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"..."

Yuder silently opened his eyes.

'Was it a dream?'

He had dreamt of a time from his past life—one of the earliest moments after he had joined the Cavalry. It was the first time he had had a conversation with Kishiar.

He remembered beginning to learn various things from Kishiar, starting with the sword. Those memories had blurred long ago due to the passage of time. However, the recollections that resurfaced in his dream were incredibly vivid, as if they had occurred just yesterday. Yuder had experienced this sudden clarity of forgotten memories multiple times before.

'Was that also among the memories I had lost?'

But it seemed unlikely that he would forget something as trivial as that.

The texture of the practice sword that he gripped in his palms, Kishiar's voice whispering in the dark, and even the slight upward curl of Kishiar's lips—all appeared in his mind with unsettling clarity.

Yes, there had undoubtedly been such a time.

A time when nobody had died yet, when his second gender hadn't manifested, and when he was wholly focused on learning new things.

Back then, Yuder had felt that adapting to his radically changed living environment was somewhat against his nature. But looking back, he thought that might have been the most peaceful period of his life.

Yuder rose, feeling as if his chest had become slightly lighter. The fragrant and sharp aroma wafting from the aromatic pouch placed next to his pillow tickled his nose.

Was the Empress's aromatic pouch, said to bring good dreams, the cause of today's dream? Though seeing Kishiar in a vision twice yesterday likely had the most significant influence, the pouch might also have played a role in bringing forth a trivial yet peaceful memory from many.

'If it's a good dream, then it's good in its own way.'

Yuder of the past would not have admitted it, but the present Yuder knew that he had been quite enamored with the first sword he had touched. Although he was aimless and unaware of his own limitations back then, training was as close to his true calling as anything could be.

And he had realized that through Kishiar.

Yuder got out of bed and stood on the floor. He was the only one in the room, as his chamber was right next to Kishiar's. As he walked towards the still-dark window, he saw the palace's rear view.

The stunning imperial garden, breathtaking from any angle, failed to stir any emotion in him. His eyes were unconsciously searching for something else, something hidden deeper.

'I remember there being a small training ground somewhere over there during my previous stay... Ah, there it is.'

Was it because of the dream about training? For some reason, he wanted to move, even if just a little, right then. Spotting a vacant lot in a corner of the garden, Yuder didn't hesitate to change his clothes. Slipping out unnoticed was no big deal.

The training ground, located a short distance away from the palace, seemed quite small compared to those designated for the Cavalry and the imperial knights. Had he not stayed here for a few days before, he would never have known such a place existed.

Yuder entered the ground, holding a decorative sword he had casually taken from the palace. Then he stopped in his tracks upon discovering a person who had arrived there before him.

“...”

Kishiar was swinging his sword in silence at the center of the training ground.

Despite the chilly weather, just enough to see his breath, he donned only a thin layer of training clothes. Yet, he didn't seem cold at all. From his shoulders, as he practiced one move after another with a wooden training sword, heat emanated, creating a mirage-like haze.

He swung, sliced, lunged forward, and stabbed. Then, with fluid motions, he kicked off the ground and circled back to make another powerful slash. Despite the simplicity of these actions, there was not a moment of hesitation. His movements flowed smoothly like unstoppable water, yet carried the weight of a massive mountain.

Yuder had known that Kishiar practiced his swordsmanship every dawn when they shared a room in Tainu. But seeing him now from the outside, he somehow appeared both unfamiliar and new. Unconsciously tracing Kishiar's movements with his eyes, Yuder suddenly realized why they felt so familiar and stiffened.

'That is...'

If he was not mistaken, these were the same movements that appeared in the basic swordsmanship manual, the ones Yuder had tirelessly repeated in his recent dream.

Just as Yuder was planning to go down to the training ground and replicate those movements, Kishiar completed his final move. Lowering the sword he had held high, he turned around. His eyes, which had been frighteningly focused and devoid of emotion, changed the moment they met Yuder's.

Yet, somehow, he felt slightly different from the usual Kishiar.

"Swinging a sword around at this hour? Did you sleep well?"

That peculiar atmosphere quickly dissolved the moment he spoke. Yuder looked up at the approaching man and nodded.

"Yes, I felt a bit stiff, so I came down."

"How did you know about this place?"

"I passed by it when I was here before."

"Ah, you did? You have a keen eye."

"Is this a place you have always used for training?"

"Yes, that's right. I used this place often until I left the palace. I even trained Nathan here."

Kishiar looked around, smiling.

"Normally, such physically demanding training would be impossible, so we couldn't have had a training ground. But I insisted on having one, even if it's small."

That explained why the training ground, despite being part of the palace, was so small and inconspicuous.

Kishiar kindly offered to lend Yuder a wooden training sword since he had finished his own practice. Yuder politely declined and assumed his stance with his decorative sword.

It was the first move of the same basic training manual Kishiar had been practicing earlier.

As he swung the sword, Yuder felt an unwavering gaze on him. Maybe it was because he had just dreamt about the past, but for some reason, the sensations overlapped.

Yuder shook off the weighty feeling clinging to his limbs and deliberately put more force into his moves. At first, he struggled to concentrate, but as he continued, his surroundings gradually faded from his consciousness.

After precisely ten repetitions, he lowered his sword and took a deep breath.

When he opened his eyes, there stood Kishiar, as still as if he had stepped out from the past.

Suddenly, something deep within his chest ached.

"Last night, I had a strange dream."

In that odd atmosphere, Kishiar quietly spoke to Yuder.

"I don't remember it well, but one thing is certain. I think I was watching you, just as you are now, swinging your sword. You followed the swordsmanship textbook to the letter."

"What?"

For a moment, Yuder felt as if something heavy had abruptly settled upon him.

"This is the first time I've remembered a dream featuring you after waking up. Could it have been a premonition?"

Yuder licked his lips a few times, as if lost in thought, finally struggling to speak. "No, it probably wasn't."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because... I had the same dream."

Kishiar remained silent for a moment.

"So, this is another instance of a 'connection' similar to before?"

It probably was. He should have anticipated such an occurrence since Kishiar had a history of calling the name Yudrain in his sleep. However, he couldn't help being surprised when it actually happened.

"I suppose that seems likely."

"Sharing dreams, huh? Considering what happened yesterday, it's not that surprising. It felt like it wasn't my dream, so maybe this connection originated from you to me..."

The man who had been quietly speaking suddenly looked at Yuder's face and shut his mouth, humming thoughtfully. A smile soon appeared on his face.

"The idea that my assistant was watching me even in a dream is suddenly so touching that I feel like crying. Do you often dream of me?"

Yuder had indeed often dreamed of Kishiar, but it wasn't the Kishiar of the present.

"I suppose I should try to dream more often of being with you, since I can't beat you at it."

"You don't need to make such an effort."

Yuder sighed and replied. The man who had chuckled softly approached and put his arm around Yuder's shoulder.

"If you've finished practicing, let's go inside and have breakfast. We also need to think more about treatment options for you. You could catch a cold if you cool down too much."

Guided by the arm pulling him, Yuder began to walk. When he glanced up, he no longer felt the strange atmosphere that had surrounded the man earlier.

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'But it's impossible to truly be indifferent about it.'

Even after finishing breakfast and discussing with Kishiar on ways to treat the Emperor, as a continuation of yesterday's conversation, thoughts about dream-sharing continually occupied a corner of Yuder's mind.

Could the dream Kishiar had be exactly the same as Yuder's? The memories were faint, so it was hard to say for sure. But what mattered was that it wasn't the first time he had received information from a past life through a dream.

Previously, when Kishiar had sleep-talked the name Yudrain, he couldn't remember anything. But this time, he retained some memories. What would happen the next time something like this occurred?

'As the connection deepens and becomes more frequent, will such incidents increase as well?'

Although it was still unclear, his thoughts were complicated.

As Yuder pondered over the ambiguous issues, a servant approached to clear away the empty plates and set down a new plate of pumpkin pie. It was already the fourth pie.

The pies weren't tasteless, but how many had they baked to keep serving them endlessly? While eating the new pie and contemplating this minor question, Kishiar suddenly narrowed his eyes as he read a note handed to him by the servant.

"Oh, dear."

"What's the matter?"

"The Emperor says that meeting him again today will be difficult. We've been instructed to return and see him again in three days."

Considering the Emperor's health, they couldn't afford to waste time. Yet, treatments needed to be carried out according to the will of the patient. The sudden change in plans likely meant that the Emperor's side also required some preparation time.

"Three days should be sufficient... It might be beneficial to gather more information in the meantime."

Coincidentally, after yesterday's experience, he was curious about the difference between a person who had the Red Stone energy within them but hadn't awakened and a normal person. It seemed like a good idea to look into it.

...

"How long has it been, Yuder?"

Yuder exchanged greetings with Alik, the apprentice of Thais Yulman, in the mage's lab he hadn't visited in quite some time.

Since Thais Yulman had conducted the most research on the power of the Red Stone, it was only natural for Yuder to seek him out.

"Ah, should I refer to you as Baron Aile now?"

"No, calling me as you always have is sufficient. Is Master Yulman in?"

"My Master is currently out but will return soon. Why don't you wait here?"

As Yuder waited, Alik, who was quite affable, chatted about various topics.

"I heard you've made significant contributions in the West. I also heard you were injured. Are you alright now?"

