. Let's keep the greetings as brief as possible."

From the beginning, the Emperor declared that he would not stand on ceremony, unlike their last meal together. His eyes swept over the faces of Kishiar and Yuder, who had knelt and offered brief salutations. After gazing at Yuder for quite some time, the last look he gave was to his younger sibling, who was smiling innocuously.

"But, Duke, what happened to your neck that you had to seek treatment? Did you sustain an injury that even divine power could not heal?"

Yuder silently swallowed the breath he almost let slip.

'I knew this would happen.'

The Emperor had pointed to the few pieces of gauze that covered Kishiar's neck, where naturally, the imprints of Yuder's fangs were visible. Although he possessed magic power, Kishiar had deliberately chosen not to heal the marks. Instead, he placed a small piece of gauze over them and tied a brightly patterned, wide ornamental tie to cover the red marks.

Neither the chief steward nor the Empress spoke, so Kishiar had hoped he might escape detection. But the Emperor's keen eyes were not so easily fooled.

"Quite the opposite. I left it be precisely because it's not a severe injury," Kishiar calmly responded, whether he was aware of Yuder's feelings or not.

"Some wounds can even become a point of pride," he continued.

"So, you're saying you've left the marks on your neck because they are a point of pride for the Duke?" the Emperor inquired.

"Yes."

The atmosphere became tense. The Emperor looked intently at Kishiar's face as if he desperately wanted to say something, then slowly shifted his gaze to Yuder. Yuder quickly lowered his head to avoid the Emperor's probing eyes.

After a moment of silence, the Emperor relented. "Fine. If you're well, stand up and come over here."

The Emperor put on his glasses, looking suddenly tired, and gestured. Without a word, the chief steward, who had been standing rigidly nearby, poured tea into three cups.

The atmosphere was somewhat more relaxed than it had been at their first meeting. Eating and drinking in the Emperor's presence no longer felt as awkward.

"The reason I've summoned you today is that I've heard the opinions of those around me suggesting it would be unfair to dismiss your abilities without seeing them for myself. They say that your mere observation of a person's condition can bring about miracles, almost like ancient magic."

Everyone in the room knew who that "opinion" came from, but the Emperor neither uttered the Empress's name nor elaborated on why he had changed his mind. Yet when he mentioned "the opinion of those around me," his eyes momentarily took on a different weight—a pained look that could not completely conceal a tender and warm emotion.

It was an emotion that would have remained hidden if they had not been sitting so close—The true feelings of Emperor Keilusa.

"If you can indeed do as they say, without causing any harm, then I am willing to give you this one chance," the Emperor stated, but with conditions. Kishiar was not to intervene, and should the Emperor decide to stop, Yuder would have to cease his observations immediately. When asked if he was willing to agree to these terms, Yuder responded without hesitation.

"Yes, of course."

Emperor Keilusa's eyes narrowed for a moment. A soft sigh, almost inaudible, escaped from his pale lips.

"Why did it have to be like this," he muttered, almost to himself.

"Pardon?"

"Never mind. Let's begin."

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A minor disturbance momentarily irked him, but the issue at hand was far more critical.

"Understood."

Yuder requested the Emperor to lie down, maintaining as composed a state of mind as possible. The Emperor, who had barely touched his teacup, got up without a word and headed towards the bed located not too far away. A brief wobble, like a sudden onset of dizziness, occurred as he started to undress, but thanks to the skillful assistance from his chief steward and Kishiar, no unfortunate fall took place.

"...Is it done now?"

"Yes."

The Emperor, who had laboriously lain down, only managed to ask the question in a lifeless tone after taking several deep breaths. Yuder approached the bed respectfully and examined the Emperor's whole body.

'He really looks frail up close.'

Emperor Keilusa, when confronting others or appearing before them, always managed to maintain a calm and dignified gaze from behind his glasses. One wouldn't have assumed he was suffering at all. However, lying down and fully exposed, he looked utterly drained and feeble.

Yuder found himself recalling the Kishiar from his past life.

Had that Kishiar also ever appeared this frail when out of the public eye?

He couldn't know for certain, but the thought made him feel somewhat suffocated.

"And now, what do you intend to do in this condition?"

Snapped out of his reverie by Emperor Keilusa's question, Yuder abandoned his musings.

"I intend to use the pure power of the Red Stone to examine your internal state."

Yuder briefly explained what he meant by 'examining the internal state.' The Emperor, possibly already informed by the Empress, simply nodded without further questions.

"You will likely feel no pain, only the sensation of being touched. However, should you experience any discomfort, please speak up immediately."

Yuder removed his gloves and lightly placed his hand on the upper abdomen of the Emperor. He felt the keen gaze of the Emperor and the chief attendant descending upon his hand. In contrast to their somewhat tense emotions facing the unprecedented event, only one person could not take his eyes off Yuder's face. Naturally, it was Kishiar.

As their eyes met, Yuder felt the unnecessary tension draining away from his hand instantly.

As if waiting for that moment, a faint breeze blew, causing the semi-transparent cloth hovering above the bed to quiver. It was a phenomenon he had experienced several times, associated with the activation of the Red Stone's power. The dark red veins on the back of Yuder's hand writhed and shone, followed by the manifestation of an ethereal force tinged red.

The moment was marked by a golden light beginning to flow from one of Yuder's pupils.

"My goodness..."

Even the seasoned chief attendant couldn't suppress his astonishment and murmured involuntarily. However, Yuder was so focused that he couldn't hear the chief attendant's mutterings.

'All those I've examined internally so far were Awakeners, and they were in no life-threatening condition. However, the Emperor is not an Awakener. His vessel is even unstable, so I must exercise utmost caution.'

Opening Kishiar had felt like pushing a heavy, solid iron door, but opening the Emperor felt like gingerly opening a rotten wooden door that could collapse at the slightest touch.

Yuder exerted more effort than ever to seize the origin of the troublesome currents flowing within the Emperor's body. However, capturing those frail streams with a force that already proved challenging to manage was no easy task—too much pressure could shatter them.

As he intensified his focus, sweat began to bead on his forehead. The erratic, dark-red blotches in the back of his hand swelled, growing large enough to be seen creeping up his arm and into the collar of his shirt.

Though the light and wind fluctuated irregularly, there was no visible change in Emperor Keilusa. The chief attendant finally broke the tense silence, "It seems to be taking quite some time... Is this typical?"

"It does seem to be the longest it's ever taken," Kishiar, who was observing the situation, replied. His voice was even, but his eyes were almost unblinkingly fixed on Yuder.

"So it's still not working?" Emperor Keilusa mumbled. His eyes were directed at Yuder Aile, who remained intently focused on harnessing the energy.

The Emperor was not terribly disappointed. He had given this final opportunity simply because a cursory examination was possible, but he had never truly harbored expectations of success.

Having had no expectations, there was nothing to be startled by. In fact, he was somewhat relieved not to have given anyone false hope.

