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Chapter 561

"It's about the leader of those guys, the one they called Sage. I heard he used to live in the capital."

"Sage?"

Enon's interest was enough to indicate that this was no ordinary news, but this was truly unexpected.

"Yes. He was a manager."

Manager. Yuder recalled the visage of the Sage he had glimpsed briefly.

The Sage that Yuder knew from his previous life was unlike the genuine Sage of this era, who looked like a kind-hearted middle-aged man. With a neatly kept beard and clear complexion, he didn't look like someone who had struggled in life. But to think he was a manager in the capital? It was hard to believe.

"Are you sure you didn't mistake him for someone else?"

"The information comes from someone I worked with in the Intelligence Guild. He mainly deals with lower-level managers, but his memory for people is exceptional."

"Hmm..."

Yuder's expression shifted. A slight nod conveyed the implicit request for more information. It was an attitude that seemed slightly arrogant, yet also entirely natural for someone long accustomed to leadership. Indeed, Enon had sensed this about him from the start.

"That guy said there was a manager who had worked for a long time in the Blue Crown. Two years ago, he suddenly cleared out his home and disappeared in the dead of night. It caused quite a stir. And he said that the Sage had a striking resemblance to that manager."

"Vanished in the dead of night?"

"Yes. Back then, it wasn't uncommon for people to disappear like that, but it was the first time for someone from the Blue Crown. That's why he remembered it so well."

"People disappeared like that occasionally? Why... Ah."

Yuder suddenly recalled the timeframe and understood the reason. Enon gave a sly smile.

"Yes, you'd know the reason better than anyone."

While it wasn't particularly relevant to Yuder, who had been living alone in the mountains, there had been an atmosphere of fear and suspicion toward the newly emerging Awakeners at that time.

The chaos had somewhat subsided after announcements were made about the Red Stone, but there were still many Awakeners who had fled their hometowns. It was a fact evident even from the Awakeners Yuder had met, such as those from the Star of Nagan.

"So, the theory is that the manager who disappeared might have become an Awakener and fled?"

Yuder had not known that even in the capital, where the Emperor's reach was closest, there were such individuals. However, it made sense if they had Awakened before the announcements about the Red Stone and the Awakeners had begun.

"Yes, so I did some more digging."

"And? What did you find?"

"Here, take a look."

Yuder unfolded the parched paper handed to him by Enon. It contained the personal details of some managers who had worked at the Blue Crown. A red stamp in the corner indicated that it was a discarded document.

'The ink and paper are definitely the ones exclusively used by managers. It's neither duplicated nor a copy. This is the original.'

It was a mystery how Enon had managed to find a document that must have been buried somewhere for years.

"How did you manage to get your hands on this?"

"Isn't this what they dragged me into their intelligence department for?"

"I knew that, but I'm asking because it's impressively done."

"Enough with the compliments, just read it already!"

Enon's reply was curt, but Yuder noticed the slight grin tugging at the corners of Enon's mouth and eyes, failing to hide his sense of satisfaction.

The name written on the documents was "Karl Enfile." He was a Level 8 administrator who had worked in the Blue Crown, responsible for library management and temple communications. If he were still alive today, he would be in his late fifties.

'The age seems about right,' Yuder thought.

According to the documents, Karl Enfile led a fairly average life for a lower-level administrator. Born into an obscure family with little reputation, he became an administrator solely on the basis of his surname, without any titles to speak of.

"He was an administrator for over 30 years and remained a Level 8. That probably means he hardly got any promotions. Did he have a family?" Yuder wondered.

There was no mention of a spouse or children in his family details. He had lived alone in the sixth wall district, led an unremarkable administrative life, neither making any significant contributions nor committing any offenses. Then, nearly three years ago, he vanished without a trace. That was the end of it.

'But that doesn't mean there's absolutely no information to be gained about him,' Yuder mused.

Even if Karl Enfile had disappeared, there would be those who still remembered him. Digging deeper could reveal more.

Enon seemed to be thinking along the same lines, and added, "From what I've gathered so far, Karl Enfile had quite an extensive social network. He was knowledgeable and often consulted by others. When working with the temple, he frequently gave doctrine lectures on behalf of the priests."

Yuder interpreted this in his own way: 'So he was well-read and persuasive.'

"Why didn't he get promoted, then?"

"He may have been pushed out during power struggles. The documents don't mention it, but the Blue Crown is one of those places where those who lose out in internal politics end up," Enon explained.

'Hmm. So this socially adept guy was also actively involved in power struggles,' Yuder contemplated.

It wasn't particularly surprising. There were plenty of people who appeared good from a distance but were not so upon closer examination.

Yuder had visited the Blue Crown when he applied for the Cavalry test. It was primarily a workplace for lower-level administrators. Such positions offered the best career path for people born with some but not significant advantage, although the internal atmosphere was often thick with ambition.

Yuder had sensed it when he was there to register for the test; there were more people interested in protecting their own comfort than in actually doing their jobs.

"What's strange is that besides the guy who mentioned remembering Karl's face, almost no one else remembers him. The guy who gave me the information said that Karl's disappearance was quite the topic at the time, but no one remembers it now, not even his name," Enon added.

It seemed that Enon had gone to great lengths to find documents proving Karl Enfile's existence precisely for that reason.

It was strange for everyone to so uniformly forget someone without a reason. Yuder knew of one explanation for such an occurrence.

"The likelihood that a psychic was involved is high," Yuder posited.

"Exactly. That's why I want to dig deeper."

"In that case, give me a list of people who claim they can't remember."

"Why?"

"If it really is the work of a psychic, then from that point on, it's my responsibility."

"Do you have a way to restore their memories?"

Enon asked skeptically. Yuder quietly replied, "That would also be the work of a psychic. And there's no one who understands that power better than I do."

Even if one's psychic abilities seemed formidable, they were never absolute. Just as Nahan's illusionary abilities had their weaknesses.

Even if these forces were invisible, as long as the same energy was being used, there was always a way to block or break it. Among mages, it was rare to be bested by magic, and swordmasters seldom lost to other swordsmen. The principle was the same.

Enon briefly furrowed his brows before reaching out and firmly grabbing Yuder's cheek.

"...Why are you doing this?"

"Quiet. No showing off just because you think your powers are so great. Especially not when you're bleeding all over and had to be carried here."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just know this—no showing off, no acting cool. Because of people like you, we increasingly get patients who overextend themselves and have to be brought in."

Annoyed for some unfathomable reason, Enon began to mutter.

"I'll pass you the list later. You find out exactly what abilities Sage and the others possess. Even my own investigations have their limits."

"Understood."

Yuder was aware, thanks to the information Kishiar had provided, that the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran were currently staying in the Bright Palace of Crown Prince for a few days.

So, the next meeting was as good as set.

'I hope Kiolle has been doing a good job investigating them.'

"By the way, what happened with your Commander?"

Having finished their conversation and about to clear the tableware, Enon suddenly asked as if he had just remembered something. He seemed reluctant but inescapable in his inquiry.

"Why?"

"This morning, he came looking for Lusan and asked if he could have some divine energy for rejuvenation."

'...Kishiar asked for that?'

Since the day the Emperor awakened, Kishiar had been focusing on recovery, alongside Yuder. He had his condition diagnosed by Enon at Yuder's request and had mostly stayed by Yuder's side when he wasn't taking medicine or sleeping in his own room. His diligent and attentive caregiving was still fresh in Yuder's memory.

Though he had mentioned going to see the Emperor this morning, Yuder hadn't noticed anything odd then.

'Rejuvenation, huh.'

At face value, it might just be that Kishiar wanted to appear healthier when going to see the Emperor. But if there was another reason...

It was Yuder who had declined Enon's offer to rest in the room next to Kishiar, opting to rest in his own room instead. But after hearing Enon's words, he began to think he should have stayed by Kishiar's side, regardless of how others might perceive it.

"Got it. Thanks for letting me know."