"Yes, as you can see, I'm quite well now."

Alik prattled on about how quiet it had been since most of the Cavalry members had gone to the West, and how his ability to summon water had improved under his Master's strict tutelage. Then, his eyes gleamed, and he lowered his voice cautiously.

"Ah, by the way, that thing the Cavalry members discovered in the Great Sarain Forest. Was it really... that?"

Although he hadn't specified what 'that' was, there was only one thing a mage would be excited enough to discuss. Yuder stared at Alik's eager face and responded.

"Are you talking about the ruins discovered in the Great Sarain Forest?"

"Yes, exactly that!"

Alik took a deep, excited breath.

Because of that, there had been quite a commotion among mages lately. "However, it's hard to get reliable information around here. I was going to ask the new mage who just arrived, but you need to know where they are to ask them, don't you?"

The new mage in question was Hellem, but she hadn't been back since she returned from the West and the entire Cavalry members took on vacation. It made sense they hadn't met. It was likely that one of the buildings Emperor Keilusa had awarded would be converted into a monster-specific lab for her, so chances were they'd only meet after that.

'But there's no need to go into such detail.'

"Is it true that if you receive concentrated ancient magic from that place, anyone can use magic much more powerful than before? Is there really a mysterious treasure left by the Archmage? They say that the magic stone found there has unknown powers, is that true?"

The rapid-fire questions seemed endless. It appeared that the previous pleasantries were just a lead-in for these inquiries. Yuder sidestepped the questions with as much tact and ambiguity as possible.

"Well, it seems some exaggerated rumors have taken hold. I'm not well-versed in magic, so I can't provide a detailed answer..."

"Come on, don't be like that. Just tell me a bit. Is it really that—"

"Alik! Where has that Alik gone again?"

Fortunately, before Yuder could be pestered further by the young mage, a savior appeared. Alik reflexively stood up, muttering, "My Master is here," with a disappointed look on his face.

Yuder exited with him toward the lab entrance. But Thais Yulman, whom they finally met, was not alone. Seeing the aged mage supporting someone who appeared to have fainted, Alik's face changed dramatically.

"Master! Who is that person? He's not dead, is he? Surely you didn't—"

"What nonsense are you talking about? I met someone I know on the way. He fainted after hitting his head, so I brought him. Move him over there. He seems to have a lump; check it."

"Oh, right, of course."

Alik hastily took the limp body from his Master.

"Ah, my shoulders are killing me. Hmm? Who is this?"

The aged mage, massaging his shoulders, finally noticed Yuder and widened his eyes.

"Ha! Long time no see, Yuder!"

While Thais Yulman greeted Yuder warmly, Yuder did not reciprocate. He was distracted by the person Alik was moving; the back of the man's head looked strangely familiar.

And when the man's face was finally revealed as he lay on the sofa, Yuder immediately knew the source of his unease.

"Is that not... Mikalin Punt?"

"Correct. You two met in the West, didn't you?"

The man Thais Yulman had brought was none other than the head of the Western Mage Union, Mikalin Punt. As Yuder frowned, puzzled as to why he would be in such a state, the old mage who had removed his coat began to explain.

"Well, I had to pick up some items from the Pearl Tower, you see. On my way back, I ran into this guy. Turns out he was planning to visit the Cavalry members today. So, since I'm staying with the Cavalry, I offered to guide him. For some reason, he got angry and made a fuss, then tripped and ended up like this. No gratitude, tsk tsk."

"Ah, so that's how it was."

Yuder had a feeling that hearing Mikalin's side of the story would offer a different perspective, but he decided not to probe any further. He would find out soon enough once Mikalin regained consciousness.

"And what brings you all the way here? Curious about the progress of my research?"

"Yes, that too... I also wanted to hear your opinions on the incidents I faced in the West. And I wanted to express my gratitude for the letter you sent me before leaving."

Since he couldn't discuss matters related to the Emperor in front of Mikalin, an outsider, Yuder decided to use the experiences he'd had in the West as a pretext to bait the conversation. After all, there were a few things he needed to tell Mikalin among those experiences; weaving the necessary discussions in between wouldn't be difficult.

"Ah, I've already heard from Mikalin that my advice was of help. You did well to heed my words."

Thais Yulman stroked his beard with a delighted expression and chuckled. He was blissfully unaware of how much resentment Mikalin had expressed towards him after reading that letter, and he would continue to remain in the dark.

"If only the Duke... ah, I mean the Commander, would appreciate my efforts and provide additional support for my research. I heard he promised substantial aid to the Western Mage Union, how envious that makes me."

While expressing envy for the support promised to the Western Mage Union, the old mage's hungry gaze was constantly directed at Yuder. Naturally, the real 'support' he wanted was permission to observe Yuder.

"If there's specific support you'd like, please inform the Commander. As long as it's not unreasonable, he'll likely comply."

"Uh... No, not yet. I'm not that careless with my own life, you know."

With a disappointed tongue-click, Thais Yulman sunk deeper into his chair.

"Hmm, anyway, what did you want to discuss with me?"

"When we last met, you had discovered that a medium imbued with the power of the Red Stone could amplify an Awakener's abilities. You also speculated that, conversely, an Awakener could absorb the power within the medium. Do you remember?"

"I did say that."

Amplification had been proven through the body of Thais Yulman's apprentice, Alik, but absorption remained an unverified hypothesis. However...

"It appears that I managed to achieve that absorption in the West."

"What?"

The old mage leaped up, then sat back down. A flicker of what seemed like madness, mixed with keen interest and excitement, flashed through his wrinkled eyes.

"What do you mean? Explain in detail!"

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Yuder calmly withstood the intense gaze directed at him and slowly began to recount his experiences in the Great Sarain Forest.

"When I headed west, I took with me an object imbued with the power of the Red Stone. Later, I suffered an unexpected injury that left me incapacitated for a while."

"I recall hearing something about a severe injury... Are you referring to that time?"

"Yes."

The news of Yuder sustaining an injury while facing a colossal monster in the Great Sarain Forest was well-known. However, very few were aware that he had been unable to use his powers for some time afterward, aside from those directly involved at the time.

"I managed to heal, but then a situation arose where I had to use my powers while still not fully recovered. At that moment, I decided to use the object in my hand to amplify my abilities, but then..."

Just then, something unexpected happened.

A burst of red light emanated from the medium, connecting with the red power that resided in Yuder's right hand. The two forces, both sharing the trait of being pure energy from the Red Stone, resonated with each other. Subsequently, Yuder regained his lost abilities.

This was entirely different from when Alik had held the object imbued with the power of the Red Stone.

After this event, the object that Yuder had carried changed color, and the power within it disappeared.

"The red light that came out of your hand must have been the one that came out during the accident that occurred in the basement of the Cavalry headquarters at that time! Ah...! To think such a thing would happen again..."

Thais Yulman, who seemed as if he desperately wanted to know everything, finally managed to suppress his emotions before sharing his thoughts.

"Anyway, if what you say is true, then it's clear that you absorbed the medium's power. Astonishing, truly astonishing."

"Do you think so?"

"What else could it be?"

Thais Yulman's long beard quivered with excitement as he gave a decisive answer.

"This proves that my theories were not in vain! I'm dying to know if there are others who can also absorb the power stored in such mediums! How have your powers been since then? How about the potency and duration? Have you attempted absorption again?"

"As you know, the medium is confidential and dangerous. I haven't tried it again since then. I don't necessarily feel that my abilities have become stronger, but it certainly helped me regain the power I had lost."

"Hmm, I see. I do want to figure out why the absorption that was impossible for Alik worked for you. But comparing your abilities to Alik's now would be difficult due to the vast gap in power. Still, I've discovered through my research that by increasing the time spent using the medium for amplification, abilities can slightly evolve. That's a significant finding!"

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. I consider it akin to the theory that the more one is exposed to the Red Stone's power, the higher the chance of becoming an Awakener. It's a result not too different from what I had previously thought! If one could utilize the medium's power as freely as you did, then building upon that..."

As his mumbling grew faster, it seemed he was on the verge of being lost in his own thoughts once again. Whether Yuder responded or not, the old mage was too engrossed in his own theories to notice. Yuder quietly observed him.

'Now is the perfect time to bring up the real issue.'

With a casual expression, he posed a question.

"...Master Yulman, what do you think distinguishes those who awaken from those who are exposed to the power of the Red Stone but do not awaken?"

"Ah, that is indeed one of the subjects that fascinates me. As I just said, it's certain that prolonged and significant exposure to that power can change a human body. But as you've mentioned, it doesn't affect everyone."

Thais Yulman took Yuder's bait immediately. He seamlessly shifted the topic and continued speaking.

"You might know better than I do, but most of those who turned into Awakeners were neither too young nor too old; they were mostly young adults. This doesn't mean that the younger you are, the more likely you are to awaken. Furthermore, among mages, knights who can use aura, or priests, have there been any who have awakened? Of course, my own disciple is the first case."

Technically, Kishiar would have been the first, Yuder thought, but he simply nodded. In the future, the limitations would expand, and even young children or elders, as well as priests and knights, would become Awakeners. But for now, such cases were rare, which in itself was thought-provoking.

Thais Yulman seemed to think so as well.