After waiting a bit longer with no signs of change, the Emperor turned to Yuder, "If it hasn't worked by now, there seems to be no point in continuing."

"..."

"Shall we stop now?"

"..."

"Do you need more time? At this rate, even the Baron's face will be marred by those blotches. It might be better to stop before it becomes dangerous."

The Emperor himself felt nothing, so it didn't matter to him whether the attempt was abandoned. However, seeing what looked like real-time damage on a promising talent who could be the pillar of his country in the future was not good on multiple fronts—both for the future of the Orr Empire, after Keilusa La Orr's disappearance, and, although he didn't want to admit it, for his own brother.

Just as the Emperor was about to call off the endeavor, "Yes. I need more time. Please..." Yuder raised his head, speaking in a very suppressed voice.

"Just wait a little longer."

Yuder's eyes, glaring through gritted teeth, were alarmingly red and swollen. The moment he opened his mouth, the dark-red streaks reached up to his jaw and writhed, causing the Emperor to momentarily flinch. He was immediately surprised at his own reaction.

Nothing about this situation had been anticipated by the Emperor.

'Why?'

Why was he going to such lengths?

When Yuder Aile had initially said he wanted to help the Emperor, he had highly valued Yuder's steady and calm temperament but had not given much importance to the sincerity behind those words. That had remained true up until this very moment.

Though he appreciated Yuder's willingness to help, he could not fathom why it needed to be so desperate.

He had assumed that Yuder would step back readily after a reasonable effort. Given his stoic demeanor in front of the Emperor, he had been viewed as a very rational individual, and his limited emotional range had led to that judgment.

However, the look in Yuder's eyes felt both familiar and entirely different at the same time. It wasn't mere loyalty or a desire to impress that filled his gaze; something altogether different, a form of blind conviction, dwelled within his eyes.

Caught off guard, the Emperor found himself asking, "How strange. Why go to such lengths? I've said that I'm fine."

The light emanating from Yuder's hand intensified. Amidst the wind that tousled even the Emperor's hair, a slow, flat, and almost inaudible voice could be heard.

"There's only one reason."

"..."

"Because I know what will happen next if we stop and give up here."

Between the reddish streaks that flushed his cheeks, Yuder's eyes whispered like thunder, no, like an enigmatic prophecy.

"I know Your Majesty must move beyond today. I will make sure that happens."

Even as he found the words strange, the Emperor couldn't tear his gaze away. The overwhelming conviction in Yuder's words moved him—shaking for the first time his heart and determination, which had never wavered despite hearing countless expressions of concern.

And as if that small crack served as some kind of trigger, the light flowing from Yuder's hands suddenly amplified explosively.

"Ah..."

The Emperor felt something warm gently infiltrate his body. Just as he frowned at the unfamiliar sensation and looked away, his eyes met Kishiar's. Kishiar, who had been watching the whole scene with folded arms, bore a complex expression—part pleased, part enshrouded in incomprehensible questions. It was a face even the Emperor had never seen before.

"Finally!"

Sensing a crack in the armor of Emperor Keilusa, Yuder instinctively focused his energy anew. The task remained as difficult as before, but the presence or absence of a weakness made a world of difference. Relying on his recent experience of using his powers on Hosanna—who had lacked both will and consciousness—he managed to successfully break through.

‘There will be no next chance if I fail here.’

Whether Emperor Keilusa himself felt that way or not, Yuder knew he was a person who could not die here.

As if responding to its master's will, the light flowing from Yuder's hands strengthened, and the wind blew harder. In this tremendous spectacle, as if conjured by ancient magic, the moment the Emperor licked his dry lips, the light that had infiltrated his body expanded sharply and burst out again.

Everyone was rendered speechless at the sight, which looked like a painting drawn with light.

"Success."

Finally seeing the internal state of Emperor Keilusa that lay before him, Yuder wiped the sweat trickling down his forehead.

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"Success at last."

Yuder wiped the sweat trickling down his forehead as he finally laid eyes on the internal state of Emperor Keilusa.

Only when the acute tension that had been hovering sharply began to wane did he become keenly aware of his surroundings. Turning his gaze, he caught sight of Kishiar's red eyes watching him intently from a little distance away.

Unspoken but palpable concern and careful observation.

Though Kishiar refrained from uttering words of excessive worry considering the situation, Yuder knew that if he felt Yuder was struggling to bear some pain, Kishiar wouldn't hesitate to intervene—regardless of the Emperor's command or Yuder's own stubbornness.

Oddly enough, just feeling that watchful gaze seemed to provide a solid foundation behind him. Yuder took a deep breath and turned his eyes back to the Emperor.

"The internal gate is open, Your Majesty. Is everything alright?"

"The sensation is a bit odd. But otherwise, everything is as usual."

"Shall we continue, then?"

Emperor Keilusa's head moved almost imperceptibly, signaling assent.

Finally allowed to view the Emperor's inner workings, it was—as expected—a mess.

The energies within the Emperor were fewer and more scattered than those within Kishiar. There was no aura to speak of, and magic energy existed only in a slight concentration around the heart. The most significant aspect was the transparent white light of divine energy.

The spectacle of the divine energy coursing erratically throughout his body, getting tangled and broken intermittently, was evidently not normal even at first glance.

'And the vessel is...'

Yuder's eyes scanned the area around the Emperor's vital point. Thanks to his previous attempts, he quickly found the 'vessel' amid the complex flow of light.

Located roughly in the body's center was a small lump of energy, connected like the root of all power, extending its branches. This was the vessel.

However, Emperor Keilusa's vessel seemed unstable, as if it might vanish at any moment. Yuder had little trouble guessing why.

The largest power filling the Emperor's vessel was divine energy. But as this divine energy tried to return to the vessel, it got tangled and dissipated on the way, resulting in very little actually reaching its destination. The vessel lost its form as it lacked the energy to sustain it, causing the chaotic energies in the body to collide and tangle with each other. It was a vicious cycle.

Kishiar's vessel had been different. It was stable due to the red energy that wrapped around it, allowing the energy to circulate throughout his body healthily. There were some tangles and knots, but compared to the Emperor's state, it was far more stable.

'I never thought I would reevaluate Kishiar's vessel like this,' Yuder mused, looking down somewhat bitterly at the Emperor's vessel, which was barely the size of a small bird's egg.

'The most serious issue seems to be that it can't maintain its form and keeps dispersing. This must be what they call "a crack in the vessel".'

As far as Yuder could tell, the small size of the vessel wasn't a significant issue. After all, most people live and die without even knowing what a 'vessel' is.

However, the inherent problem that anyone could see was that what originally existed was struggling to maintain its proper form and was on the verge of collapsing. Each time the vessel

wobbled and barely coalesced back into shape, a corresponding strain appeared on Emperor Keilusa's brow.

'Would it have had a similar effect if the Emperor became an Awakener, like Kishiar speculated?'