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After Enon left, intelligence agents flooded in as if it was a shift change.

"Yuder! We heard you took on a secret mission and got injured! Is it true?"

Externally, he was supposed to be on leave for personal reasons, but it was obvious how they had found out. Gakane, who was caught between the Eldore siblings and seemed half out of his mind, was likely the source of the information.

'Getting whatever information they want without regard for the means is a good quality for an intelligence agent, but... perhaps I should give Gakane more training so he isn't so easily swayed by his colleagues.'

In the end, he decided to let it go. At least it appeared that Gakane's involvement in the secret mission hadn't been discovered.

Kanna, who had seen a lot of blood, was still in the medical division, but other than being drained, Gakane had no significant injuries. So it didn't seem like he'd been through anything major.

From Yuder's perspective, who had expended a lot to save Gakane, it was a huge relief. Not long ago, he had sustained life-threatening injuries in the West; another injury would have likely resulted in a condition far more serious than Kanna's current state.

"Why aren't you answering? Is it true?"

"I can't answer."

"Why?"

"Because it's a secret."

"So it is true!"

He wondered if they had come to protest that only Gakane was called in from among the intelligence agents, but instead, they gifted Yuder some snacks. It was butter cookies, apparently popular in the capital these days. The Eldore siblings teased Devran, who had turned bright red, saying it was the first time he'd ever bought such an awkward gift.

They all shared the cookies and had a brief exchange of information about the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran they had each been observing.

Firstly, they had been exceptionally well-behaved, aside from when they went to treat the Crown Prince. No conspicuous actions like drinking or causing a scene. Their outings were almost solely for buying groceries. They seemed pious enough to be considered pilgrims, and that was indeed how they were perceived by those around them.

"But, no matter how quietly they live, people talk amongst themselves, you know. And I happen to be very good at eavesdropping."

Devran, who had been highly praised for his keen observational skills and became an intelligence agent, lifted his chin confidently.

"I can guarantee that one of them is being ostracized."

"Really? How did you find out?"

Devran gleefully answered Hinn's question.

"I've been helping out at the grocery store they frequently visit whenever I have some free time, observing them. Except for the old man who they called Sage, the four of them usually shop at specific times, making them easy to observe."

"Wow, you still have the energy to do such tasks even after Cavalry training? Impressive, Devran."

"What are you talking about? Do you know how hard it's been to skip training without getting caught...?"

Devran caught Yuder's eye and stopped short, picking up on the social cues.

'Right. If he remembers who drafted that training program, he'd better watch what he says.'

But Yuder decided to generously let it slide. Training was important, but fieldwork for intelligence was even more so. No one knew Devran was skipping training as long as he didn't admit it, which was impressive in its own way.

"Ahem! Anyway, one out of the four is always left out of the conversations. He doesn't seem to fit in with the group. The other three also seem to somewhat ignore him."

"Is it a personality issue?"

Devran frowned at the question.

"No, that might be a part of it, but it seems to be more about his abilities."

"Abilities?"

"Of course, people won't talk about it openly. But, you know, there's a certain atmosphere when Awakeners discuss their abilities. Everyone knows that, right?"

Devran looked at them as if to say they should obviously know.

"The one being ostracized has a power that others find highly repulsive, that much is clear."

Devran said he had only deduced that much about the reason for the ostracism.

Yuder pondered for a moment before speaking.

"Devran, can you describe the appearance of the guy who's being ostracized?"

"Huh? Sure! He looks a bit red-skinned, like someone of southern descent. And he has a long scar on one ear. He looks somewhat timid, but I haven't heard anyone call him by a name yet. He's always on the outskirts, so I haven't had the chance to hear his name."

It was certain. The Awakener being ostracized within the group was undoubtedly the future 'Sage' that Yuder knew.

But wasn't that guy's ability just to mildly influence other people's moods? He was an individual who used his words well to make his rather mundane power effective, so why was he being ostracized for it?

'...Could it be that the ability I know isn't his real power?'

He hadn't even considered that the confession he had received before death could be a lie. Clearly, he needed to investigate further.

"Could you focus more on learning about him in the future?"

"The ostracized guy? Why?"

"There are some points that concern me. You've given me information I didn't have before. It might be a bit of a burden, but please do it."

Hearing that he had provided information even Yuder didn't know, Devran's face flushed slightly with emotion. The Eldore siblings caught on and teased him, but Devran paid them no mind.

"Alright, leave it to me!"

Beside the enthusiastic Devran, Gakane mumbled with less confidence.

"Uhm... I've only been able to know when those people come and go because I've placed shadows on them, so I haven't really delved deeper. What should I do?"

"You've been busy lately. It's fine."

"Still, I did find out that lately they've been spending more time and going more frequently to the palace than when we first started watching them. Though it seems like useless information now since they haven't returned to their lodging for days..."

"No, no, Gakane! Thanks to you, we have the courage to make a move."

Pretending to scold him for only playing around, the Eldore siblings patted Gakane's shoulder. Gakane looked worried as he asked,

"Courage? What courage?"

"What can we do with these powers?"

The siblings, who had developed their abilities to not only possess unparalleled strength but also to teleport objects on their own, grinned wickedly.

"If they haven't returned home for days, and Gakane's power lets us know who's coming and going, isn't this the perfect time to sneak in for a little observation?"

"That's way too dangerous!"

"So, we're just going to miss this opportunity?"

"Yuder, say something!"

Yuder took a moment to consider and finally made up his mind.

"Indeed, this seems like the most opportune time to take action."

"See? I knew Yuder would agree. Trust us, we're completely confident."

"Then I'll leave this task to the three of you. And if possible, bring back small items from there. Kanna may be able to help us with them."

"Understood."

The siblings readily agreed.

The intelligence agents, having finished all the snacks, each left a comment of concern for Yuder's health before leaving the room. Only Gakane remained, seeming a bit hesitant.

"Gakane, do you have something to say?"

"Um, it's about that secret mission we just completed."

"You don't need to apologize for almost blowing our cover to Hinn and Finn."

"No, no, it's not that."

Yuder wondered what else Gakane could have on his mind, sensing that it was something entirely different. After a moment of hesitation, Gakane clenched his fist and spoke.

"What do you think, would Sir Nathan Zuckerman be willing to teach me swordsmanship?"

"Nathan Zuckerman?"

"During this mission, I noticed... he's incredibly skilled with a sword! I've never seen a knight so proficient."

'Ah, right. Nathan Zuckerman did defeat the final monster on his own. He must have displayed his true skills.'

Seeing Gakane's eyes filled with genuine admiration, it was evident that he'd discovered Nathan Zuckerman's mastery of the sword.

"I know I'm not a member of the Peletta Knights, so it might not be appropriate for me to ask, but... I still want to. The thing is, I don't know where to find him usually. I've been looking but haven't seen him."

Being Kishiar's assistant, Yuder had often seen Nathan Zuckerman. Gakane seemed to be banking on that.

Gakane had always been more obsessed with becoming stronger than any other member. Although he had primarily focused on training his shadow clone, considering his past efforts to become a knight, it seemed possible he had been intentionally avoiding swordsmanship.

'If he's genuinely willing to learn... Kishiar would undoubtedly facilitate it.'

Kishiar, more than anyone else, encouraged the growth of his subordinates and enjoyed teaching himself. Considering this, Yuder thought that Nathan Zuckerman, who had reached the pinnacle under such a person, was unlikely to refuse.

"Alright. I'll pass the word along when I see him."

"Thank you!"

Gakane got up, his face blooming like a freshly-watered rose. He was about to leave in high spirits when, unluckily, he almost bumped into Kishiar standing right outside the door. Gakane froze in surprise.

"Commander! I didn't know you were there. I apologize."

"It's alright. You seem to have had a pleasant conversation."

"Well, haha, it's not confirmed yet, but Yuder agreed to help me with a request."

Kishiar's eyes softened as he looked at Gakane.

"Good to hear."