"A priest from the South, who is acquainted with me, once said this, 'God gave each human a vessel of different sizes, allowing them to fill it with whatever they like, but they can't overflow it.' I've wondered if that might apply in this case as well."

It was a somewhat ambiguous statement. Thais Yulman looked at Yuder's puzzled eyes with satisfaction and explained with fervor.

"Look, children and elders either have vessels that haven't properly formed yet or have lived long enough that there's no room for anything new. Knights, priests, and mages are those who have already filled their vessels with the power they possess. There may be those whose vessels are less full, but such cases are not common, are they?"

"That seems plausible," Yuder conceded.

"As for me, I'm an obsolete mage with no potential for further development, but my disciple, Alik, was considered to have potential for growth if he trained diligently. In other words, his vessel was still empty, creating room for the transformation into an Awakener."

"Hmm..."

"Based on this hypothesis, while you all were in the West, I have been continuously researching the relationship between the medium and Alik, and under what circumstances and conditions an Awakener's abilities continue to change."

According to Thais, when Alik attempted to amplify his power using the medium, the increase in ability was not always at a consistent level. After more than a hundred attempts to understand this discrepancy, Alik told his Master he felt he was onto something.

"According to Alik, when he felt that the power was amplifying more than usual, it was during moments when he was desperate and yearning for self-improvement. The more stable his mental state, the less the power increased, and there was no further development of abilities."

After repeated experiments, Thais Yulman became convinced that it wasn't just a matter of perception. He formulated a new hypothesis.

"Consider this. Perhaps becoming an Awakener isn't just influenced by physical condition and innate talent, but also by some measure of one's inner self. Don't you think so?"

'Physical condition and the inner self... along with desires.'

The thought carried a certain gravitas. As Yuder pondered, Thais Yulman's eyes gleamed and he continued.

"It's fascinating, and not dissimilar to the requirements for becoming a mage. First, one has to be born with the ability to sense magic energy. Next comes having a robust heart and vessel that can accumulate and absorb that energy, and, of course, willpower."

Those talented in magic could gather energy much more effectively and use powerful spells much more quickly than other mages. But it wasn't as if the opposite meant no hope at all.

"Well, if you're not like me, who wisely chose to abandon wasting time early on and turned to scholarly pursuits, practicing in areas rich in magic energy will definitely boost your magic power. This has been empirically proven by mages over time."

"I see."

"Yes. So if you think of the power of the Red Stone as similar to magic energy, it only makes sense that Alik, who has trained relentlessly while surrounded by the densest energy, has grown stronger, doesn't it?"

Sensing that the old mage Thais Yulman was veering off track again, Yuder skillfully steered the conversation back.

"So, if I understand you correctly, you're suggesting that even someone who's not currently an Awakener could become one if exposed to a large amount of the Red Stone's power, or if they hold intense desires when they are most susceptible to change—that is, when their 'vessel' is empty?"

"Exactly so. But of course, that's not all there is to it. This is still an unproven hypothesis, after all. Think of it as adding just one more condition to the still-unknown factors that contribute to someone becoming an Awakener."

'Well, I myself became an Awakener for no apparent reason, so that can't be the only factor.'

Yuder considered several new ideas based on what Thais Yulman had said.

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The Red Stone transforms humans into Awakeners. Just as those who awakened at the beginning who have great 'innate physical talent' to the point where they can change nearly in an instant just by

accepting a small amount of power, on the opposite end, there are also those who have talent but undergo slower transformations.

The conditions that bridge the slight gap between the Awakener and the non-Awakener might even lie within the individuals themselves.

‘Now I understand where this intuition came from.’

Yuder recalled Hinn Eldore, who had awakened the ability to teleport alone to save the endangered Gakane, and Prince Ejain, who had suddenly awakened in the face of near-death threats.

One was already an Awakener, and the other had the potential to awaken in the future. What they had in common was that both had gained power through intense yearning while in perilous situations.

Hadn't it already been known that Awakeners could seize the opportunity to gain great power when emitting intense yearning? Perhaps it was no surprise that the same could be applied to the process of awakening itself.

‘This is definitely worth testing.’

Though it was hard to trust him completely as a human being, Thais Yulman was indeed an extraordinary mage in this area. Yuder was again struck by how fearlessly and unhesitatingly he delved into the research of previously unseen phenomena, perhaps because he had long studied magic power, something similar yet different.

Yuder found it increasingly fortunate that Thais Yulman had come under his and the Cavalry, binding himself with an oath, rather than staying in the Pearl Tower.

"Master! Master Mikalin has regained consciousness!"

Not long after, Alik, who had been taking care of Mikalin, called out to them. Mikalin was clutching his swollen head and moaning when he abruptly shouted upon seeing Thais.

"Thais Yulman! You...! When you can't match me with magic, you dare to trip me...! Where did you learn such disgraceful, un-magelike behavior?"

"Hmm, for someone who left the Pearl Tower, you have no decency, calling the name of a senior like me so carelessly and making up false allegations. Who do you think went through all the trouble of bringing you, who was lying down so disgracefully, all the way here? Aren't you ashamed before my younger disciple and outsiders?"

"Quiet! Where the hell is this place? If you've kidnapped me to make me an experiment, throw me out right now!"

"My, you really don't trust anyone, do you? I thought living in the West might have improved you, but you're the same as ever."

Thais Yulman calmly stroked his beard and tilted his head. To any casual observer, he appeared to be an innocent, kindly old man, but none in that room were fooled by his demeanor.

While Alik, who knew his Master's character well, sighed and thought, 'Typical of my Master...', Yuder approached the fuming Mikalin and greeted him.

"Hello, Mikalin."

"Why are you here, Yuder...!"

Mikalin immediately recognized Yuder.

"This is where the Cavalry headquarters is located. Are you feeling alright? I heard you met with each other on your way here..."

"Wait, is this really the Cavalry? Not that mad old man's laboratory?"

While the location indeed doubled as Thais Yulman's research lab, the fact that he was conducting research here was not something to be disclosed in detail.

"Yes, this is the Cavalry. May I ask what brings you here?"

"Ah, well... I had just finished my court appearances and was on my way to meet His Grace, the Duke of Peletta, and you. However, I only knew that the Cavalry was located within the Imperial Knights' territory. Navigating was not easy. Eventually, I encountered that old man, but... let's not go into further details, it gives me a headache."

Mikalin muttered curses under his breath as he staggered to his feet.

"If I'm in the right place, let's get out of here. I don't want to spend another second in the same space with that guy."

"Mikalin, if you're leaving, I have one thing to say. Clean up your beard and hair a bit. What's the state of your appearance? It's downright slovenly."

"Why you—judging me as if I'm not even a mage!"

"Let's go."

Yuder led Mikalin out of the building. The moment Thais Yulman disappeared from sight, Mikalin quickly reverted to his usual demeanor that Yuder was familiar with. Grumbling but standing upright, the elderly mage, who led the Western Mage Union, assumed a solemn posture and expressed his gratitude to Yuder.

"Thank you. Because of you, I was saved from further embarrassment."

Perhaps due to their frequent interactions in the West and the fact that Yuder had helped him escape from Thais Yulman, Mikalin's tone had become considerably friendlier.

"You're welcome."

"Ah, I heard you've been granted the title of Baron. Our Mage Union has sent a small gift to congratulate you, although it probably hasn't arrived yet. Shall I call you 'Baron' from now on?"

Having been asked a similar question multiple times already today, Yuder concealed a sigh and nodded. After briefly conveying that it was okay to call him the same as in the past, he received some well-intended advice that being too modest was also not good.

"Speaking of which, ever since I brought that letter, I've sensed that you and the Cavalry share a deep bond. Makes sense. To you, the power of an Awakener is more appealing than an untapped gold mine."

Mikalin mumbled as if he understood even without being told. He refrained from asking any more about why Thais Yulman was here, instead cursing for a while, but closed his mouth when the main building of the Cavalry appeared. It was far more elaborate than he had expected.

Though not ostentatious, the façade was as impressive as any space designed for knights or mages, captivating one's eyes instantly. The sounds of Cavalry members training and periodic explosive noises in the distance made the old mage tense, but Yuder didn't even blink. He seemed quite accustomed to such noise and pressure.

'So this is the Cavalry... truly the focal point of the new power cultivated by the Emperor and the Duke of Peletta.'

Where he once would have considered it an inconsequential place filled with commoners, the elder mage, now fully aware of the Cavalry's accomplishments in the West, found nothing mundane about it.

"If you're not feeling well, I can arrange for you to meet our priest before taking you to the Commander's office. What would you like to do?"

"Ah, if it's the priest of the Cavalry, would that be the person I know? If so, I'd prefer to meet him after seeing the Duke."

"Understood. Then let's..."

Upon entering the building, Mikalin's amazement did not cease.

'Is that a glowstone? To embed such valuable stones in every corridor. Even our Western Mage Union's headquarters doesn't have these...'

"Be careful. There's a child ahead."

"A child? Where?"

Mikalin, who had been looking around, turned his head at the odd remark. He blinked in surprise upon discovering a tiny kitten sprawled on the railing of the staircase he was about to touch.

'Did he just call this kitten a child?'

The kitten, wearing a red silk ribbon around its neck, yawned lazily as soon as it made eye contact with Mikalin. Its swaying tail wrapped around Yuder's wrist before falling back down. Yuder glanced down indifferently at the kitten and offered a short greeting.