The vessel of Kishiar and the vessel of the Emperor. The most significant difference between the two was the presence or absence of a red energy that enveloped them, maintaining their shape. If it had existed, the current situation could have been somewhat different.

Yuder's gaze swiftly moved, focusing on the Emperor's desk far away. He sensed a faint but familiar power from the mediums stacked in the basket.

They were gifts sent by Kishiar to the Emperor, following the speculation that exposure to Awakener's energy increases the likelihood of awakening. However, the Emperor had not yet awakened.

'Naturally, not everyone has awakened since the Red Stone fell. There must be individual differences. But... what conditions give rise to those differences?'

Lost in thought, Yuder suddenly saw a faint red light flicker and disappear within the Emperor's vessel.

'...What?'

Blinking, he looked again, but the light had vanished.

'An illusion?'

However, moments later, Yuder once more saw a red energy briefly shimmer and disappear within the Emperor. This time, he was certain it was not an illusion.

'This... could be.'

"Your Majesty, you're sweating profusely on your forehead. Are you alright?"

At that moment, the chief attendant's cautious words alerted Yuder to the deteriorating state of the Emperor. When he came to his senses, he realized quite a bit of time had passed.

"...I'm fine. It's business as usual. The Baron's work is not yet done; leave me."

Emperor Keilusa replied tersely, his teeth gritted. While his voice feigned calm, his vessel, writhing and revealing its strain, exposed the pain he was feeling.

"But still..."

'I've examined all that I can. Let me quickly discuss the important points and then I'll withdraw my energy.'

Swiftly responding, Yuder moved his hand to point at several locations.

"This is your divine power, this is your magic power, and this central part is your vessel."

"The vessel, you say? This?"

Yuder elaborated as clearly as possible on the state of the Emperor's vessel, comparing it with what he had seen in Kishiar and others. Although the explanation was challenging, the Emperor maintained his focus, listening intently even amidst his pain.

"...I see. The Duke's vessel is wrapped in the energy of an Awakener, while I lack that, and so my collapsing vessel fails to maintain its form... That is your assessment of my current state?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"It's evident then that becoming an Awakener has indeed made the Duke healthier."

The Emperor muttered softly and exhaled deeply, closing his eyes. When he reopened them, his face bore a warm affection for Kishiar, mixed with an unfamiliar emotion.

It was a fragile but genuine glimmer of hope.

In the now softer atmosphere, Yuder quietly opened his mouth.

"I've explained all that I can, and I'll now withdraw my energy before continuing."

Yuder slowly pulled back his energy. As the light hovering above the Emperor dissipated, the chief attendant quickly prepared a warm towel to wipe the fatigued Emperor's forehead and face.

Yuder was also rapidly growing fatigued, but explaining what he had just discovered about the Emperor took precedence.

"Your Majesty, when I examined your internal state just now, I discovered an aspect that was completely unexpected."

"...Unexpected?"

"Within you, Your Majesty, there was a red aura."

"What did you say?"

Emperor Keilusa's eyes widened in surprise. The chief attendant, who had been attending to the Emperor, abruptly stopped and swallowed hard. Kishiar also revealed a change in emotion, subtly moving his eyebrows.

"Is this true?"

"It appeared only briefly before vanishing, but it was unmistakably a red aura."

"How could that be... In that case..."

"However, I cannot confirm that it's the aura of an Awakener."

At Yuder's subsequent words, the Emperor's expression changed again.

Seeming to question what exactly Yuder was trying to say, Yuder opened his mouth without hesitation.

"In my judgment, it's difficult to find the answer with just the power I possess. Therefore, I would like to seek the help of the Commander."

"Are you asking for the lifting of the Duke's participation ban?"

Yuder nodded after a moment of silence.

"Yes. Moreover, I would like to request another opportunity."

"..."

It was a truly bold request. In the silence that filled the room, Yuder continued unequivocally.

"The extent of what I could examine alone today has its limits. However, if you judge that the results were not useless, please grant me one more opportunity. The power that the Commander possesses is absolutely necessary for this matter."

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"..."

"Hmm. As I've said before, I'm more than willing to assist in any way I can," Kishiar, who was standing beside Emperor Keilusa, interjected smoothly with a voice tinged with amusement.

"However, it would be more helpful if you specify exactly what you would like me to assist with."

"You make a valid point," the chief attendant chimed in from the sidelines. His eyes had significantly changed when he looked at Yuder after witnessing the astonishing spectacle that had just unfolded.

Although he intellectually understood that the young man with black hair possessed incredible abilities, the power he had just seen was enough to make him doubt what he thought he knew. It was a revelation even to the old man, who thought he had seen it all after a lifetime in the palace.

The old man, who hadn't had high expectations for the day, was now awaiting Yuder's response with a completely changed mindset.

"What I seek from you, Commander, is solely your Awakener ability," Yuder began, speaking slowly but clearly.

"Your power is exceptionally effective at either pulling something towards you or pushing it away. It is not only applicable to tangible objects but also to intangible energies, making it a rather special ability. I believe that with your help, I can sift through the dispersed energies within His Majesty and gather only the red energy."

"..."

"If the nature of this gathered energy turns out to be what I suspect it is..."

Yuder's voice trailed off, and his eyes looked downward as he was lost in thought. He then spoke with greater conviction, emphasizing each word.

"Then perhaps we can find a way to hasten His Majesty's awakening or protect his vessel."

The moment Yuder finished speaking, the chief attendant swallowed his breath, and a bright smile lit up Kishiar's face. The intention was not to chide himself for finally uttering what they had decided not to discuss regarding the treatment.

It was a smile of admiration for someone who had found a new path in what was considered an impassable wasteland, paving the way for all to see.

The Emperor exhaled deeply as he saw the unfolding events that he should have cautiously dismissed.

Up until now, neither the Emperor nor those around him had taken Kishiar's Awakener abilities too seriously, beyond the fact that they had saved his life. One reason was that Kishiar already had other

astonishing abilities, and another was that Kishiar did not use his power in front of his family and relatives.

The ability to pull or push something might sound less impressive when put into words. However, the Kishiar that emerged through Yuder's description, and the power he wielded, seemed irreplaceably strong.

No, at least Yuder seemed to genuinely believe that Kishiar could accomplish the tasks he described using that power.

Words that seemed so fantastical they bordered on delusion.

But the Emperor had already witnessed something miraculous with his own eyes.

Once his heart had been swayed, there was no turning back.

"I couldn't help but wonder if I was being overly optimistic about the situation... But yes, I must admit, if it's feasible, nothing could be better."

At the Emperor's cautious response, Yuder's head snapped up.

"In that case..."

"Before that, there's something I'd like to ask."

"What would that be?"

"Can you assure me that Duke Peletta and the Baron will not be at risk in this process? I mean, can you swear in front of me that no harm, physical or emotional, will come to you two even if you two take on this task?"