"Yes, I'll take my leave now. Yuder, rest well!"

"..."

After Gakane left, the tall man stepped over the threshold, which felt unusually small compared to his stature, making a one-person room feel like it was made for half a person.

Yuder observed Kishiar's pristine face that showed no signs of fatigue, despite having recently received divine power from Lusan.

"How was your trip to the palace?"

"Good. His Majesty said he wants to see you once you're fully recovered. It seems he wants to thank you properly."

Kishiar's answer was consistent with his usual demeanor. Yuder continued to observe him while taking in the faint fragrance that emanated from him the moment he sat down.

Even though his demeanor seemed utterly calm, was that truly the case on the inside as well?

Yuder had never felt the need for this uncontrollable 'connection' as much as he did right now.

And the moment Kishiar seemed to sense something strange and looked up to meet his gaze, Yuder felt something intensely grip and release his chest in an extremely brief moment.

It was emotion.

However, it wasn't Yuder's emotion. The intensity of the feeling was so strong that it almost felt like pain, and Yuder was perplexed upon realizing that such powerful emotions were storming within the man who appeared so beautiful and tranquil.

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"...Commander."

"Hm?"

"Is something the matter?"

"A lot has been going on."

The man answered as if he had been waiting for the question.

"I have to find ways to help His Majesty, especially since it seems he plans to frequently use his new ability. We also need to discuss how to utilize the monster corpse obtained during the intrusion, and according to reports, the harvest in Peletta is so good this year that their storage is full. We'll have to find a solution. Plus, there's a relic that's arrived from Nelarn that needs examining."

Setting aside the other matters for the moment, the last point caught his attention.

'A relic from Nelarn... According to Prince Ejain, it's from the blind sage, presumed to be Archmage Luma. So it has finally arrived.'

If it was indeed an object connected to Luma, it would naturally pique his interest.

However, none of these matters explained the emotional turbulence he'd sensed in Kishiar. Compared to that, a relic seemed trivial. Yuder let out a small breath and spoke.

"If His Majesty is seeking methods to utilize and train his awakened abilities, I will compile effective training techniques from our Cavalry and submit them. I may not know how to make use of the monster corpse, but I have gathered some more information about the suspected intruders from the Star of Nagran, which I can share now. As for the harvest issue... Why are you looking at me like that?"

He thought he had spoken as he usually would, yet Kishiar's eyes were peculiar.

"Just thinking that you seem to have truly recovered."

"Enon said the same thing earlier."

Kishiar sat down next to Yuder's bed. Yuder didn't avoid the hand that reached out towards his cheek. The tip of the thumb lightly brushed beneath his eyes, which no longer shone golden, before withdrawing.

Through that touch, Yuder felt sure once again.

'Something is indeed different.'

Yuder, who rarely hesitated to speak his mind to anyone, found it different when facing Kishiar. He stared at the man, so adept at concealing his feelings, and spoke firmly.

"I heard you received divine power from Priest Lusan this morning."

"The pharmacist must have told you."

"So something did happen, didn't it?"

"Hm... There's a letter that came along with the relic from the prince. Would you like to receive it?"

A small letter emerged from Kishiar's pocket. Yuder accepted it but set it aside without even looking at it.

"Commander."

"Yes, I know why you're asking."

Finally, Kishiar raised both his hands and smiled again. However, this smile faded away almost as quickly as it had appeared.

"I had a dream. Because of it, I couldn't sleep well. Even with divine power, I can't heal myself. So, I did what I could to avoid causing you concern before seeing you."

"..."

"That's all there is to it. Truly."

From his experiences with Kishiar, Yuder knew he wasn't lying. Kishiar lightly touched his own forehead and eyes; he looked a bit tired.

The fatigue in his eyes evoked memories from a previous life, causing Yuder's fingertips to twitch involuntarily.

'A dream so disturbing he couldn't sleep well... Is the impact of the connection affecting Kishiar once again?'

Yuder had long known that the dreams Kishiar had were not ordinary. For some time now, Kishiar had been having dreams related to his past life.

Up until then, he had rarely remembered them upon waking. But what about the most recent, unsettling dream?

That time, Kishiar dreamt almost the same dream that Yuder had. It was a dream about a period when Yuder, in his past life, had just started learning swordsmanship from Kishiar. He couldn't recall the conversations they'd had in the dream, but he did remember, as vividly as dawn, the first basic swordsmanship routine Yuder had practiced and demonstrated. He tried it out as soon as he woke up.

'The last memory from my previous life that I recalled was... what I saw on the day I treated the Emperor.'

It was a memory right after Kishiar was killed.

A chill settled in his chest as he revisited that moment. His hands stiffened, and a dark haze clouded his vision.

'I thought it was possible because we both slept at the same time on the same day when we had the same dream before. But that wasn't the case this time.'

In the absence of understanding this inexplicable 'connection' between Kishiar's dreams and the reality, there was nothing to be sure of.

The connection between him and Yuder had become more robust through these events. According to the last memory he had while healing the Emperor, the threads linking the two had increased to an uncountable number.

'If what he saw is truly what I think it is,'

He understood why Kishiar was so unsettled that he couldn't sleep again, why he needed the restorative effects of divine power, and why he tried to hide all of this from Yuder.

'If my suspicion is correct...'

Yuder hesitantly moved his usually impassive lips to ask again.

"...May I inquire what dream you had?"

"I'm always willing to answer any questions from my assistant, but this time, I think knowing it won't make either of us feel better."

That sentence seemed almost like a stamp of approval on Yuder's thoughts.

He could continue to feign ignorance about that dream. But the moment Yuder remembered the complex and painful emotional storms he had briefly felt in Kishiar, he knew he couldn't.

'If I am involved in Kishiar's dream, then it's something I must resolve, no matter what.'

"Even so, if that dream is related to me, I would like to know. Please tell me."

Yuder asked, even though he had already anticipated the answer. Lowering his eyes, he felt his body becoming increasingly tense as he waited for the response.

"...It was a dream where you die."

When he heard that, Yuder briefly doubted his hearing.

"You were standing under a guillotine in the square, condemned."

"..."

"The first time I had that dream was the day after healing the Emperor, and I barely remembered it when I woke up. So, I soon forgot. But... when I dreamt the same dream the next day, things started to become a bit clearer. And finally, yesterday."

Kishiar paused for a moment. For the first time, Yuder saw him hesitate so visibly.

"...I finally realized who the condemned person I saw in my dream was."

Faced with those deeply shadowed, crimson eyes, Yuder found himself at a loss for words.

"..."

"When I woke you before by calling your hidden name, you said it felt like the secrets you were trying to hide were being shared with me. Ever since we both had that shared dream, I even considered the possibility that it might be a form of prophetic dreaming."

"..."

"But if that dream really was prophetic, then what was the meaning of the one I just had? From the moment that thought crossed my mind, sleep eluded me."

Kishiar's voice grew softer, almost to a whisper. Yet Yuder could hear him as clearly as if he were shouting directly into his ear.

The dream Kishiar had was not of the day Yuder would kill him.

What Kishiar saw was a day so far in the future that it could only be known by Yuder. It was a day long after Kishiar La Orr had died.

After finishing, Kishiar closed his mouth. The atmosphere grew still as if the world contained only him and Yuder.

Yuder thought he should say something. It wasn't the dream of the day he dreaded most, so there were plenty of comforting words he could think of.

But Yuder couldn't bring himself to say anything. His usually cool head had lost its clarity.

...

"Sage, do you have a moment right now?"

The Crown Prince had granted the healers a room that was exceedingly lavish. However, the room given to the sage alone was the best among them.

As soon as he stepped into the stunning room, the Awakener shrank back, overwhelmed by its opulence. It was only when he saw the sage, sitting there with a gentle expression, that he regained his composure. The room's overpowering scent of wealth and prestige lost its luster in front of that serene and wise face.

"What brings you here at this late hour?"

"Everyone is worried about you meeting with Duke Diarca alone with Diemon tomorrow. Isn't it too risky?"