"Ah, hello."

There was something different about the greeting, something that didn't quite fit with a mere acknowledgement of the animal's cuteness. But Mikalin couldn't put his finger on what exactly it was. He alternated his gaze between the kitten and Yuder, his mouth closed so tightly that wrinkles formed on his chin.

'Could it be... Even if there are Awakeners with all kinds of bizarre abilities, could someone actually turn into an animal? And even if they could, wouldn't they be doing something rather than lazing around like this?'

Confused, they continued to climb the stairs, finally reaching the entrance to the top-floor office.

"Commander, it's Yuder Aile. We have a guest."

Knocking on the door, Yuder Aile announced their business and stepped inside. Mikalin finally came face to face with the reason he had come here—Duke Peletta.

"Greetings, Your Grace, Duke Peletta."

"It's been a while, Mikalin. I thought you'd be busy enjoying the trial of Duke Tain in the capital. Have you finished all your affairs there?"

The young Duke was still breathtakingly handsome. However, knowing what kind of terrifying things lay beneath that beauty, Mikalin braced himself, refusing to be lulled by Peletta's casual smile.

He had not forgotten the days when Duke Peletta, with that very face, had relentlessly pressured him. Whether it was promising eternal support for the Union and their research, only to cunningly lock the mouths of Mikalin and his fellow mages with a vow, or manipulating magic power even as an Awakener—Mikalin had not forgotten any of it.

But despite all that, he bore no animosity, and even held a certain degree of admiration for the Duke, given their different life experiences and viewpoints. The abilities of Duke Peletta Kishiar La Orr were indeed remarkable.

"Yes, most of my tasks in the capital are done. Baron Wilhelm, who was as much an enemy to our Union as anyone could be, was stripped of his title and had his assets confiscated before being exiled to a southern island. As for Duke Tain, a verdict has not been reached, but it seems likely he'll be exiled as well."

"I see."

Duke Peletta smiled as if he already knew all of this.

"Yes, so before I left the capital, I thought I'd pay you a visit and bring some news."

"Any interesting news?"

"Yes, the first thing I'd like to mention is... The reaction to the recently released 'Yuder No. 1' has been quite heated."

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Yuder No. 1. It was the name of a dispelling magic created to neutralize the toxic traces of the colossal monster that had unnaturally covered Yuder's body. Thanks to this magic spell, laboriously crafted by the mages of the Western Mage Union and Kishiar working together, Yuder was able to regain his lost vision and recover his skin, which had been marred with dark stains.

Later on, Micalin decided to name the completed new magic spell "Yuder No. 1," following academic protocol that new magic spells should be formally submitted. It was on this occasion, during his visit to the capital, that he finally announced it.

"Frankly, the reaction was expected. Though it's a large-scale magic spell that normally wouldn't even be possible to cast without the immense magic energy embedded in the Great Sarain Forest, the fact that it succeeded in neutralizing the monster's influence alone marks a milestone in the history of magic," Micalin said, his face flush with pride. "You wouldn't believe how much interest the foreign mages, who were here for an exchange, have shown."

Micalin's gaze clouded over, his proud face suddenly turning somber. "However, aside from my pride as a mage... I do have some reservations."

"Why?"

"It hasn't been easy to divert all attention to our Union, keeping anonymous the fact that your Grace led the completion of the magic spell. There are too many people curious about the circumstances at the time. Someone might guess the truth eventually."

Micalin sighed deeply, and for a moment, Yuder's gaze shifted to Kishiar before returning.

'So they decided to officially hide Kishiar's involvement in the announcement about the creation of the magic spell... I hadn't realized, but it makes sense.'

Indeed, while Kishiar had declared his ambition to reveal himself as the rightful owner of the Divine Sword, magic was a separate matter. Yuder could guess multiple reasons why he would choose to hide it.

However, knowing this didn't lift Yuder's spirits. After all, he knew that Kishiar's power had been the most significant influence in the creation and completion of the magic spell.

"Isn't that something we've already anticipated? Handle it so my name doesn't come out. I trust you have the skill to manage that," Kishiar said.

"Of course, I understand... Alright," Micalin agreed, bowing his head. Then he turned his gaze back to Yuder. "Ah, and due to the magic spell bearing your name, interest in you Baron Aile, and the Cavalry has significantly increased among the mages. Many were especially astonished that an Awakener could also rely on magic for healing. You might soon receive contact from both the Pearl Tower and the Court Mage Office."

"Hmm. The Pearl Tower and the Court Mage Office, you say?"

While Kishiar mumbled with what seemed like genuine interest, Yuder couldn't care less. Whether the mages took interest in him or not was of no importance to him.

"Also, one more piece of news... it seems that the expansion of the Great Sarain Forest has finally stopped for sure."

According to Micalin, nearly half of the vast amounts of pure magic energy that had begun to flow out of the suspected magic spring ruins had now been expelled. As a result, the forest, which had been expanding for a long time, had finally halted its growth, and logging was currently underway at its fringes.

"Now, there are no longer any abnormal plant growths in that place. Animals have begun to enter the forest, and birds have made their nests. The yearly occurrences of monsters within the forest have also drastically decreased, making it almost peaceful now. And yet..."

Micalin, who had been speaking with a faint smile, suddenly grew serious again.

"We've also confirmed that the flow of dense magic energy originating from the forest is now spreading throughout the entire western region."

Yuder was certain that this was probably the most crucial part of what Micalin had come to tell Kishiar today.

"That's obviously not the end of it."

"Indeed. Our Union believes that if left unchecked, this magic energy could eventually envelop the entire world. It's that pure of an energy. While it may not be the complete solution to the waning of magic power, this phenomenon is sure to astonish the whole world."

"Then we should make another announcement regarding this matter."

Kishiar murmured, his face calm.

"Yes. Thanks to the excellent cooperation from Baron Koelt, who has become a new pillar of Tainu, we're tracking the spread and concentration of this magic energy flow smoothly. I'll send another report soon, alongside the progress of Yuder No. 2's research."

"Understood. If you're short on manpower, let me know."

A smile crossed Micalin's sharp, raptor-like face. He seemed satisfied that he had successfully finished reporting and secured ongoing sponsorship.

And then Yuder took the opportunity to ask a question as the conversation concluded.

"But what is this Yuder No. 2 you mentioned? I've never heard of it before."

"Hm? You didn't know? One of the research projects we're working on is based on Yuder No. 1. It aims to develop a simpler magic spell to help those who have been poisoned by monsters."

Micalin cheerfully responded, as if asking how Yuder could not have known.

"While research on monsters and magic is important, it seemed too wasteful to use Yuder No. 1 just once and dispose of it. Fortunately, modifying it is much easier than developing a new magic spell, so the project is progressing swiftly."

The other mages also welcomed the development of Yuder No. 2, a fact Micalin was pleased to share. He looked decades younger than when Yuder first met him. Just from his expression, one could tell how much he was enjoying life these days. Yuder simply nodded, having nothing more to say.

After all, there was no reason to be upset when the research was going well and troublesome individuals like Baron Willhem were facing consequences.

After exchanging a few more opinions, Yuder escorted Micalin to the first floor medical unit. Priestess Lusan, who had been in the middle of prayers, was startled by the unexpected visitor but soon healed Micalin's head bump with divine power.

"It was quite a significant bump. While it has healed, I would recommend not lying down on that side for a few days."

"That darn old man... Ah, thank you, anyway."

Micalin barely maintained his social decorum, grinding his teeth as he bowed his head.

"Micalin, can you find your way back without an escort?"

"If you could call a carriage for me, that would be better. The very thought of walking back to my lodging is daunting... In any case, thank you for guiding this old body of mine. I've certainly been a handful, despite the hospitality."

Micalin bowed, maintaining his dignity, and Yuder felt a sense of accomplishment in successfully aiding the conversation between Micalin and Kishiar.

"Before anything else, I'm simply the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. I only did what I ought to have done, so please think nothing of it."

"...You really haven't changed."

Micalin let out a long sigh, his eyes wrinkling at the corners.

"Speaking of Yuder No. 1 and 2 from earlier... To tell you the truth, one reason I wanted to name the spell after you was to encourage mages to be less antagonistic toward Awakeners, so they wouldn't live to regret it, like I have."

"...Is that so?"

Caught off guard by the unexpected statement, Yuder slowly blinked his eyes and inquired further.

"Yes. You might not understand from your perspective, but I thought it would be helpful in some way. Of course, I considered the possibility that you might decline... but since you've given your consent, I intend to use it well. I would be pleased if it proves useful someday."

Having said this, Micalin left the Cavalry. Yuder returned to the Commander's office where Kishiar was and relayed Micalin's words, asking if he had any idea what they meant.

"I don't understand how naming a spell after me would help to lessen mages' hostility toward Awakeners. Do you have any idea, Commander?"

"To understand that, you'd have to delve into why mages dislike Awakeners in the first place."

Within the complex emotions of the mages who despised Awakeners, jealousy had found a place. In a time when even summoning a simple flame had become rare due to years of diligent study and cultivation, the news of Awakeners wielding potent natural powers with ease was more than enough to provoke shock and hatred.

"Someone like you, an Awakener who uses a power similar to magic, recovering from injuries by relying on magic rather than the power of an Awakener or a priest, would be a very significant event for them. Names can't be used without the consent of the person involved, so that could strengthen their change in perception even more."