Before Yuder could respond to the Emperor's sharp and heavy question, Kishiar interjected.

"Your Majesty, if a vow is what you require, then I shall make it."

"I did not ask you, Kishiar."

The Emperor replied without a hint of emotion.

"Why not? I am the one who will assist in the task, and I also bear the responsibility for what Yuder is doing."

"I told you, I didn't ask you."

The tension that had briefly peaked dissipated in an instant, thanks to the weary but familiar exchange between them.

Receiving the Emperor's gaze, Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

"I assure you, the concerns you have will not come to pass. I will stake everything I have and swear it before you, Your Majesty."

Then, he knelt on one knee and touched his clenched fist to the opposite shoulder, an ancient and truthful gesture of a vow that implied he would consider any form of punishment if he broke it.

The Emperor gazed silently at Yuder for a moment.

"...Very well. I will trust your words."

Having spoken, the Emperor gave a small cough. When the cough persisted, his attendant quickly lifted him slightly to offer relief, momentarily pausing the conversation.

As he waited for the coughing to subside, Yuder contemplated Emperor Keilusa's true intentions.

According to the Empress, the Emperor wants Kishiar to become the Crown Prince.

However, if something were to suddenly go wrong—due to hasty action fueled by newfound hope—and the Emperor died prematurely or encountered any issue, then all his plans would be in vain. The same would apply if something happened to Kishiar.

'Considering that, it's not surprising if he finds it more comforting to prepare for a future he can somewhat control and anticipate.'

Although it reminded him of Kishiar in his previous life, always putting the future before his own well-being, the Emperor ultimately sided with Yuder.

"I will grant the Baron's request and give both men another chance. However, I am quite fatigued now... Let's conclude for today."

Finally hearing the response he had hoped for from the Emperor, Yuder felt a tingling sensation run down his spine. The weight of the trust the Emperor had granted him pressed down on his shoulders, differently from when he had trusted Kishiar.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

It was a monumental act of courage and also the beginning of an enormous change.

Something that had never happened before was about to unfold, a future whose end no one could predict was now on the horizon.

"...So, His Majesty has changed his mind."

"Is it really true?"

Leaving the Emperor's chamber, Kishiar and Yuder headed straight to where the Empress was waiting. Despite the late hour, the Empress, who had been standing all along, collapsed into a chair as soon as she heard the news that the Emperor had changed his mind.

"Did His Majesty truly say that?"

"Yes, it's true."

"Ah...."

After repeatedly confirming the matter, a soft sigh tinged with a moan escaped the Empress. The chief maid beside her quietly lifted a handkerchief. The Empress buried her face in it and did not raise her head for a considerable time.

When she finally looked up again, she grabbed Yuder's hand first. Her eyes, wet with tears she'd tried but failed to hold back, continuously conveyed her gratitude to Yuder.

"Thank you. I am truly grateful. I believed you would do it, but now that it's actually happened..."

Yuder shook his head gently, replying that it was all due to her influencing the Emperor's heart. However, the Empress's tears and overwhelming emotions didn't subside easily. It was only when Kishiar stepped in and jokingly told the Empress, "I wanted to share the joy and hold the assistant's hand as well, but it seems you've beaten me to it," that the atmosphere finally began to calm.

"I've shown an unsightly side of myself. I apologize. My emotions got the better of me... Come to think of it, Yuder, are you alright? You look extremely fatigued; perhaps I've held you here for too long."

"I am fine."

The dark flush that had risen to Yuder's cheeks had by then receded somewhat, settling below the collar of his garment. Although he couldn't completely hide his fatigue, Yuder didn't seem to mind.

"If there's anything I can do to help you in the future, I will. You must be tired today, go and get some rest."

The Empress informed them that Kishiar had made arrangements for them to stay at a palace he had resided in during his days as the prince, while they were checking on the Emperor's condition. As Kishiar had predicted earlier, it seemed they would be staying at the imperial palace that night.

After offering their farewells, Yuder watched the Empress leave with a sense of mixed emotions, pondering anew about her relationship with the Emperor.

The Empress, who had been so anxious yet couldn't even properly greet the Emperor when face-to-face, was leaving. And the Emperor, who would only regain some warmth when hearing stories related to the Empress, even amidst his suffering.

'I must make things different from now on.'

The road ahead was long. As Yuder raised his head and exhaled a deep breath, his eyes met Kishiar's. Just as he was about to ask where they should go next, a hand reached out and tightly embraced Yuder's back.

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Yuder had been embraced by Kishiar in various ways before, but this hug was a first. The man who held Yuder so tightly that it was hard to breathe kept his head bowed and his eyes closed for a long time, saying nothing.

In the silence, which was like boiling water without a sound, the thumping of the other's heart reverberated loudly in their ears through their bodies pressed together. Yuder carefully lifted his hand, which had been hanging by his side, and placed it on the other's back.

Finally, as the two became as one like a single tree, Kishiar spoke.

"There are many things I want to say, but no words can fully convey what I'm feeling right now."

"..."

Thank you.

The emotion felt stronger, flowing through their skin rather than words. Unknowingly, Yuder's fingers twitched in response to the emotion that seemed to resonate from his head to his toes.

He had successfully completed countless missions and accomplished many tasks that were generally considered impossible. Yet he rarely felt any vain emotions like pride or satisfaction. Yuder Aile's longstanding habit and nature were to think calmly about the next, more difficult challenge rather than basking in the satisfaction of what he had done. Even just a moment ago,

hadn't he been contemplating the weight of future tasks while watching the Empress's emotions and tears?

So the joy bubbling up from within felt somewhat unfamiliar and awkward to him.

What is this emotion, for something that was just a job that had to be done? The mountain that must be crossed still looms too high and perilous; it's too early to be at ease.

Yet, when he looked at Kishiar, who laid bare his suppressed emotions the moment they were alone, Yuder felt that this couldn't be helped. Unless one is a rock, how could one not feel anything? If the person here wasn't Yuder but someone else, the laughter tinged with various emotions would undoubtedly stir something within them as well.

"Are you alright?"

"As you can see, I'm fine."

"You were badly bruised."

"It wasn't too painful... A bit tiring, but rest will fix it."

"Good... That's a relief."

Indeed, it's a relief. Kishiar softly muttered as he laid his forehead against Yuder's hair, sniffing lightly at the tips before finally letting go.

"Shall we go, then?"

As it turned out, the carriage bound for their palace had been waiting at the back door for some time. The waiting attendants and coachmen led them quietly, showing no surprise at their delayed appearance.

"Please, Your Highness."

Their destination, cloaked in darkness, was a small palace far from the Sun Palace. Aged attendants, whose faces were familiar from previous meetings, greeted Kishiar and Yuder with bright smiles.

"We heard you would stay after visiting His Majesty; do you require anything for your comfort? Bath and bedroom are ready."

"Accommodations are set; prepare warm medicinal tea with honey."