"Don't worry. Haven't I explained enough? Only by demonstrating the power that Diemon possesses will they trust us."

"But you know very well how displeased that knight, the son of Duke Diarca, has been with us. Ever since we started staying here, he's been directly questioning us, and it's unbearable."

The Sage chuckled.

"Excessive worrying will eat away at your heart and harm your body. Kiolle also did the same but didn't cause us any harm. He's just curious."

Hearing those words, the Awakener felt a sense of ease wash over him. The tension that had nearly choked him because of Kiolle's constant probing disappeared, and his breathing improved.

"You're right. I was too worried."

"I understand. Who else would care so much for this person if not you?"

"Sage..."

Touched, the Awakener bit his lip and then composed himself.

"Oh, there's another matter I need to inform you about. Actually, I should have mentioned this first... We received news from our southern base."

"Is everyone well?"

The sage inquired kindly, but the Awakener's expression turned somber.

"Well... Nahan has returned."

"Nahan? Has he returned with everyone?"

The Sage's question hung in the air, marking a pause that seemed heavier due to the Awakener's troubled expression.

"No, he returned alone, they say. And... as soon as he recovered a bit after a few days, he disappeared again with the men who had followed him. They didn't say where they were going, but according to Sera, who sent the news, it seems he's headed to the capital to find the sage."

For a moment, the gentle smile on the sage's face faded. The Awakener spoke with a worried expression.

"Do you think he'll really come here?"

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To those who followed the sage, Nahan was an enigmatic and challenging figure. Yet, they had managed to coexist well thus far because both the sage and Nahan had distinct roles that contributed to the betterment of the entire Star of Nagran.

Whenever Nahan infiltrated places where Awakeners were oppressed and in danger, he would rescue them, and the sage would then look after and educate these people, integrating them into the community. While the sage focused on stabilizing their strongholds, Nahan would neutralize threats to these places, training the Awakeners to defend the Star of Nagran.

During the times when these responsibilities were clearly divided, everything seemed to go well. Especially in a world where the Awakeners were constantly threatened, Nahan's terrifying abilities and awkward personality were actually comforting.

'But things started to get strange as the number of strongholds and people grew.'

Initially, those who joined the Star of Nagran were individuals who wanted nothing more than to save their lives and find a place to hide. However, as people began to settle and time passed, there emerged those who wanted to wield their newfound powers for revenge.

It was inevitable that among those who had been forced to leave their homelands simply because they had awakened, there would be those with grudges. Most of their targets for revenge were loathsome nobles. While the sage tried to calm and prevent them from acting out, Nahan actually encouraged them.

Everyone knew that the reason Nahan had not returned after completing his mission in the west was because of Ershi, who wanted revenge against the nobles in that region.

Nahan was close to the Awakeners who were filled with sorrow and a thirst for vengeance. There were moments when he seemed to believe that aiding their rage was his very purpose. Those who believed they should use their power for greater causes genuinely admired and deeply followed Nahan.

'I know he's not the enemy. If I were ever in danger or seeking revenge, there would be no one better to help me. But I still fear him. I can't fathom what he's thinking!'

"Langbarton, are you afraid of Nahan?"

Just then, the sage asked, as if he had read the thoughts of the Awakener named Langbarton, who nervously clenched his fists. Ashamed, Langbarton's face flushed as he stuttered.

"To be honest... I don't see him as a good comrade. I understand he does a lot for us, but... isn't it well-known that he really despises nobles? His visit to you now doesn't feel well-intended."

He expected the sage to respond with his usual warmth and talk about the importance of supporting one another as comrades. After all, the sage was someone who never expressed anger and instilled faith through love and warmth.

However, the response he received was different.

"Yes, it is likely that he is coming to express his concerns."

"Ah... You think so too, sage? But what could Nahan possibly be concerned about with you?"

"Langbarton, how long have you been in the Star of Nagran?"

Caught off guard by the abrupt question, Langbarton hastily sifted through his memories.

"Over a year... definitely. I met you around the time winter began last year."

"I met Nahan two years ago, before the Star of Nagran even had a name. I was by his side for about that much."

"Ah..."

Nezo was one of the four Awakeners who had followed the sage to the Crown Prince's palace. A young man who wore glasses, he seemed to have had some scholarly pursuits in his past. Nezo wasn't even his real name, or so people had heard. Still, he was more concerned than anyone else about the risk Nahan posed and worried for the Sage.

He had heard rumors that Nahan was among the oldest group of Awakeners on the Star of Nagran, but he had never expected those to be true. Unable to hide his surprise, Langbarton found himself comforted by the sage's gentle words.

"At that time, Nahan was a deeply pained and vulnerable individual. He believed places like the Star of Nagran were necessary to help people like his fellow Awakeners. That belief has not changed, but it seems that his own heart might have."

Hearing this, Langbarton looked into the sage's eyes, still radiating warmth, and felt a deep sense of turmoil. His mind was a muddle of anger towards the ungrateful Nahan and concern for the sage.

"How could you change, sage? Who else is there who cares for us more than you?"

At this, the sage merely smiled, a bitter twist to his lips.

"Thank you for saying so. However, Nahan may not feel the same way. Or even if he once did, that may no longer be the case."

"Is it because we're treating the Crown Prince?"

The sage offered no reply to this, apparently not wishing to burden others with undue concern.

"I entrust you to support our brothers and sisters while I am away tomorrow, Langbarton."

Ultimately, Langbarton left the sage's room, drained. He returned to his own room and scanned for the bespectacled Awakener among the others while giving cursory replies to their questions.

"Nezo. Can we talk for a moment?"

Langbarton and Nezo retreated to a secluded area, avoiding the others. After all, no one in the Crown Prince's palace was going to pay attention to individuals as disheveled as they were. Langbarton relayed his conversation with the Sage in full, then openly vented his frustrations.

"The Sage said not to worry even if Nahan comes. Granted, Nahan has always listened to the Sage, but who knows if he will this time? The Sage has to go to a dangerous place tomorrow with only an idiot like Diemen. What if he runs into Nahan's gang? We have to protect him."

"Did the Sage say that?"

Anger flared on Nezo's face.

"That damn Southerner... utterly useless. I knew from the moment the Sage took him in that a day like this would come. What can a bloodthirsty Southerner do?"

Nezo, who had been with the Sage for the longest time, seemed to know quite a lot about Nahan as well.

"What is it with that Nahan? What's his issue?"

"Well, you've earned the Sage's trust to be here, so you have a right to know."

After a moment's hesitation, Nezo began speaking.

"Years ago, when the Star of Nagran first appeared, the sage planned to lead us all in fleeing the Empire. Nahan was tasked with finding companions to join us until we could find a land to settle. But as you know, things have changed quite a lot since then."

"I can see that..."

The early days of the Awakeners must have been focused solely on survival. But as Awakened nobles like Duke Pelleta emerged and Cavalry was formed, the Empire's attitude toward the Awakeners began to shift.

Langbarton didn't particularly hold the Cavalry in high regard, but his ears were intact, and since arriving at the capital, he'd picked up various rumors. Whatever the case, it was true that people were less afraid of the Awakeners thanks to the Cavalry's current exploits.

Nearly a year had passed since the Cavalry had been established, and still, no other organization like it existed outside of the Orr Empire. His comrades, who had recently relocated to a western outpost, unanimously reported, "The situation in the western countries is even worse than in the Orr Empire."

It went without saying what life must be like for the Awakeners living in places people fled from in terror. Anyone with a head on their shoulders could assume that outside the Empire was even more dangerous.

'If I'd continued living dangerously, as I did before entering the Star of Nagran, maybe," Langbarton thought, "but in the current circumstances, I wouldn't dream of fleeing the Empire.'

Nezo nodded as he looked at Langbarton's face.

"Yes, most people will understand what I mean, just like you do. But that guy Nahan doesn't get it. He's been pestering the sage to keep his promises, even more so after encountering the Cavalry."