Could mages really change their ways just because of something like that? It was still hard to comprehend even after the explanation. Nevertheless, Yuder responded that he understood. After all, if naming the spell Yuder No. 1 could alleviate mages' irrational apprehension of Awakeners and make them more cooperative, sacrificing a name was a small price to pay.

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"Come to think of it, I heard you visited the mage's research lab today. Did you bring Micalin back from there?"

Sensing that Yuder had entirely put aside his thoughts about mage, Kishiar smoothly changed the subject.

"Yes."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I've heard something from Master Yulman that could be of assistance in our current situation. Actually, I was planning on reporting it to you first..."

"Intriguing. Let's hear it then."

Kishiar set down the documents he had been holding. The man, now wearing a different smile than when he had faced Micalin, rested his chin on his hands and looked at Yuder with the utmost attention. If anyone had witnessed the sudden change in his demeanor, they would have been shocked. But Yuder, unbothered, said what he had to say.

Master Thais Yulman had concluded through relentless research, using his apprentice Alik's power and medium, that the 'inner self' of Awakeners—or those with the potential to awaken—could influence the acquisition of power.

If that were true, then they could find answers to both why the Emperor had yet to awaken despite already harboring the Red Stone power within him, and how they could facilitate his awakening.

After explicitly explaining all these points, Yuder finally added his own thoughts.

"Based on my experiences, I already knew that Awakeners experience rapid power growth when they possess intense desires. However, there's no guarantee that things will go as one wishes, so it's not entirely a good thing..."

"So, what you're saying is that if already Awakeners can gain power through this method, then those who haven't awakened but have the qualities and conditions may also expedite their awakening for the same reasons."

"Yes, exactly."

"Will and desire, huh..."

Kishiar muttered quietly, his gaze drifting off as if lost in thought.

"Indeed, His Majesty never seemed to hold any expectations of awakening in a way similar to me."

"..."

Emperor Keilusa had personally ordered the retrieval of the Red Stone. He had always kept the medium in his chamber and never skimped on supporting the related research.

However, that didn't necessarily mean the Emperor genuinely wished to awaken.

Yuder had sensed it before—peering into the Emperor's interior.

The Emperor had no hope or expectations for the future, as he felt his imminent demise was inevitable. Though he must have wanted to live, like any other human, he preferred reducing the current uncertainties rather than risking an uncertain future.

His objectivity even when judging himself, the cold rationality that refused to display mercy beyond reason.

His resolve to burn through the end of his life as efficiently as possible while preparing for what comes next.

These were all valuable traits, but they were precisely what prevented the Emperor from exhibiting any will or desire beyond what was necessary, leading to the current state of affairs.

"But having heard what you've said now, it gives me a new line of thought that I hadn't considered before."

"And what would that be?"

"According to what you've said, awakening is ultimately the Red Stone's power settling within a human body, undergoing transformations according to the individual's desires. In that case, couldn't the type of power bestowed upon the Awakeners also be influenced to some extent by their aptitude and desires? Whether the individual is aware of it or not."

Yuder paused to ponder, then slowly nodded his head. Kishiar continued to speak.

"You may already know this, but when I first awakened, I yearned to live more desperately than anyone else. If the power granted to me by my awakening is what has made me this way, then I think I understand why the energy within me takes the form of protecting its vessel, unlike others."

Yuder's gaze involuntarily dropped to Kishiar's abdomen. A sudden realization about an aspect he had not previously considered sent chills down his spine.

"...Ah, I see."

The power of Kishiar La Orr is to either attract or repel.

Until recently, it had been believed that this power could only be applied to what one could see or touch. It was understandable to think that way since Kishiar primarily used it in combat to swiftly and efficiently dispose of his enemies. Even Kishiar himself hadn't considered there might be more to it.

However, they had just recently realized that this wasn't the case.

If this power could apply to the intangible, metaphysical 'force' itself, then it stood to reason that the power within Kishiar could likewise be mobilized in that way.

"I didn't realize it until now because I've been like this since my awakening... but perhaps the Awakening power that was protecting my vessel was something I was 'pulling in' myself."

Perhaps, ever since his awakening until now, he had been doing so subconsciously.

"Of course, this power is not omnipotent. If the source of the power sustains damage that cannot be healed, or if the gathered vessel is struck once more, I can't guarantee what will happen next. However, knowing this allows us to prepare, which is entirely different from living in ignorance."

Kishiar might not have known, but Yuder's heart began to pound painfully at those words.

Because he knew that in a previous life, Kishiar had indeed twice sustained damage to his vessel, ultimately hurtling toward a swift death.

"And perhaps the reason you thought His Majesty's condition was suddenly deteriorating may have been due to the Red Stone energy believed to be present in his body?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. If we're right, His Majesty's current situation could be due to a continually accumulating new energy in his body while the vessel remains unstable. Since His Majesty hasn't awakened, that power neither moves nor gathers according to his will, but disperses. If that power continues to accumulate..."

They had already seen how unchanneled power, dispersed throughout the body, could bring unbearable agony.

And a bitter, cold smile surfaced on Kishiar's face, who probably knew more about that pain than anyone else.

"...However, there are two positives. One, His Majesty has opened up to us, so our efforts should be easier than before. And two—"

The possibility that even if Emperor Keilusa did not awaken, Yuder and Kishiar combined might still be able to gather that Red Stone power and protect the Emperor's vessel.

Gazing into the eyes of the man who had mentioned these two advantages, Yuder nodded.

"Yes, it's good to know we have two things working in our favor. We will definitely succeed."

At that, Kishiar blinked for a moment before melting into a warm smile.

"It's strange. I didn't say this because I wanted to hear such assurances, but your words always make me realize just how much confidence I've needed."

'I already know why. It's because many people wanted Kishiar La Orr to live that way, and he acted accordingly.'

Even after making judicious and wise decisions, Kishiar wasn't yet accustomed to trusting his own conclusions. That fact was subtly conveyed through his words.

Understanding someone brought a type of pain Yuder had never known before. But if it meant he could keep seeing the smile before him, perhaps that was alright. Yuder blankly gazed at the man's smiling face before lowering his eyes.

"...If we're both heading down an unfamiliar path, then walking one where we can see even a little is far easier than walking one where we can't see anything at all. From my perspective, it's well worth trying," Yuder stated.

"Well worth trying," Kishiar repeated after him.

"Yes. A person who would leap in without hesitation at the slightest possibility. That's my assistant for you."

"..."

"In that case, I'll also consider it worth trying. Until I see His Majesty again, I'll have to continue practicing how to control this power."

"Can you really master it through practice?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

With a smiling face, the man effortlessly clenched and unclenched his hand. A small orb of condensed energy appeared over his palm.

The swirling ball of energy closely resembled what Kishiar had unleashed to deal with the assassins who had suddenly appeared during the Harvest Festival.

However, unlike before, this newly manifested orb of energy was almost entirely red, marking the difference from the previous instance.

"Is that... could it be the power of the Awakener?"

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"Is that... the power of the Awakener?"

"More precisely, it's an object infused with the power of the Awakener and Aura. Aura is best suited for manifesting it in this form."

According to him, it was a physical manifestation of compressed power. It seemed that Kishiar could mix all the types of power he possessed. The man explained every detail, even those he had kept secret during the procession.

"You've seen something similar before, haven't you? Last time, I combined it with air and used a 'pushing' force, making it quick to use. However, mixing two or more requires a considerable amount of energy just to create."

His words sounded simple, but the reality was anything but. Though he spoke of an extraordinary feat that no one else had accomplished, Kishiar remained unfazed.

"No need to be so surprised. It appears simple, but it drains a lot of energy. In practice, I only use it after balancing the internal forces and practicing power regulation."

"What do you mean by balancing internal forces?"

"It means maintaining a balance among the various powers I possess, so that one doesn't dominate or become too weak. After using a lot of magic, it's good to draw out an equal amount of other powers. The same applies in reverse."

Kishiar clenched and unclenched his fist again. The red orb disappeared, and this time a new orb appeared, shimmering in shades of gold and blue. In this manner, he continued to produce orbs of different colors and auras, each with a distinct oppressive force, only for them to vanish moments later.

He stopped only when he had summoned the red orb again, identical to the one he had first brought forth.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the small orb contained the fruits of the long, agonizing journey he had survived.

And now, he was prepared to pour that power into saving his own flesh and blood.

Their eyes met in quiet understanding. No words were exchanged, yet Yuder felt an emotion more profound than words could express.

It was a surge of willpower, more intense than ever before.

...

"Nahan, Nahan is back!"

A loud cry echoed unexpectedly through the hidden village of the Star of Nagran, in the harsh and desolate southern desert.

The faces of the surprised villagers converged on the man who had just passed through the entrance.

His face was unmistakable, even from a distance. One side was marred by a vivid burn scar, while the other was smooth and cold. His clothing couldn't conceal the visible scars that covered his body. His gaze was so chilling that no one dared approach him.

Frozen, not knowing how to react, the villagers watched as Nahan looked around and finally broke into a smile.

"Why the long faces? Did you all think I was dead?"

It was only then that everyone snapped out of their stupor. Those who usually followed Nahan warmly started to choke up, calling his name, while those who had been distant exchanged surprised and awkward glances.