The palace had not changed since their last visit. Yuder came out after taking a shower, having pushed away Kishiar who had wanted to accompany him to the bathroom.

'I almost forgot where I am, he followed so naturally.'

This wasn't the Cavalry; this was where Kishiar had once been called Prince. Shouldn't he maintain at least some formality before attendants who had known Kishiar since childhood?

Yuder sipped the tea that the servants had lovingly prepared, as Kishiar had not yet emerged from the other bathroom. The original bitter taste was smoothly complemented by the sweetness of honey, immediately easing his tension. His stiff muscles momentarily relaxed, and a long breath escaped from him.

'That's the bedroom where I stayed last time,' Yuder thought, casting his gaze toward the distant entrance of the chamber. It was the very place where he had woken up for the first time after manifesting his second gender. At that time, he had no concerns, but now, knowing more about Kishiar, the three isolation barriers hidden there began to weigh on his mind.

They were false walls, designed to contain and isolate the overpoweringly strong power of a young prince, so it wouldn't affect the outside world. Considering Kishiar had likely spent a lot of time within those meticulously crafted barriers, Yuder felt decidedly dispirited. His mood darkened further when he recalled how Kishiar had once shrugged it off, as if talking about a childhood friend.

"Come to think of it, the place where the Emperor resides now didn't feel that different from that bedroom."

Kishiar had mentioned that more of such isolation barriers existed in various palaces within the Imperial compound. Yuder was fairly certain that one of those places was probably in the second palace of the Sun Palace, which served as both the Emperor's bedroom and office. Things he hadn't understood before were now coming into view.

"..."

Sipping his tea again, which he couldn't really taste anymore, Yuder looked around to clear his mind. The room where he sat was a private resting area, available only to the palace's owner. Even though Kishiar wasn't currently occupying the space, traces of his presence were evident in the furnishings and decorative items, which closely resembled those in his office room.

The space was not overly opulent, but it was intricate and elegant, mirroring the atmosphere of its owner. The paintings adorning the walls were mostly landscapes, capturing a broad spectrum of lights and colors, rather than portraits or still lifes.

"Could it be he likes landscapes because his mobility is restricted?"

"Ah, Lord Yuder, you're already here," a servant said as he entered with a tray. Setting down a small plate of cookies and cream, the man, who appeared to be of similar age to Emperor's chief steward Yuliver, gave a gentle smile.

"Is there something you were looking at? If you require anything, please feel free to ask."

"I was just looking at the paintings for a moment."

"Ah, if you're interested in art, we have a collection that His Highness, the Duke, accumulated while staying here. Would you like to go see it?"

Yuder was about to decline when the servant's next words made him change his mind.

"One of the portraits that His Highness drew during his stay at the palace is also displayed there. It's a space that has received endless praise from all who see it."

"...Which way is it?"

Setting down his cup, Yuder rose from his seat. The gallery displaying the artwork was located just next to the corridor beside the room where he had been sitting. It was a practical use of a space that lacked windows and natural light.

It was a beautiful place, but Yuder's eyes barely lingered on the other paintings and artworks. His focus was on a rather striking portrait.

"This is..."

He instantly recognized the boy in the painting. The young man, who captured attention with his golden locks, sat emotionless on a chair.

His cheeks were alabaster, radiant precisely because of their youthful immaturity. Even as a young boy, his well-formed features prevented him from looking completely frail; they were just as they had always been. Although the boy prince in the painting wore no special clothes or jewels, he was so regal and beautiful that he could blind the eye. Somehow, perhaps due to the absence of a smile, he seemed like a fleeting existence.

Never had he thought that he would encounter this face here—the one that Emperor Katchian had burned beyond recognition in his previous life. Memories surfaced of times in Tainu when he'd been curious about what Kishiar's childhood might have been like, and the sensation was deeply strange.

In any case, the young Kishiar in the painting was far more remarkable than Yuder had ever vaguely imagined.

"...That painting was created just before His Highness, the Duke, left for Peletta upon receiving his title. At the time, the court painter, Lord Elmert, prepared the painting. He doubted his own skill and was so tormented that he fainted five times while making it," the servant who had been attending to Yuder explained in a soft voice.

"But in the end, it became a portrait that everyone could admire. Had it been released to the public, it might have been considered Elmert's masterpiece, even more representative than 'Afternoon in the Meadows Palace.'"

"I see."

He didn't know much about the name of the painter, but he clearly understood that the painting depicted Kishiar at the time he had just become the Duke of Peletta.

'So he was even younger than I thought.'

It was a time when one should know nothing of the world's troubles. Yet, not a trace of laughter could be seen in the eyes of the boy in the painting. Was it because he was already aware of the destiny that awaited him, far away?

Yuder stared long and hard into the distant past of Kishiar La Orr he did not know.

He stood almost absorbed in the painting until a chilly fragrance enveloped him.

"So you're here."

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Upon hearing the voice tinged with amusement, Yuder turned his head to find Kishiar, whose hair tips were slightly damp, approaching to stand beside him in front of the painting. The attendant had discreetly disappeared from view.

"Hmm. Were you looking at this? It's been a while."

"I heard it was painted just before you left for Peletta."

"That's right. I had it done because there were many saying I might never return from there. You could say it was something like a portrait meant to be left behind after one's death."

Kishiar casually revealed the grim backstory of the painting. However, his expression while looking at it was neither dark nor seemed displeased.

Yuder stared briefly at the face in the portrait, its gentle contours and transient aura entirely gone, replaced by a secretive and lax smile, before responding.

"In that case, it's become the most useless painting in the world. You're still here, after all."

"True."

Kishiar's eyes twinkled as if Yuder's words were the exact answer he'd been expecting. It seemed the painting still being stored here was more a memento of its original purpose being rendered meaningless.

"But since you've shown such interest in it, it doesn't seem entirely useless. Do you like the painting?"

"It's not so much that I like the painting, but I was curious as I've never seen a portrait of you before."

"So, you were really curious about my younger days."

Kishiar read Yuder's intentions with remarkable accuracy, his face brimming with enthusiasm.

"So, what's your impression?"

Impression. Yuder couldn't say he'd been contemplating either the fate of this seemingly pointless painting from his previous life or the trials the young Duke in the portrait must have faced after heading for Peletta.

In the end, there was only one thing he could say.

"... I was thinking that you were handsome from that time on."

Kishiar's eyes sparkled.

"Is that all you have to say? It's a bit embarrassing to say it myself, but back then, people would often say I was more like an angel than a human, or that even the air where my breath brushed by was mythically beautiful."

He didn't look embarrassed at all; the content of his words even less so.

"It seems you're already well aware, so what more do you wish to hear?"

"I may be tired of knowing how handsome I am, but special compliments from a special person are always something one wishes to hear more of."

If anyone other than Kishiar had brazenly made such skin-crawling comments, they might have instantly turned to dust under Yuder's hand.