"Promises?"

"Nahan seems to think establishing a new outpost outside the Empire is a promise that must be kept. In fact, many of those who owe me their lives have said the same to the sage. They keep asking when we'll move to the new place."

"I had no idea."

"You came here alone. When the sage explains we have no plans to leave, most people accept it. There are exceptions, of course."

Nezo's face tensed up behind his glasses.

"In my opinion, the sage's current course of action is clearly better for all of us. But if Nahan concludes that the sage isn't going to keep his promises, he could ruin everything in a heartbeat."

That couldn't happen. Langbarton knew just how crucial the current moment was. Now he clearly understood what he needed to do. It even occurred to him that the sage might have trusted him for precisely this moment.

"Alright, let's take the initiative. We'll stop him from meeting the sage."

"We will?"

"According to Sera, Nahan sustained severe injuries in the west and can hardly move. If we don't seize this opportunity, how will we catch him? He'll surely contact us first; we'll target that moment."

A bit of unease flickered across Nezo's face. He was one of those who secretly feared Nahan's abilities.

"But you know what his abilities are like..."

"Who doesn't have abilities? Have you forgotten who successfully handled things this time? Nahan won't use his full power against us. We know that. I don't know about the guys following him or the tricky ones like Hosanna... but Hosanna isn't here now. Besides, we have Diemon on our side."

"Hmm..."

"Diemon may be annoying, but with his abilities, we can counteract Nahan's. It may weaken us a bit, but it should be enough. To protect sage, we have no choice but to step in!"

Finally, Nezo agreed, recognizing that this issue couldn't be avoided forever.

"Alright, let's do it that way."

The two returned to the room to share the situation with the rest of their companions and suggested they unite in purpose. The group, initially hesitant, soon decided to join forces. Among them was Diemon, his face flushed at the thought of becoming the center of this alliance.

...

"Yuder, did you hear what I just said?"

Yuder lifted his head, noticing the small hand waving in front of his eyes. Kanna was looking at him with a worried expression.

"...No. What were you saying?"

"I said that Hosanna is getting much better... How much of that did you miss?"

"..."

Had she been talking about that? He couldn't quite recall. Seeing that Yuder remained silent, Kanna lowered her head.

"You've seemed distracted ever since I first saw you. If you're tired, we can talk about this later."

"No, please repeat it. I'll listen properly this time."

"...Really, what's going on with you?"

What's going on? Something had indeed happened, something he couldn't articulate.

Kishiar's words from yesterday, about dreaming of the day he was executed, still lingered in his mind. Unable to respond, Yuder watched as Kanna left the spot, whispering that he should rest.

After that, Yuder couldn't sleep a wink all night. And so, here he was now.

Turning

Chapter 565

"Let me repeat myself, listen carefully. For a while now, Gayle and Doyle have been meeting with Hosanna once a day. Initially, they didn't spend much time together, but their meetings have been getting longer."

Kanna, who had been observing Yuder's complexion, sighed and continued the conversation.

"He has also been eating more, and thanks to the dedicated treatment from the medical division, his physical condition has improved significantly. Just last night, Hosanna even asked me how I was doing when he heard that I was unwell and staying in the medical ward."

Kanna had bled profusely due to the backlash from overusing her powers during a mission and had been receiving medical treatment. Fortunately, her recovery was swift, and she had been resuming her daily life since yesterday.

"So, what did you say?"

"I told him I was much better. While I was talking, I also read what he knows about the sage and his surroundings."

"You used your abilities right after recovering?"

At the icy question, Kanna defiantly lifted her chin and shook her head.

"Of course, I didn't overexert myself! Do you think I'm like you, Yuder?"

"..."

Why did the memory of Enon grumbling 'it's because of people like you that we get more patients overexerting themselves' and pulling his cheek suddenly surface? Yuder had nothing to say and just exhaled a short sigh.

"Anyway, it seems like Hosanna has been more open lately; I can read his thoughts more easily now. I think I've learned quite a lot."

It felt more like Kanna's abilities had taken a significant leap than Hosanna becoming more open. Kanna likely knew this too but chose to not explicitly say so, showing a degree of humility.

"Hosanna personally thinks highly of the sage. He views him as an extremely virtuous and trustworthy benefactor. But recently, he seemed anxious about something related to the sage. Maybe it has something to do with Nahan."

It was strange that Hosanna, being so close to Nahan, would think so highly of the sage. Was their discord a recent development?

"Actually, I found this odd. Hosanna would do anything for Nahan. Even knowing that Nahan is acting unusually toward the sage, I didn't sense much doubt from him. He has mental barriers towards people who follow the sage but dislike Nahan, but no such barriers exist toward the sage. Do you get what I'm saying, Yuder?"

Yuder slowly nodded his head.

"I think I understand."

"Good. So, I've also read Gayle and Doyle with a focus on their knowledge about the sage and found something odd."

Kanna's eyes sparkled with confidence.

"It seems Gayle and Doyle have harbored suspicions about the sage, who hasn't come to rescue them even though they are alive. But still, they genuinely believe the sage is a good person and can be trusted absolutely. They consider this normal, but it really isn't. I've never encountered this with anyone else. So, my conclusion is..."

"That you think the sage's abilities are related to this phenomenon."

"Exactly."

Kanna beamed a satisfying smile at Yuder, who had instantly reached the right conclusion.

"If such a strange occurrence only happens around these individuals, it can't be a coincidence. I'd feel even more certain if I could read those Awakeners from the Star of Nagran in the West again, but even with what I have, it's enough. I'm convinced the sage must be a mental Awakener, and moreover, someone who can naturally alter people's thoughts and feelings!"

"Excellent," Yuder said, offering her an unreserved compliment.

"It even aligns with some new information I've recently discovered about the sage."

"Really? You already knew about this, Yuder?"

"It's not so much that I knew..."

Yuder chose not to mention that the information had come from Enon, but he did share what he knew about a man named Karl Enfile, suspected to be the sage. Kanna showed keen interest upon hearing this.

"If he's really the sage, then it means he left his hometown, returned, and deliberately obscured people's perceptions of him. Given that the sage recently appeared in the capital, it might not have been long since people forgot about Karl Enfile."

It was a valid point. Thanks to her ability to read information, Kanna had better instantaneous insights than anyone else. Yuder thought it was a good decision to inform her about the Star of Nagran and the sage as soon as the imperial palace mission had ended.

"It's something worth checking out."

"Shall I take a look? It doesn't seem that difficult."

"Don't overexert yourself."

"It's really not a big deal. I just need to see if the same mental gaps I sense from Hosanna, Gayle, and Doyle are present in those related to Karl Enfile. And, you know..."

Kanna paused, a sly smile curving her lips. It was a look that made one think of Hinn and Finn.

"Remember I was in the house of Count Gallon before joining the Cavalry? Well, Count Gallon was a second-rank officer in the palace, specifically in charge of the imperial library and archives."

Technically, he would be her father, but neither Kanna nor Yuder considered him to be such.

"Lately, I mean after the party, the Gallon household has been annoyingly persistent in contacting me. So, I was thinking this could be a good opportunity to find out more about Karl Enfile, who managed the documents in the Blue Crown."

If the lower officials of the Blue Crown were in charge of the documents, then by extension, they were under the Empire. That meant they would have been under Count Gallon, who managed the royal library and archives.

An unexpected link, but Yuder shook his head.

"There's no need to go out of your way to contact them for this, Kanna."

"I wasn't planning to. They've been a nuisance, trying to form a connection with me ever since the party. I was going to give them a piece of my mind anyway. If I use them for this, wouldn't Count Gallon be of some help to me?"

Kanna seemed quite pleased with her idea. Her stronger, resilient demeanor contrasted sharply with the woman who had once confessed to still experiencing nightmares from her days in the Gallon household.

In the end, Yuder agreed to her plan.

"But you mustn't act alone. Either I, Gakane, Hinn, or Finn must accompany you."