The chaos settled down only when Nahan and the village leaders found themselves face to face in a room designated for meetings.

"How did you survive, Nahan? We thought you and all the other brothers and sisters were captured by the Cavalry and killed without a chance."

"Unfortunately, I didn't die. Were there no others among my brothers and sisters who made it back?"

"No, you're the only one. Weren't you there? How could you not know?"

"We were all scattered at the time. Barely making it back alive was a feat in itself for me."

As Nahan responded calmly, someone in the room shot up, his face twisted with rage, and shouted while pointing a finger.

"What's there to be so proud of? You alone made it back alive? You can't even account for the lives of those who trusted you enough to go with you. How does that make sense?"

"Calm down, Maek."

"Calm down? Is this a situation to calm down? Our western stronghold was utterly destroyed because of him! We lost people who were doing just fine until they decided to follow him. And all he has to say is that he didn't know?"

The particularly enraged individual had left the western stronghold for the south after it had fallen. As he trembled with fury, huge horns and spikes emerged from his body. Those sitting next to Nahan stood up to block him.

"Isn't it a relief that at least one person made it back alive? What more do you want from Nahan, who has been more devoted to our cause than anyone else? Do you expect him to take responsibility and die?"

"This is absurd. Did Nahan force anyone to go with him? He acted to aid Sister Ershi. Everyone decided and resolved themselves to go. The misfortune that happened there is the fault of the Cavalry, not Brother Nahan!"

At this point, those who followed the sage stood up in opposition.

"You always say that Nahan is faultless. Can you claim that he bears no responsibility in all of this?"

"Why does that guy always have to be the one to act? We just want to live peacefully!"

"No one told you not to live peacefully. Nahan and the rest of us are merely acting on behalf of our suffering brothers and sisters who couldn't attain that peace!"

In the midst of the escalating shouting match, some who had no particular allegiance looked around nervously, caught in the maelstrom of raw emotions.

In the end, the meeting surrounding Nahan disintegrated without achieving anything substantive. No one was able to engage in meaningful discussion. Surrounded by those loyal to him, Nahan stepped out, passing through the icy stares.

"Nahan, are you alright? The atmosphere was terrible due to the tense nerves of the brothers and sisters from the western stronghold. Don't take their harsh words to heart."

"Yes, those people are just a minority. How are your injuries? They look like they haven't been treated properly... Can someone get some medicine?"

"...I'm fine. There's no need."

For the first time, Nahan's voice flowed from his lips that had been silent. He spoke as he looked at the faces of those he had personally rescued or helped.

"More importantly, I'm curious why the Sage isn't here."

"Ah, the Sage is... not here at the moment. You see..."

Noticing Nahan's sharp gaze, the crowd hesitated before answering.

"To resolve this matter and protect the village, he went to the capital... with a few people..."

"...The capital?"

Nahan's eye twitched. Sensing that subtle reaction, those around him reluctantly replied.

"Ah, yes. I don't know the details."

"If the sage himself has gone to the capital, it's not a trivial matter. Do any of you brothers know more?"

"Shayman, you were at the meeting, weren't you?"

"Well..."

The one called Shayman turned his eyes away, his face uneasy. The look in his eyes indicated he knew that the information he possessed was extremely dangerous.

A moment later, he closed his eyes tightly and muttered, "Someone very special is in the center of the capital. Someone related to the people who have been helping us for a long time..."

Some did not yet grasp what that meant, but others knew what Nahan disliked as much as he despised the non-Awakeners. Amidst the sound of collective swallowing, Nahan maintained his silence for a while.

"..."

Even his comrades couldn't guess what he was thinking. All the while, other Awakeners passed by them, giving them cold and suspicious glances as if they were looking at foreigners.

Finally, Nahan spoke again.

"How long has it been since the sage left the village?"

"It's been quite some time. He left almost immediately after we heard the news that you might have all been captured or killed in the west."

"I see."

His voice was so soft and soothing it sent shivers down one's spine. Even those who followed Nahan momentarily felt a chill. They hastily tried to comfort him.

"Look, Nahan. We knew you might be concerned about this... But the sage had no choice. We thought all of you had died... He thought this was the best option."

"Right. Let's complete the treatment first, then contact the sage to confirm things. We will assist you."

"If only Hosanna was here, it would've been easier to go there right away..."

The one who carelessly mentioned Hosanna's name snapped his mouth shut as looks of reproach poured in from others.

And Nahan, surprisingly, smiled behind a hidden face.

"Nahan...?"

"Why, what is it?"

"Was it really an unavoidable situation?"

"What?"

"No, I don't think so."

His soft voice gradually lost its warmth.

"My head aches. Yes... we need to confirm this."

...

The night fell over the Sun Palace, as if anticipating the events to come. It was eerily quiet.

Yuder stepped down from the carriage and looked up at the grand building.

Finally, tonight, the fate of Emperor Keilusa would be decided.

Turning

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"Please come this way, I will guide you."

Yuder turned his gaze toward the chief attendant he had met once again. The weight reflected in his expression was entirely different than before. The old man, although aged, maintained an upright posture. He bowed courteously and briefly scanned the faces of the two people who had alighted from the carriage behind Yuder.

The order to bring suitable personnel from the Cavalry for palace security had come just last night. There was a clear reason for this unexpected command.

The Emperor's side had determined that details of the recent events occurring within the Sun Palace had likely leaked to the outside world. Despite his caution, Yuder felt anew how difficult it was to move securely. He discussed this with Kishiar and they decided to add two more allies to their circle.

'Given the situation, it's natural to include Kanna who can read information. Gakane can perfectly balance both combat and tracking while effectively protecting Kanna, so he should also be included.'

Kanna's ability was indispensable, particularly in a situation like this. However, she had the drawback of being weak in combat and unable to move quickly. Gakane's shadow clone, which had an advantage in the darkness of night, compensated for these weaknesses, enabling them to move optimally under any circumstances.

Both were cautious by nature and also among Yuder's closest comrades. He had decided that today, when he needed to bring the smallest group possible, there were no better candidates.

Subsequently, Kishiar headed for the palace alone, while Yuder, under the guise of a secret mission to assist in palace security, called for Kanna and Gakane. They rode the carriage at a later hour, taking extra precautions to prevent any information leaks.

As Yuder had anticipated, both refrained from asking questions beyond what was to happen here and silently followed him. Their eyes blinked in tense alertness, clearly sensing that the atmosphere in the palace was unusual, but they weren't so unnerved as to be unable to carry out their mission.

'They've certainly become much calmer with experience.'

Both had increased remarkably in composure and cool-headedness since their entrance tests, which proved their training and missions had not been in vain.

Their path was quieter than ever before, yet Yuder keenly sensed that the number of hidden guards throughout the palace had multiplied several times.

'Kanna and Gakane might not sense this yet, but give them a few years and they will be fully capable of it.'

Not even considering the possibility they couldn't, he thought that if they couldn't, then he would simply train them until they could.

In this state, pondering future training plans, they walked for some time until the chief attendant stopped and turned around.

"Both of you are responsible for monitoring all who pass from here. No visitor can go the right way without passing this point. Subdue them immediately if you find anyone suspicious. Now, Baron Aile, this way please."

Yuder slightly turned his head toward Kanna and Gakane. With tense faces, they cautiously nodded their acknowledgment.

"You both have different duties from us, right? Do well, Yuder."

"Nothing seems odd here so far. If anything does, I'll act according to what I've been told. Then Yuder can complete the mission, and we can catch up later."

"...Alright."

The place Yuder headed to after distancing from the two was Emperor Keilusa's office—a place he had visited for the third time. Yuder looked up at the towering figure waiting before the closed office doors.

Kishiar, who had reached the Sun Palace ahead of Yuder, squinted his eyes and smiled at him.

"You timed it well. I've been waiting."

"Why are you waiting out here instead of inside?"

"It's because of the conditions we conveyed in advance. His Majesty agreed, but I figured seeing my face might disturb his peace even before we begin the treatment. So, I thought it best to wait out here."

"Hmm..."

Conditions. Yuder, already aware of what they were, glanced at the door and nodded his understanding.

The chief attendant who had guided Yuder thus far sighed softly, looking at the effervescent Kishiar.

"...You may not know how much His Majesty has been worrying about these conditions."

"I heard you went through great lengths to persuade him. Thank you, Yuliver."

Kishiar responded in a light tone, graced by a smile.

"If everything concludes successfully, you'll find that your efforts were not in vain. I promise."

"You really never change."

"Never change? Do you know how much I've changed? Saying that will make my assistant feel slighted."

"..."

Unaware of what could have slighted him, Yuder maintained a reserved silence. Fortunately, the chief attendant did not extend the conversation further and opened the door.

Within the office, now familiar on his third visit, were Emperor Keilusa and one other person already seated.

"You've finally arrived."

A person not initially scheduled to be there that day, the Empress, greeted them with a faint smile because of Kishiar's request.

Empress Rosa Faria La Orr. She was the last 'condition' that Kishiar and Yuder had prepared.

Yuder remembered the serious conversation he had with Kishiar the day after concluding that the subject's will and wishes could affect the Awakening conditions.

"I've thought about it. No matter how well we prepare, the extent to which we can elevate His Majesty's wishes has its limits."

"If we want more than what we have now, that's true."