But this was Kishiar. His self-praise about his appearance was convincing enough to make anyone accept it, so all Yuder could do was let out a short sigh.

"...Fine. You were, are, and likely will forever continue to be incredibly handsome."

Kishiar burst into laughter. Fortunately, he seemed satisfied with that much and didn't press Yuder any further about the beauty of his younger self.

"Then it's time to infuse you with some divine power. There's a chair over there; please have a seat."

"Pardon?"

"If we'd shared the same bathroom, I could have done it while we bathed. Since we didn't, this is the only option. Now, come on."

'...So that's why he followed me into the bathroom?'

Unlike before, Yuder felt considerably less pain when his body became stained with the energy from the Red Stone, which now seemed to seep between his veins rather than just his skin. The same was true when he was healed with divine power. Although the rate of disappearance of the blemishes didn't speed up as it had before, the absence of pain alone was an incomparable advantage.

Since his body would gradually recover if he rested, he figured it was okay not to receive divine power. Kishiar, however, appeared to have never intended to leave things be from the start.

Seeing no signs of Kishiar retreating, Yuder eventually opened the flap of his robe in front of the man. Kishiar said nothing for a moment, looking at the faintly moving, crimson veins that still marred one of Yuder's shoulders and various spots on his chest.

“...”

Finally, Kishiar began a familiar ritual in silence, taking out holy water, a sanctified symbol, and a purification stone. Each time the white light of the divine power touched his body, Yuder felt a surge of vitality in his weary flesh and a cooling sensation in the heated areas.

Even though Kishiar knew that his divine power no longer had the potent healing effects it once did, he continued to generously channel his power. Then, he suddenly spoke, “Yuder, when do you plan to examine His Majesty again?”

“The sooner, the better... If possible, I'd like to examine him again tomorrow.”

“Depending on His Majesty's health condition, it should be possible. It's not bad for me either, as I also want to test my strength as soon as possible. However, there's one thing we need to confirm beforehand.”

“What is it?”

“I couldn't properly see the red light you mentioned earlier when His Majesty's internal condition was open.”

“Pardon?”

Caught off guard by the unexpected comment, Yuder hesitated for a moment. Despite noticing Yuder's slight flinch, Kishiar continued to channel his divine power without faltering.

“It's natural that I might not have seen as much as you did, since you were closer to the source of the energy. However, even His Majesty and Yuliver, who were even closer, did not see that light. Don't you think that's worth considering? My current hypothesis is that perhaps you were the only one who could see that energy... What do you think?”

Yuder was perplexed. He had seen that red light, albeit briefly, but it hadn't been so fleeting as to be mistaken for an illusion. Could it be true that no one else had seen that vivid light?

'I naturally assumed that others would have seen it to some extent since I had seen it twice and was quite certain.'

If they simply missed it because it had passed too quickly, then that was fortunate. However, if only Yuder could see that energy, then it could cause problems when re-examining the Emperor. Especially for Kishiar, who needed to see the target to focus his energy.

"If that is indeed the case, then I agree that we should definitely confirm it before we examine His Majesty again," Yuder said.

"Good. Do you have any ideas as to the cause?"

Yuder thought for a moment before responding, "If the reason lies with me, then the most likely explanation could be my eye..."

Yuder looked directly into Kishiar's red eyes and saw his own reflection. Currently, his eyes were no different from usual as he was not using any abilities. However, when he used his powers, one of Yuder's eyes turned golden. This unique phenomenon had been described by Enon as the "Eye of Magic."

'When the Eye of Magic opens, one becomes sensitive to phenomena caused by magic power and other energies, seeing things one couldn't see before... or so they say.'

Ever since that moment, Yuder had found it much more comfortable to peer into someone's inner self compared to before.

He had grown accustomed to this newfound ease, and given that he didn't feel any significant changes in himself, he hadn't thought much of it. However, if he considered today's incident as an instance of "seeing things he couldn't see before," then this mysterious event made some sense.

Hearing Yuder's speculation, Kishiar also nodded his head softly in agreement.

"My thoughts exactly."

"If I'm the only one who can see that energy, things will get difficult. How can we gather strength if Commander can't see it?"

"In fact, I've been thinking about a solution to that while taking a bath earlier. Would you like to hear it?"

The divine power flowing from Kishiar's hand finally ceased. Confirming that the crimson vein had settled and almost returned to its original size, the man opened his mouth as he draped a garment over Yuder's bare shoulder.

"The source of the magic flowing in your eyes originated from me. And we are also connected through a somewhat mysterious force."

"Yes."

The man who started off with cryptic words studied Yuder's reaction and continued.

"So, if we intentionally activate that connection while attempting something, perhaps I can clearly know what you are seeing and chasing from my end. I had that thought."

...Is that even possible?

Yuder didn't know much about magic, making it difficult to firmly assert anything. However, he did feel that it wouldn't be as easy as it sounded.

"Intentional activation... Is that even possible? What if it puts you at risk...?"

"Have you forgotten? We've already activated our connection once before through our own will. Considering that, this method might be the most tried and true."

At those words, Yuder immediately recalled the slender threads of light he had seen overlaying Kishiar earlier today. That dreamlike and mysterious sensation still lingered somewhere within him.

"And I believe the Awakener's power I possess could also help in activating this connection," Kishiar added.

Kishiar's eyes were clear, as if he had considered the idea long before today. Upon hearing his words, Yuder's mind reflexively flashed back to the day in a past life when he had killed Kishiar.

"Do you remember the inexplicable bond I inflicted upon you?"

"Perhaps what was connected that day was something deeper than our physical selves... something akin to a soul. After much searching for a way to sever this unseen link, I concluded that my powers could bring about the most optimal outcome."

"...This will end soon. Pushing until all bonds are forcibly severed... and then..."

Words that had been hard to fully understand when Yuder had dreamt them.

However, if Kishiar could intentionally draw their connection closer with his power, couldn't the opposite also be true?

If two objects that were stuck together were pushed in opposite directions indefinitely, then whatever they were...

"They would certainly sever."

A chill crawled down his spine, and he felt as if every hair on his body stood on end.

A sense of certainty flooded in, confirming what Kishiar in his past life had intended to do. His mind grew icy.

"Did Kishiar succeed back then? What happened next?"

Kishiar in his past life had intended to use his abilities to sever his connection with Yuder as he faced his own end. Assuming that he succeeded, why was it that even after turning back time, a 'thread' between him and Yuder still remained?

Had the connection severed as he wished, or had it failed? Had Yuder remained unscathed despite the severance?

"No... I thought so, but that wasn't the case."

Yuder recalled the gaps in his memory he had lived unaware of, the countless holes still lurking somewhere within him.

The majority of the memories he had recovered and the gaps he had filled were related to Kishiar. Was this the price he had paid for Kishiar's attempt to sever their bond?

His head throbbed and ached. The more he tried to think, the more painful it became.

"Yuder?"