"Don't worry about a thing, Yuder. Just wait for the news I'll bring!"

Kanna concluded confidently but then softened her eyebrows.

"By the way, why did you seem so out of it earlier?"

The shift in conversation brought Yuder back to thoughts of Kishiar from the day before, plunging him into a dark mental space. Noticing the quick change in Yuder's expression, Kanna looked as if she suddenly had a hunch about something.

"Uh... S... a... r... e... Worrying... this isn't it, right?"

"...What did you say?"

The words were stretched so peculiarly that it was hard to understand at once.

"Oh, never mind if you didn't get it! Ah, I went to see the Commander earlier to report my return to duty today. He looked... kind of tired like you! Everyone must be tired today! Haha. Ha!"

"..."

"..."

Kishiar's face, which had looked tired since yesterday, flickered in Yuder's inner eyelids. Had he dreamed that dream again? Was that why he looked so exhausted?

As if her heart had frozen, Kanna exhaled while watching Yuder, a look of concern in her eyes.

"Yuder. If you're really struggling with something serious, you don't have to tell me. But you know that I'm always on your side, just like I said before, right?"

Yuder looked at the face of his friend, who was cautiously trying to console him. During a time when he couldn't focus even in the West due to issues related to Kishiar, Kanna had been his comfort.

Kanna's abilities were developing at an unprecedented rate. Her 'Information Reading' had gone beyond merely perceiving someone's past actions and could now quickly deduce the most likely scenarios that would soon unfold.

If not for her ability, they wouldn't have caught the rats that had infiltrated the palace so quickly, and the doors would have been easily breached by surprise attacks.

As Yuder had thought when he first discovered her abilities, Kanna might soon be able to foresee even the distant future, not just the past and present.

When that day comes, the secrets about Yuder Aile's future would also be revealed.

'In fact... she did say she had read something from me that time too.'

However, Kanna hadn't elaborated on it. Yuder thought it was time to know about it, something he had considered should eventually be addressed.

"Kanna."

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away!"

"I want to know what you read from me before."

"..."

Kanna looked as if she wanted to smack her own mouth, which had just said, 'Ask away.'

"Um, Yuder, that thing is, you know... Do we really have to discuss it right now?"

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine. Just tell me."

"Uh..."

"I want to know what you know. No, I have to know."

As Kanna wrestled with the dilemma, she looked up as if something had struck her. To Yuder, her bright blue eyes felt like mirrors that could not hide anything.

"...Yuder. Do you think I might have seen something about you that I absolutely shouldn't have? Is that what you're so worried about right now?"

Turning

Chapter 566

"...Yuder. Do you think I might have seen something about you that I absolutely shouldn't have? Is that what you're so worried about right now?"

The statement was both true and false. Kanna had not yet seen the 'something' that Yuder was hiding, the thing she was 'never supposed to know.' However, the possibility that she would discover it in the future was quite high.

But the reason Yuder seemed half-lost in thought right now was precisely because a man had seen that 'something.' So, in a broader sense, Kanna's guess was not entirely wrong.

Kanna's expression, which had succeeded in silencing Yuder more effectively than any torture or weapon, turned incredibly serious.

"Alright, if you're that concerned about it, I'll tell you. But understand this: I never intended to read that part of you."

She wiped the sweat from her forehead as she elaborated on her unexpected activation of her power, which had absolutely no intention behind it.

"So, don't avoid me or look at me differently after you hear this. I really didn't want to read into it... you have to believe me."

"I understand."

Kanna clenched her fists and took a deep breath. Her eyes tightly shut, she confessed in a whisper.

"...I saw...it."

"I didn't catch that, Kanna."

"I saw the Commander! He was using his mouth to take off your glove!"

Silence. Yuder's face went blank. Kanna blurted it out like a machine gun.

"And you were touching Commander's face while wearing that glove! That's all! When I brushed past you, I only read that part when my fingers touched your glove! Seriously, that's it!"

Immediately after she finished speaking, Kanna averted her eyes, hiding her face behind her hands. Yuder exhaled a short breath.

Indeed, just as he had suspected during their previous conversation, the information Kanna had read from him had nothing to do with his past life. It was, however, much more intimate and embarrassing than anything he had imagined, going beyond the realm of speculation.

It was a mixed feeling of disbelief and understanding, finally comprehending why Kanna was so reluctant to speak about it.

'Yes, I remember now. Back in the West, Kishiar did that...'

Back then, Yuder had been deeply distressed because Kishiar had uttered the name 'Yudrain' while dreaming.

Recalling that day, Yuder thought of the unshaken gaze of the man who admitted he too was afraid when Yuder said, "Only you make me fearful."

The passionate intensity he felt at that moment, when Kishiar tore off his glove like a beast and kissed his rough fingertips and scarred knuckles, flooded his thoughts. Those overwhelming emotions were almost unbearable to remember.

Yuder lowered his eyes to his gloved hand.

It felt absurdly real, that he was falling into the same fear he had felt back then.

'Perhaps... even deeper than before.'

Would Kishiar, who had silently retreated back then, also feel the same? Tormenting himself in familiar agony as he waited?

The moment that thought crossed his mind, his heart, which had felt as though it had frozen solid in the chill and darkness, suddenly stirred.

He knew that he had to face all these walls and pain, that it was his own burden to resolve. Yet, despite knowing that, he wished he could just run to Kishiar, pretending as if nothing ever happened.

If he could live like there were no secrets or barriers between them from the beginning, how wonderful that would be. To wrap himself in the warmth of the familiar scent, to close his eyes without hesitation and fall asleep.

If only he could...

"...Yuder?"

Kanna's cautious call snapped him out of his reverie.

'...I know. It's just a delusion. This isn't like me.'

Yuder shook off the fleeting fantasy that had filled his head and looked up.

"You're not... mad at me?"

"Why would I be mad at you? I said I wouldn't be, didn't I?"

"...Well, aren't you uncomfortable about what I read? Or did I misunderstand something? Maybe my ability malfunctioned and the situation wasn't actually like that...!"

A mix of anxiety, uncertainty, and a strange glimmer of hope were visible in Kanna's eyes.

It seemed like she would rather hear that there was nothing between Yuder and the Commander, that she had misread something. But that was not the truth.

Yuder thought of his comrades from his past life. By now, most of them would have known the rumors about his involvement with Kishiar. He had grown so accustomed to these stories trailing behind him that Kanna's cautious attitude toward mentioning his relationship with Kishiar seemed rather peculiar.

Especially since he knew she had kept the fact a secret for so long.

In the past, nobody had ever wanted to know why he was involved with the Commander, nor did anyone understand it was an accident. Yuder himself didn't want to talk about it, convinced that no one would listen or believe him anyway.

But now was different.

"If it's not a misunderstanding," Yuder spoke softly, looking at Kanna.

"Shouldn't you be the one feeling uncomfortable if everything you read was absolutely correct?"

"No, that's not it!"

Kanna immediately shook her head.

"I mean, I was shocked, yes. I don't know how many times I wished I had read it wrong. I even seriously suspected for a moment that you might just be the Commander's one-night plaything. Considering the rumors and the social status, I agonized over whether it's really an okay relationship, whether I should just pretend not to know... Oh, no! Anyway, that's not the point."

Spouting her unsettling thoughts, Kanna snapped back to her senses upon meeting Yuder's gaze.

"But when the Commander announced he would dance with you, I couldn't help but feel he was sincere. And from what I gleaned, your... aura, your emotions... Can I speak about it?"

"There's no point in keeping secrets anymore."

"True, but still..."

Her ears flushed, Kanna struggled to finish her sentence.

"It... seemed like... you were... deeply... infatuated with the Commander."

"...Me?"

"Yes, you! You, Yuder!"

Kanna covered her face again. "Ugh, aaah," she groaned in agony. She twisted her body, trying to somehow disperse the shock she had received from her own words. It was heartbreaking to see her like this.