"But isn't the point to offer something that will make His Majesty desperately want to live through the power of Awakening?"

"Is there another way?"

"We should call for the Empress."

"Excuse me?"

"Instead of living in the same palace but never seeing each other, they should be together from the start."

That would certainly sway the Emperor's emotions significantly in one direction or another. But whether the Emperor's feelings would align with their hopes upon seeing the Empress was uncertain. To that concern, Kishiar only offered a secretive smile.

"I thought about that all night. There is a way."

What that 'way' was, Yuder only understood upon seeing the Empress.

Dressed in soft-colored attire, the Empress had let her hair down, not appearing as the dignified noblewoman she usually was, but rather like an untainted, refreshing young lady.

"No, she doesn't just look like a young lady... She is actually wearing the kind of dress that unmarried noble young women wear."

The Empress, who had undergone a complete transformation, seemed slightly uncomfortable in her new attire, yet she did not lose her poise. Her eyes were filled with unwavering hope, as if she could achieve anything for the success of the day ahead.

Beside her, Emperor Keilusa quietly observed her without uttering a word.

Even as Kishiar and Yuder entered the scene, the Emperor barely shifted his gaze. His eyes seemed half-entranced by something, while the other half were sunk in complex emotions.

"Do you think this attire suits what the Duke conveyed? I don't know why, but he insisted my presence here would contribute to today's event," the Empress immediately inquired upon receiving the greeting, to which Kishiar confidently nodded.

"Yes, it's perfect. Anyone who lays eyes on Your Majesty today will understand what the beauty of dawn that dispels darkness is."

"Duke, I didn't invite you here just to hear such words," the Emperor finally turned his head and curtly cut off his brother.

"To be honest, I have no clue how this situation contributes to healing. It would be difficult to accept any further action from the Empress."

"Please set aside such concerns. Her Majesty only needs to observe the situation freely by our side as things progress."

"What exactly..."

The Emperor, seemingly puzzled, sighed and rubbed his eyes. A long sigh flowed through his parched lips.

"Is there anything else needed or prepared?"

"No, everything is ready."

"Good. Then let us begin without delay."

The Emperor rose from his seat with composure. The atmosphere, which had been somewhat relaxed, instantly became ordered, and everyone moved smoothly. The Emperor lay down on the meticulously arranged bed prepared for today, and Yuder stood with Kishiar at opposite sides of the bed. Near the head of the bed was a servant with a bowl of hot steaming water and a wet towel, and a little further away stood the Empress, watching over all of it alone.

A seemingly insignificant bedroom for an operation intended to save the life of the Emperor who ruled the empire. Only four people were present for the Emperor.

However, Yuder felt no sense of inadequacy.

Lifting his gaze and taking a deep breath, he met the swirling crimson eyes also looking at him.

Beneath that seemingly carefree smile, only Yuder could feel the deep, age-old agonies that rippled like an endless sea.

'...I will succeed.'

Strengthening his resolve, Yuder finally removed his gloves with force.

"Let us begin."

Underneath his pale hand, where the crimson veins writhed as if alive, the wind began to blow.

Turning

Chapter 549

The atmosphere in the Sun Palace had been anything but normal lately.

It was not long ago that such whispers reached the ears of Duke Diarca.

Initially, the Duke thought these rumblings to be an auspicious sign he had long awaited. The Emperor, who had secluded himself due to illness and didn't wish to reveal his deteriorating condition to anyone, was perhaps nearing his end. Though the Crown Prince's condition was not exactly promising, Duke Diarca felt that regardless, the course of the world would not deviate from the plans set forth by his house. It was a rational assessment, based on a long-standing observation of the palace's various eyes and ears.

However, his hopes were shattered when the Cavalry returned from the west and the Emperor emerged from his seclusion for the first time in years.

To the astonishment of the unwitting commoners, the Emperor looked reasonably well as he openly praised the returning Cavalry. Even more surprising, he brazenly wielded his authority, appearing with an entourage that included the Grand General and the Head of the Court Mages. Watching the Emperor and Empress return, after publicly lauding the Cavalry and elevating his brother's reputation, Duke Diarca couldn't muster even a sarcastic laugh.

True, the Duke had suspected he was placing false hopes on his brother and the Cavalry since its inception. Thus, he could come to terms with the ostentatious display. But only once.

The recent monster anomalies in the West have been exceptional incidents. It was the first time something like that had happened, and it was the first time that Duke Tain, who was so crazy about gambling that he could not afford to solve the problem himself, had brought them in. It was mere luck, not something to expect a second time around, that the Cavalry had identified and resolved the issue.

What difference did luck-made outcomes have from meaningless victories in gambling? Real victories were reserved for those who had patiently bided their time and prepared. They were not something that could be had by fools who stumbled into power by luck.

Yet, it seemed the Cavalry and Duke Peletta himself didn't share this viewpoint. At the gauche party reeking of vulgarity, they did not hesitate to provoke Duke Diarca.

After that damned party, Duke Diarca lost several confidants, including the always-obedient Baron Durmand. He even went to the extent of making sweeping changes among his inner circle, to deter any erroneous thinking about the Diarca family. Although it was something he was planning to do sooner or later, the fact that he was forced into it made it particularly disagreeable.

Still, amidst his frustration and anger, the Duke did what needed to be done based on his previous experiences. He maximally utilized the lessons learned from the party. Knowing that the awakened commoners were fiercely loyal to those who recognized their value, he decided to replace the worthless men around him with Awakeners he'd never paid attention to before. As a first step, he finally sent reliable eyes and ears into the Cavalry, which he had ignored until now.

However, this motley crew, not even a year old, gave not an iota of attention to the people sent by Duke Diarca. It wasn't that they were satisfied with their current group, but they weren't easily swayed by money or prestige either. On the contrary, they regarded the people sent from Diarca with suspicion, making repeated attempts to discern their true identities, which in turn unnerved the Duke's messengers.

"Your Grace. I apologize, but the arrogance of those commoners surpasses all imagination. Given their inflated sense of importance, they're unlikely to accept our proposal at this juncture. May I suggest we wait for a better opportunity? Human greed knows no bounds, and these lowly beings will not know their place. Time will provide the answer to all."

The first plan, which aimed to buy off members of the Cavalry to act as eyes and ears within it, had failed. Duke Diarca regretted not planting his agents when the Cavalry was initially formed. However, he reasoned that new members would eventually be recruited. If these men had any sense, they would soon realize that they'd joined a rotten corps.

Instead, Duke Diarca started to fill his ranks with other Awakeners. Though not entirely pleased, he comforted himself with the thought that nothing in the world progresses perfectly in one go.

Patience never betrays. Even the Duke's irresponsible youngest son, Kiolle, had finally matured enough to act like a proper human being. Or so the Duke thought, unaware of the truth about his 'finally matured' youngest son. Duke Diarca was unconcerned with the details.

After the Diarca party, he planted even more eyes and ears around the Emperor, Empress, and the Cavalry. Those he had left alone, thinking they would fail on their own, had started to regain their vitality. He could not afford to ignore this any longer.

Soon, new shifts in the atmosphere that he had previously overlooked began to filter through to him. Duke Peletta, who had always been a wastrel and frequented all manner of parties, was now reportedly engrossed in training exercises with his Cavalry. Reports came in that the commoners' faith in him grew significantly when his new sword was verified to be genuine.

The Emperor, who was thought to be ineffectively hanging around the nobility and occasionally losing his temper, had recently started inviting several people into the palace. Even more shocking was the unreliable information suggesting a close correspondence between the Sun Palace and the upper echelons of Nelarn.

The Empress, usually so meek in social gatherings, was unexpectedly in frequent contact with her family, the House of Herne. Particularly concerning was her communication with the first and the second child of the Herne family, who were the most likely candidates to become the next Duke of Herne. This gave Duke Diarca an unsettling feeling.

It was the sensation of danger, a feeling that had dulled from years of living in victory and peace.

Could it be that the absence of any action from the Herne family in the recent tragic events involving the Apeto and Tain families was due to some conversations between the Empress and the Emperor?

It was an unknown. However, just the thought that such a possibility might exist filled Duke Diarca with discomfort. He had always assumed he had an intimate understanding of these matters.

When had these people started moving beyond his field of vision?

Why did he only hear of these developments now?

"Your Grace. Please forgive the sudden intrusion into your chamber. Urgent matters have arisen. Last night, individuals sneaked into the Sun Palace through a secret passageway. While unconfirmed, we've heard that they may be Duke Peletta and Baron Aile..."

At that moment, several days ago, Duke Diarca's displeasure reached its peak upon hearing this report.

"The atmosphere in the Dawn Palace also seems different from before. It's difficult to confirm precisely since one of our spies was discovered and expelled, but something is clearly being prepared in the Sun Palace."

"Could it be that Duke Peletta has finally found a way to cure the Emperor's chronic illness?"

"Preposterous... Is such a thing even possible?"

"Wasn't Duke Peletta the one who has met and investigated the most Awakeners in the Empire? Consider the Red Stone, of which we've heard nothing since it was retrieved by the Cavalry. If it wasn't useless..."

A chilling speculation, but worth investigating nonetheless.

Only then did Duke Diarca remember Thais Yulman, an elder of the Pearl Tower, whom he had disregarded after hearing news about the Red Stone's retrieval. He sent someone to make contact. But the old mage they had counted on was long gone, leaving behind only some luggage. Contact had been lost for several months, and few people knew where the mage had gone.