Kishiar called out cautiously, observing the icy pallor that had come over Yuder's face. Yuder finally snapped out of his reverie and looked at Kishiar. The headache vanished as quickly as it had arrived.

"Is there something troubling you in what I've said?"

"...No, there isn't."

Avoiding Kishiar's gaze, Yuder hesitated briefly before speaking.

"I see... I'm not certain if the plan you've suggested is actually possible, as I hadn't fully considered it, but it doesn't seem entirely impossible."

What Kishiar was attempting now was fundamentally different from what he had tried in his past life. Instead of meddling with the connection itself, he merely intended to 'draw in' an already existing but rarely activated connection, making it easier to trigger and utilizing the resulting sensations.

‘First, let's see if it's really possible or not,’ Yuder thought.

"Would it be difficult to try it out now?"

"Now? Wouldn't it be better to rest a bit first?"

Knowing that this concern was directed at him, Yuder shook his head gently. He responded that he didn't want to delay even a little if there was a way. Kishiar looked into his face for a moment before nodding.

Knowing he lacked the power, Yuder tried to keep a neutral expression on his face, like someone hesitating to reveal a secret.

"Let's try something simple, then."

Kishiar took Yuder's hand.

"Use any ability. Just enough to open your Eye of Magic."

Immediately, Yuder conjured a breeze. As the warm wind brushed against the strands of hair on his forehead, a golden light streamed from his eye, signaling that his Eye of Magic had opened.

'I don't see any other powers right now, but...'

Despite the dim lighting, the clarity with which he could see Kishiar's facial expression and even the number of his eyelashes confirmed the activation of his Eye of Magic. While contemplating this, Kishiar, who had been gazing into his golden eye, gently tightened his grip on Yuder's hand.

In that instant, the air around them seemed to ripple, and a tingling sensation spread from behind Yuder's eyes. His hand twitched involuntarily.

"When I channel my magic power, there's indeed a reaction."

The light intensified. Though Kishiar whispered it, Yuder couldn't see it, making it hard to believe.

"Now... try using your ability."

A subtle, mist-like energy began to emanate from Kishiar's entire body. Yuder caught every distorted, misty fluctuation, difficult as they were to see. The moment that lingering energy seemed

to know where to go, it surged through their clasped hands into Yuder. Yuder inhaled deeply and clenched his teeth.

'...Ah.'

Something had 'touched.'

Somewhere deep within Yuder, something dormant quivered at this sudden contact. Something else followed smoothly, 'pulling' at it. Yuder felt as if his entire being was being sucked towards Kishiar and swayed, feeling momentarily dizzy.

"You're fine."

A soft voice reassured him as the hand gripping his tightened, as if to deny the sensations as unreal.

Yuder took a deep breath and blinked reflexively. Then, in that brief moment, he saw a world turned utterly upside down.

Between him and Kishiar wavered a single familiar thread. That faint, fragile thread, seemingly made of light, looked nearly identical to the one that had once helped Yuder locate Kishiar in Tainu.

He followed the trajectory of that weightless thread fluttering around them. Reaching its end, he realized it was connected to both their clasped hands and Kishiar's red eyes. He was overwhelmed, unable to speak.

At the same time, the world gradually faded to white.

All he could see was the presence before him. The scent he had surely memorized felt more vivid than ever. Yuder breathed in the comforting fragrance of Kishiar, imbibing unfamiliar yet familiar emotions within that scent.

It was as if from the beginning, everything within Yuder had longed to continue being drawn towards him. The delicate thread encircling his body yearned for a deeper, stronger connection, once lost and now hoped for again.

In a powerful interweaving and entanglement, the fragmented pieces loudly cried out for something.

It was the name of the one who had once been like a part of him. Or perhaps a memory, or maybe regret, or even resentment.

And in response to those intense emotions, he sensed similar yet unfamiliar sensations coming from somewhere invisible that were connected to him. Yuder felt entrapped by these sensations, as if they were violently shaking his soul. He tried to suppress them with force but failed.

When Yuder opened his eyes again, he became aware that he was still in the unchanged gallery. He had been sitting upright, holding Kishiar's hand while attempting the ritual, but now found himself almost embraced in the man's arms.

Kishiar's energy had long since waned, and the wind summoned by Yuder had also dissipated. Finally taking a long breath, the pair of red eyes that had been staring into Yuder's blinked.

"Commander?"

"We successfully activated the connection. Did you feel it?"

"Ah... yes, I felt it."

"Any pain or discomfort?"

"None."

"Good, that's fortunate."

Kishiar brushed his hand across Yuder's forehead. Yuder sat up as if waking from a dream. The lingering fragments of emotion swirling in his head faded quickly, causing him to forget what he had just felt.

"Are you alright, Commander?"

Kishiar explained that the moment the connection was activated, as expected, he had been able to somewhat feel what Yuder's Eye of Magic was seeing by using his own magic energy.

"I sensed the flow of the Awakener energy and magic energy from me. However, the connection kept unexpectedly strengthening. I couldn't disconnect it as easily as I had hoped to..."

After saying this much, Kishiar briefly shook his head. Now that Yuder looked, he noticed Kishiar's gaze was also inexplicably dull and deep.

"...I thought I sensed something immediately after that, but I can't be sure."

'Something...'

Yuder felt similarly. He thought he had sensed something, but the feeling quickly faded as he regained his senses, making it difficult to put into words.

'But I have gained one answer.'

It was now certain that with Kishiar's power, activating the connection was possible. And through that, he could also reach Yuder's Eye of Magic. It was a significant step forward in the path to healing the Emperor.

Instead of being mired in the unknown, it was better to organize the answers they had found. Yuder lay down in the bedroom, filled with aromatic pouches that the Empress had sent for them, and after pondering for a long while, closed his eyes.

Chapter 540

Yuder swung his sword in the darkness.

The outdoor training ground of the Cavalry was completely silent, all lights extinguished as night deepened. Lost in his own rapid breathing, Yuder repeatedly swung his sword down, focusing solely on the rhythm of his own breaths and movements.

Suddenly, the sword slipped from his grip and skidded across the ground, momentarily halting the seemingly endless cycle of swings.

Yuder looked down at the practice sword rolling on the ground with a furrowed brow, its clunky noises filling the air. He then glanced at the palm of his hand, which had become an unrecognizable mess of blood and sweat.

Clenching his fist tightly, Yuder took a few steadying breaths and moved on. As he casually bent down to pick up his sword, a pair of unfamiliar feet appeared in his line of sight. It was just then.

“Who... is it the Commander?”

About to ask who it was, Yuder quickly changed his question. The reason was that a face he thought he had never seen before blinked and transformed into a familiar one. Lacking much knowledge about magic, Yuder assumed it was an optical illusion caused by the darkness.

Even in the dead of night, when it was hard to make out faces, that striking visage could not go unrecognized. The man whose face Yuder, infamous for not remembering the names or faces of any of his colleagues, instantly memorized was none other than Duke Kishiar La Orr. With an inscrutable expression, Kishiar spoke.