The phrase "deeply infatuated" felt incredibly foreign, but upon reflection, it was true. He had already become aware on the day they kissed that he was so out of his mind he couldn't maintain any distance from Kishiar La Orr.

All the distance he had tried so hard to keep, all the secrets, were crumbling like sand dissolving in water. It would be more strange not to call this state "deeply infatuated."

"I know you wanted to keep this a secret," Kanna spoke up. "I really wish I could've remained ignorant too. But now that I know, how can I stop seeing it, thinking about it?"

"..."

"I'll still try to forget it. I won't ask any more questions than what I've seen. I haven't told anyone, and I swear on my faith, my mother, and my life that it will remain a secret forever. Trust me!"

It seemed unnecessary, but Kanna immediately raised her hand and recited a short vow. She seemed so decisive, as if she had imagined this scenario in her head hundreds of times.

"Ah, saying it out loud is really refreshing."

After her vow, Kanna seemed almost entirely back to her usual self. Although her ears were still red, she seemed genuinely relieved.

And oddly enough, through this conversation, he felt a little lighter, as if a weight had lifted from his chest. Even though he knew that none of his real concerns had been resolved.

So, after some hesitation, he spoke.

"Kanna."

"Hm?"

"I thought you might have read deeper into me."

"Is there something deeper than this?"

Kanna's eyes trembled without restraint.

"Yes, there is. A lot."

"Not even one?"

"Finding out someone else's secret isn't a good feeling. But even if that day comes, I want to..."

He hesitated for a moment.

"... continue to be with you just like now."

He was well aware that it was a selfish wish, much like it was with Kishiar.

"..."

"Thank you for agreeing to be on my side. My heart feels lighter because of it."

Kanna, who had been shaking her hand as if asking what could be deeper than this, suddenly froze. A sudden moisture appeared in her big eyes as she stared blankly at him.

He thought she was about to cry, but Kanna didn't shed a tear. She swiftly covered her eyes, and under her hand, her lips broke into a smile that was wider and brighter than ever before.

"Ah, what's this? You're not like yourself when you say things like that, Yuder. But, me too."

"..."

"I was really worried you'd distance yourself from me after experiencing my ability. Thank you for not doing that. Whatever you're hiding, whatever I end up reading, nothing will change. Because what you wish for is what I wish for too!"

With newfound confidence in her improved ability control, Kanna reached out and grasped his hand, shaking it vigorously. It felt like it had been an eternity since they had this sort of physical contact.

"Like you said earlier, finding out something you didn't want to know isn't always good. But isn't living in ignorance not entirely happy either? That's how I try to think about my ability."

Her final words left ripples in his heart.

Turning

Chapter 567

"Like you said earlier, finding out something you didn't want to know isn't always good. But isn't living in ignorance not entirely happy either? That's how I try to think about my ability."

Her final words left ripples in Yuder's heart.

'Knowing everything isn't necessarily good, but living in ignorance isn't blissful either.'

If one didn't even realize their own ignorance, could they truly be free in their quest for truth? Yuder himself was consumed by the desire to know the truth about his past life.

And within that truth, there were things that Kishiar from his past life had not revealed to him.

'I remember feeling really frustrated back then when Kishiar wouldn't tell me anything.'

Where Kishiar went during late nights, why he handed over command to Yuder and left for Peletta but would secretly return when least expected, whether he had really been planning a rebellion... All the questions that a younger Yuder had once been curious about began to flood his mind.

Yuder had defied Emperor Katchian to give Kishiar a chance because he wanted to know. And he probably felt frustrated every time he saw Kishiar, precisely because he wasn't happy living in ignorance.

All of this was the result of the desire to know.

Even now, that feeling persisted, despite having forgotten much and trying to forget even more since his death. He wouldn't be like this if he didn't genuinely have regrets.

Yes, Kanna was absolutely right.

Living in ignorance isn't blissful.

'And Kishiar must feel the same way now.'

Just as Yuder began to undergo changes after learning fragments of the truth about his past life, Kishiar too would not be able to escape this fate, now that he knew some of Yuder's secrets.

The man who enjoyed intellectual games and the thrill of breaking down barriers, and who laughed joyfully while doing so, would act differently, especially around Yuder. And Yuder knew this better than anyone.

What he knew was not limited to emotions. The biggest difference between his previous and current life was that all lingering hesitations between them had vanished, and they knew each other even physically.

Yuder began to think back to the times when he'd passionately desired his counterpart, ignoring everything else in his current life. He recalled the moments when he'd discovered just how far he could go just because he wanted something and how much of the other person he could desire—these moments were filled with both ecstasy and tears.

It was far more than a mere physical encounter. He couldn't dismiss what he had felt—the oneness, the shared pain—while being continuously intertwined.

Yuder pondered for a long time.

'Alright... let's admit that waiting for the situation to turn completely in my favor is excessive greed.'

After all, the world had never been kind to Yuder. While Kishiar and the Emperor might have had their share of luck, Yuder himself was more familiar with misfortune than fortune.

And in the face of such unpredictable misfortunes, Yuder's response had always been the same—to simply maintain his usual self and to avoid unnecessary complications.

'let's not overcomplicate things.' Yuder decided to set aside his burgeoning fear and retreat, opting to assess the situation he found himself in with a cool head.

‘While this incident has been embarrassing, if I think about it, it's actually surprising that everything has gone more or less as expected up until now. No one knows what will happen tomorrow.’

Even if Yuder managed to discover everything right away, how Kishiar would react after learning the truth of his dream was unknown. There was no benefit in avoiding the uncertainties.

‘Kishiar saw not his own death but mine in his vision. Given that Kishiar himself still has many questions, it might be fortunate for me to bring up my side first.’

Certainly, Kishiar would ponder over various speculations he had made up till now. However, Yuder resolved not to become mired in questions without clear answers.

‘I initially wanted to understand everything from my end and have a frank discussion, but given how things have turned out, there's no helping it. Anyway, no matter what happens, it can't be worse than my past life.’

The thought that his situation couldn't get worse than before surprisingly lent him a measure of positivity.

‘The reason I can afford such idle concerns is because I've grown too accustomed to this excessive warmth. My present contentment has sprouted excessive desire.’

In his past life, there hadn't even been time for Yuder and Kishiar to step back and think things through. Everything had ended before he could truly understand who Kishiar was and what he thought of Yuder. But now, at least, there was no such worry. Hadn't he strived for this all along?

‘As Kishiar always says, one has to be alive to accomplish anything.’

Even if Kishiar chose differently after learning the truth, that fact remained unchangeable.

‘I'll do what I can do now. And trust Kishiar, whom I've observed thus far.’

Having concluded, Yuder stood up.

"Commander, it's Yuder Aile."

He knocked rhythmically on the Commander's door and opened it. Kishiar, who, according to Kanna, should have been there just a moment ago, was not in sight. The coat usually hanging on the coat rack, which Kishiar wore when he worked, was also missing—evidence that the Commander had been out for some time.

‘Where could he be?’

Yuder cautiously scanned the room and noticed something different. A transparent sword stand that usually held the divine sword was empty.

‘The divine sword is missing. Did he take it with him?’

To where? No place came to mind.

"...Sir Aile?"

At that moment, a familiar voice sounded from behind him. It was Nathan Zuckerman. Yuder wasted no time in asking.

"Where did the Commander go with the divine sword?"

"The Pope requested a discussion with him and the divine sword, so he's gone to the audience chamber."

"Did he go alone?"

"He went with some other members of the Cavalry."

As if saying, 'Didn't you know?' the southern knight looked at Yuder with a faint hint of puzzlement. Finally, Yuder breathed a sigh of relief.

'...Alright, given the circumstances, it's only natural that he'd go with others, especially since I haven't returned to duty yet. I showed unnecessary concern.'

"Understood. Thank you for informing me."

"Please have a seat."

The person who stopped Yuder as he was about to leave was unexpectedly Nathan Zuckerman. The knight put down the papers he had been holding and gestured toward the sofa.