The Duke's men were quite flustered. Not knowing that an elder of the Pearl Tower had disappeared was a significant oversight that would surely bring disgrace upon the whole tower.

They believed that finding the old mage before reporting back would be the best way to avoid the Duke's wrath. They had not considered that he might be among the Cavalry, so the progress was agonizingly slow.

Had they contacted the Pearl Tower in time, they could have heard about the well-being of the missing old mage, but caution sometimes leads to undesirable outcomes.

In the midst of this disarray, Duke Diarca received another report.

Clear information had arrived that the Sun Palace was preparing to host guests yet again tomorrow.

The specifics were still unclear. But from the time when the Empress Dowager Inella La Orr, of Diarca origin, was in good health, Duke Diarca had never been at ease with the current Emperor and his brother.

"Whether confirmed or not, the conclusion will be the same."

He had no intention of scattering ashes on a job he considered finished.

Determined to find out what was happening at the Sun Palace, the Duke quietly gave his orders to those guarding him.

"Prepare for a visit to the Sun Palace tomorrow."

"Should we not also inform His Highness, the Crown Prince in the Bright Palace?"

"Leave him be. And don't say a word to Kiolle either. Instead, get in touch with the 'healers' who frequent the Bright Palace."

If they planned to use the power of the Awakener to sustain themselves, then he could counter them with the same power.

Duke Diarca decided to fully exploit their abilities and issued the orders. Not long after, a report arrived saying that the healers had agreed to cooperate.

Turning

Chapter 550

Whoosh...

"The Emperor's inner realm is now open."

A gentle breeze filled the room, lightly rustling everyone's hair and the thin curtains half-shrouding the bed. Yuder gazed at the beautiful array of light manifesting over Emperor Keilusa's body, exhaling softly after confirming that the inner realm was open.

It felt easier and faster compared to before. The change in the direction of the will glimpsed in the Emperor's eyes seemed to have a significant impact.

Yuder surveyed the inner realm, which looked much the same as before. He concluded that the condition of the vessel was slightly worse than three days ago. Whenever the vessel failed to contain the inner power properly, all the flows of light scattered throughout the body trembled erratically, as

though they would burst out. As this happened, the Emperor clenched his parched lips and exhaled painfully.

Despite the veins popping on his forehead and neck from the pain, the Emperor managed to endure it without a single groan. Whenever cold sweat formed on his face and neck, the chief attendant approached and gently wiped it away with a warm, damp towel. The Emperor breathed shallowly, as if clinging to each breath.

Yuder waited until the Emperor seemed to calm down before speaking. "Are you alright, Your Majesty?"

"Indeed... It's less shocking the second time around," the Emperor muttered, staring at one of Yuder's eyes, which had turned golden.

"As I mentioned before, I will now start collecting the red power scattered within your inner realm."

Yuder and Kishiar had anticipated that this would be the most time-consuming part of the process. After explaining this, Yuder turned his head towards Kishiar. Rolling up his sleeve, the man who had been sitting opposite flashed a relaxed and slightly mischievous smile—a smile that betrayed no tension.

"Your Majesty, I will now join this process as well. It may hurt a bit, but if you could bear with it, that would be much appreciated."

"Do you think I can't endure the pain?" the Emperor asked slowly.

"Not at all. What you must endure is not the pain itself but rather the thoughts that try to keep you shackled to that pain," Kishiar said.

"Thoughts that keep me shackled?"

"Based on what my assistant has discovered, the most important factor for becoming an Awakener and gaining new powers is a strong desire and will," Kishiar continued.

Placing both his hands on the Emperor's body, Kishiar overlaid them slightly over Yuder's fingertips. A cold warmth emanated from Kishiar's long, large hands.

"From this moment, please focus only on one thing," Kishiar said, signaling to Yuder without specifying what that 'one thing' was.

"Proceed."

Kishiar fully grasped Yuder's hand. Taking a deep breath, Yuder closed his eyes. The surrounding air rippled anew, centering around Kishiar, as a tingling sensation sprang up inside Yuder's eyes. Through their connected hands, Yuder felt a peculiar sensation—a wave of energy similar to what he had felt before was surging into him.

The connection between the two was now being intentionally activated again through Kishiar's power.

"...What in the world..."

A soft murmur came from the Empress, but it sounded as if it were coming from somewhere far away.

A colossal force brushed against something that had been dormant within Yuder. Immediately afterward, a sensation as though an unknowable power was pulling that something tugged at him. His entire body felt like it was being sucked into a void, inducing a dizzying vertigo.

The feeling was as if something within him, that he was normally unaware of, was forcibly dragged to the surface.

It was unfamiliar and frightening. Yet through several experiences, Yuder had come to vaguely understand what it was. Opening his eyes, he clenched Kishiar's hand tightly and found himself in a world completely transformed from before.

Between them, several strands of light intertwined, floating mysteriously as if unaffected by gravity.

These fragile threads, woven as finely as light itself, were not only around their bodies but between their interlocked hands and even within their eyes.

Kishiar slowly opened his mouth beyond their locked gazes.

"...Do you feel it?"

"Yes."

"I've also seen it. I've tried to activate it as weakly as possible compared to before. But we mustn't focus too much on this phenomenon; we have important work to do."

"I understand."

Kishiar offered a faint smile. Perhaps because they were connected, that smile felt like a powerful wave to Yuder. At the same time, a scent unique to Kishiar enveloped him like a thin cloth, leaving no gaps.

'Ah...'

His racing heart found strange comfort in that firm grounding, quickly regaining composure.

Yuder then looked down towards the Emperor, regaining his focus. Although only a brief moment had passed, it felt like an eternity.

"We will now search for the red energy within."

Yuder's hand began to slowly move upward, tracing the Emperor's body, before descending once more. Following the movement of his hand, the red energy within his palm began to ripple subtly.

It was the beginning of an attempt to locate the same type of energy within the Emperor using the pure Red Stone's power that Yuder possessed.

'If the Emperor has the Red Stone's power within him, that power will undoubtedly be drawn to this pure energy.'

From previous experiences, Yuder knew he could move the red energy within an Awakener. If the Emperor had absorbed that power, even if he was not awakened, he would certainly react here.

He had clearly sensed red energy here before.

He needed to prove now that it was neither an illusion nor a misperception.

Whoosh...

As the red energy moved according to Yuder's will, sweeping through the Emperor's body, the entangled energies within were disturbed, swirling erratically. However, when Kishiar's hand followed Yuder's, releasing a formless, whirlpool-like aura, the disturbed energies calmed and settled into place or stopped moving altogether.

Kishiar was reducing any potential shock the Emperor might feel, sensitively pulling or pushing the flow of energy within him, connected as he was to Yuder's senses and vision.

With their actions, the Emperor's breathing accelerated and then halted, repeating this cycle. Silently sitting beside him, the Empress's clenching hands tightened further. The chief attendant also looked on, unable to breathe properly, mesmerized by the surreal spectacle of energy flows moving as if with the wind.

As all eyes turned toward Yuder's hands and face, he began to release increasingly more energy from his hands while rapidly moving his eyes from side to side.

"Not here. Not here either... Let's go a bit deeper..."

"...!"

Emperor suddenly jolted.

"Your Majesty!"

The chief attendant quickly gripped the Emperor's shoulder to steady him. However, Yuder was too preoccupied to notice, his focus sharply drawn to the fleeting afterimage of a red light he had just glimpsed.

"It's there."

"Yes. We've found it."

The man who had sensed what Yuder saw through their connection nodded quickly.

"Proceed, I will help draw it out."

Energy enveloped Yuder's hand as it once again delved into the Emperor's being. At the same time, Kishiar, without missing a beat, exerted his strength to pull the twinkling shards of red light together.

The Emperor stirred once more, causing the bed to creak. Yet neither Kishiar nor Yuder halted. They continued to comb through the Emperor's entire body in the same fashion.

'Just as we suspected; it's all scattered.'

Though it was deeper and more fragmented than they had initially thought, once they started looking, it began to come out in a chain. Yuder felt an odd sense of satisfaction knowing that his and Kishiar's predictions were accurate, and he concentrated his power flawlessly toward the red energies scattered throughout the Emperor's body.

Led by a pure force, red light sparkled from within the Emperor. Kishiar immediately used his ability to gather them together. From the Emperor's abdomen to his upper body, and then from his arms to his

head and back down to his legs, the mass of red energy they collected began to grow, as if rolling up a snowball.

'So far, so good.'

Yuder assessed the situation while glancing at the long, pale fingers that followed his movements. Kishiar was, astonishingly, controlling his abilities so perfectly that it was hard to believe this was his first time doing something like this. Both their faces were drenched in sweat, but it was nothing compared to the pain the Emperor must have been feeling.

'He's holding up remarkably well...'

Every time a bit of his energy was drawn out, the Emperor seemed to experience a ripping agony, pausing in his movements. Yet, he never let out a moan. Instead, his strained gaze remained locked onto his sweat-drenched younger brother's face and behind him, the Empress who had been muttering prayers all along.

'If it continues like this...'

They might be able to move on to the next phase without any major issues.

That's what he thought, when—

—Thud...

A heavy resonance was felt from somewhere beyond the closed door.