“Have you been practicing with the sword all this time?”

“Yes. So?”

“Aren’t you going to sleep? It’s late.”

Coming from the Commander, who himself was wandering around at this hour, the question seemed rather ironic. Judging from Kishiar’s appearance—clad in clearly recognizable outdoor clothing and a fatigued expression—it seemed he had just returned from outside. Seeing a Duke wandering alone at such an hour without even a knight for protection was hardly reassuring.

A young duke who enjoys night-time activities and is terrible at planning. A royal black sheep who assembled a Cavalry for his own amusement.

Yuder recalled the various rumors he had heard about the Commander from other members of the Cavalry and simply bowed his head in response, offering no answer.

“...”

“I didn't ask to pry. Your hand looks injured; may I take a look?”

Did he notice that in this darkness? Reluctant yet respectful, as the man was his Commander and Yuder had nothing to claim for himself, he hesitantly extended his less-than-perfect hand.

“You still kept swinging even in this condition? Impressive.”

Whether it was a compliment or a scornful remark, Kishiar looked closely at Yuder's face and asked.

“Do you enjoy pain?”

How could he? Yuder swallowed the retort that nearly escaped his lips.

The man was his Commander. No matter how much of a pariah Yuder might be among the members, he couldn't afford to talk back to the Commander.

“No, Commander.”

“It seems unlikely that you'd continue such torturous training without seeking medical attention unless you couldn't feel pain or you enjoyed it.”

“It's just a blister that burst; it doesn't require any medical treatment.”

“So, you don't enjoy pain or have a high pain tolerance?”

“No, Commander.”

It was the first time Yuder had had such a lengthy conversation with the Commander, and with each word exchanged, his exhaustion grew exponentially. Eventually, Yuder pulled out a handkerchief

and began to vigorously wipe his hand, as if to demonstrate his irritation. The sensation of roughly scrubbing away the blood mixed with sweat felt uncomfortably hot, but at this point, he didn't care.

"May I go now?"

"Go ahead."

The Commander finally gave permission. Yuder wasn't particularly fond of the unchanging, crimson eyes that had been mocking him earlier.

‘Are all high-ranking people like this?’ Yuder thought, feeling abruptly exhausted. He squeezed out every last ounce of courtesy for a polite farewell and turned away. Yet even as he assumed his stance to resume his sword practice, the Commander remained, not leaving his spot.

The Commander's continual gaze was unnerving, but Yuder deliberately chose not to look back and carried on with his own tasks. It wasn't until Yuder had completed all the 24 basic sword movements that the observer finally spoke.

"Why is someone capable of using multiple elements so intent on wielding a sword? You should be more than sufficient with the powers you already possess. Wouldn't it be better to strengthen those?"

Yuder was slightly surprised.

Did the Commander remember who I am?

Since his entrance test, Yuder had been somewhat of a celebrity within the Cavalry for his flashy display of multiple elements. However, as far as the Commander was concerned, Yuder was just another Awakener among the countless commoners. He hadn't expected the Commander, who hadn't even attended the entrance test and often vacated his post, to recognize him.

Could it be that this man remembers the faces and abilities of over 300 members?

Feeling a strange mixture of emotions, Yuder responded slowly.

"Training is not about continually repeating what you're already good at; it's about improving your weaknesses. I feel the need to improve my swordsmanship, which is lacking compared to others."

Before joining, Yuder hadn't expected that everyone in the Cavalry would be taught swordsmanship, no exceptions. In an Empire that considered the sword the noblest of weapons, it didn't hurt to learn, so Yuder had participated diligently. The problem was that he had never handled a weapon before.

While he had plenty of experience with axes from living in a rural area, he had never used a sword other than kitchen knives and cleavers. Unlike other members who had wielded swords since childhood, Yuder's hands were clumsy with the unfamiliar weapon. Despite his calloused hands, new blisters formed and blood was drawn.

Those who had considered Yuder an unfortunate soul found joy in his struggles. They were probably relieved to see even a terrifying individual like him had weaknesses. However, Yuder felt crushed by their laughter.

That was why he was practicing like a madman, even sacrificing sleep.

"Hmm, impressive."

The word 'impressive' was spoken, but the shadowed, crimson eyes revealed no emotional change.

"But cutting down on sleep and swinging away haphazardly will only get you so far. Training needs specific goals. What's your ultimate aim with this training?"

A specific goal for training. He hadn't thought about that.

Yuder scrunched his brows in thought and finally opened his mouth.

"I plan to continue this way until I can perform the basic sword manual ten times in a row without feeling any discomfort in my hands."

"Ten times?"

"Yes."

"A good goal, but I'm not sure how you'll accomplish it with your fifth movement being so skewed."

The Commander walked away with a faint smile, as if suggesting that Yuder's goal was entirely unfeasible. Yuder watched him go and absentmindedly swung his sword again. He hadn't noticed before, but it did seem as though the blade swung a little crookedly. With a furrowed brow, Yuder continued to repeat the movement. After days of practice, he finally felt confident that he could execute the fifth technique flawlessly. And then he ran into the Commander again at the training ground under the cover of night.

The man, upon seeing Yuder swinging his sword with zeal, narrowed his eyes and spoke, "The balance on your fourteenth movement is off. Spread your feet a bit more and hold your stance. That should correct it."

Yuder said nothing.

Such peculiar encounters continued. The Commander would watch Yuder's movements without doing anything, then offer critical remarks before leaving.

Eventually, what started as a once-a-week encounter became every three days, and then almost every day. By the time Yuder realized this pattern, he had already achieved his goal.

"You've accomplished your objective, I see."

After completing all the sword techniques from the basic manual ten times with perfect form, the Commander suddenly spoke to Yuder. Without a word, Yuder sheathed his practice sword. The Commander could have taken offense at his aloofness, but he didn't. Surprisingly, he was quite lenient in such matters.

"So, how does it feel to have reached your goal?"

What did it feel like to have achieved one's goal? As ever, the Commander had a knack for posing odd questions.

"What should it feel like?"

"It's easy to swing a sword by the book for a day. But fewer than half can endure a week, and far fewer than that can endure a month. And if someone endures beyond that, there's only one reason."

It was because it was enjoyable. The murmured words penetrated Yuder's ears.

"So, did you find it enjoyable?"

Yuder paused. Enjoyable? Just as he was about to say that he hadn't started this for fun, a sudden realization struck him.

Why had he started this training in the first place?

The sense of rivalry he had initially felt towards others had vanished. All that remained was a peculiar satisfaction in achieving a perfect stance.

As this realization hit him, it felt as though he had been slapped on the head. The corners of the man's lips lifted ever so slightly, tracing a faint curve. It was hard to tell if it was a smile or not, but the moment vanished as quickly as it came. Yet, for some reason, it lingered deeply in Yuder's mind.