"Since he'll be back soon anyway, it would be better for you to wait while having some tea. I also have something to discuss with you, so let's talk briefly."

"...Understood."

Nathan Zuckerman had something to say to him? The possibilities were either too many or none at all—it was a conundrum. Yuder quietly sat down where Nathan had indicated.

A few moments later, a man adeptly brewed tea leaves and set down a teacup in front of Yuder, which looked somewhat small compared to the size of his hand. Some snacks were also brought in from somewhere.

Yuder didn't touch the snacks but lifted the teacup instead. For a while, not a word was exchanged between the two. Just as a mild curiosity began to arise about who would speak first, Nathan Zuckerman finally broke the silence.

"The Duke has been making some unusual requests since yesterday."

"...What kind of requests?"

"He asked for sleeping pills, which he had stopped taking since becoming an Awakener. He also took some headache medicine. He even ordered me to bring old historical books based on scriptures and grimoires written in ancient script. These were rare books, primarily designated as restricted and unavailable outside the imperial library."

"..."

"I suspect that these strange requests are somehow connected to Sir Aile. What do you think?"

Sleeping pills, headache medicine, and restricted books.

Each was surprising in its own way.

'So Kishiar has... continued to have those dreams?'

Despite the fragrant aroma rising from his tea, Yuder couldn't discern its flavor. After a lengthy silence, he nodded.

"It seems your suspicions are likely correct, Sir Zuckerman."

"You once told me to always be cautious and do my utmost to protect the Duke."

"..."

"The Duke wished for me not to give any advice regarding this matter, so ordinarily, I should have kept my mouth shut. However, right now, I'm telling you this as a precaution."

With a stern and impassive face, the southern knight spoke quietly.

"There are times when I think you might already know everything there is to know about not only this Cavalry and the Peletta Knight Order but also about me, the Duke, and others. It's an absurd thought, but sometimes, intuition goes beyond what's visible."

For a moment, the air between the two seemed to freeze. Yuder listened intently to Nathan's words.

"I don't doubt the Duke has had similar thoughts. Yet the fact he says nothing suggests that whoever you are, whatever you are, doesn't matter."

"..."

The heavily weighted words burrowed deep into his ears.

"I've placed the items the Duke requested under that desk over there. You're the only one who can understand his intentions after examining them, so take a look and make your judgment."

Yuder rose from his seat and walked toward the spot Nathan had indicated. Indeed, hidden from casual view were a few stacks of books and documents.

Turning

Chapter 568

"I've placed the items the Duke requested under that desk over there. You're the only one who can understand his intentions after examining them, so take a look and make your judgment."

Yuder rose from his seat and walked towards the area indicated. Indeed, there were stacks of books and papers hidden in a place unlikely to catch anyone's eye.

Surveying them, Yuder noted that each item emitted a stale, half-rotten smell. He picked up a few of the closest books.

The text was in an ancient language he barely understood, but fortunately, the titles also had small translations in the modern script, making them easy enough to understand.

At first glance, it seemed as if the topics were randomly selected. But that couldn't possibly be true. The person who had ordered these books must have had a clear reason for choosing them.

Yuder set them back down and quickly skimmed through the titles of other books and papers. Aside from a few that had no titles, most were on similar themes.

"Healing, death, protection, and time," Yuder muttered, naming the recurring terms.

'Time was a subject I mentioned in Duke Tain's experimental diary that caught my attention, but the rest are...'

Books that seemed to explore taboo methods for absolute protection or escaping from death through potent healing were the majority. There was only one conclusion to be drawn from this.

It seemed as though Kishiar was not seeking to understand why Yuder appeared as a condemned man in his dream. Rather, he was looking for a way to prevent such an event from ever happening again, or a solution if it did. He was even willing to peruse these dangerous books to find it.

Yuder picked up the book '<Methodological Magic for the Perfect Preservation of Life and Death>' once more.

It was one of the few whose title was not written in ancient text. The title sounded reasonable, and he thought the content would be easy to read. Surprisingly, the book was filled with more illustrations than text, all of which were absurdly cruel and gruesome.

Yuder frowned involuntarily as he skimmed through the horrific images.

Whoever wrote this book had an unscrupulous mind; no sane person could glean anything from it. The only ones who might were psychopathic killers or equally deranged mages who wrote books like this for the sake of pleasure.

Without uttering a word, Yuder slammed the book shut and tossed it aside harshly.

'Some of the books here might not be forbidden texts, but this one definitely is. It's clear why it was banned.'

He had only skimmed one, but his desire to investigate further had entirely vanished.

Yuder took a long, deep breath to calm his emotions.

At the very least, it was clear that Kishiar La Orr had a certain level of determination in seeking answers about the recent dream.

It was undeniable that he was keeping all possibilities open, without any limitations.

In search of an answer solely for Yuder's sake, a heavy sense of resolve weighed down on his shoulders. Unconsciously, Yuder closed his eyes.

"...I can hear the carriage approaching. It seems they have returned."

Nathan Zuckerman broke the silence, as if he had been waiting for Yuder to absorb all he could from the books. Though Yuder heard nothing, he trusted the Swordmaster's keen senses, far beyond that of any ordinary man.

Kishiar, who had left for the Grand Temple, would soon return. Yuder returned the book to its original place on the shelf.

"Thank you for your counsel, Sir Zuckerman."

"Have you made your decision?"

"I had intended to discuss something with the Commander upon his return, regardless. But without having seen these books, I would have had difficulty confirming the rightness of my coming here."

Whether he read the books or not, Yuder's intended course of action wouldn't have changed. But knowing he hadn't arrived too late brought a different sense of relief.

"So, if there's nothing pressing on your end, Sir Zuckerman, could you return later?"

Nathan Zuckerman's gaze met Yuder's. The faithful knight rose silently, bowing his head before departing.

"Very well."

Left alone, Yuder looked around the Commander's office. The room, arranged according to Kishiar's tastes, was a place both were intimately familiar with, having spent countless hours together.

Closing his eyes, Yuder could vividly recall every object's location. Following this trail of memories, he stopped in front of an ornately curved drawer.

As he opened the first compartment, an organized array of items caught his eye. Without hesitation, Yuder picked up one and headed for the table.

"Well, Commander. We shall take our leave now."

The door opened, and in came the voice of Steiber Rendley, the Deputy Commander of Sul Division, who was unable to conceal his excitement. The tall man who had come in halted his steps upon spotting the shadow seated behind the coal stove.

"You're here."

"I felt someone was waiting, but naturally assumed it would be Nathan."

"Unfortunately, it's me," Yuder responded, emotionless. Kishiar, in the process of removing his outer garment, smiled faintly.

"Unfortunate? This is more like an unexpected stroke of luck, isn't it?"

It was the first time they had seen each other and the first conversation they had since yesterday. Although it felt strangely like meeting after a long absence, everything also flowed seamlessly, as if nothing had ever happened.

"I heard you went to the Grand Temple. Summoned by the Pope, I believe?"

"Yes. He wanted to meet the new master of the divine sword personally."

"And what did he say?"

"He said he was pleased to meet the new master of the divine sword before departing for God's side."

"That's surprisingly straightforward approval. Others might not have been so pleased."

The current Pope was extremely old and not one to explicitly express his political opinions. To put it kindly, he was a quiet and devout man; otherwise, one could say he maintained a neutral stance, refraining from intervening in any conflict.

"The meeting was supposed to be a private one, but oddly enough, word got around and many people insisted on joining. It made it easier for me to prove that I am indeed the master of the divine sword. All I had to do was unsheathe it in front of a host of witnesses."

Yuder immediately grasped the implications behind the words.

'So the Papal side intended to keep today's meeting highly confidential. However, thanks to some fortuitous rumors, they had no choice but to acknowledge it after seeing him drawing the divine sword in front of everyone,' he thought.

The source of those 'fortuitous rumors' was not hard to guess.

'It must be a collaboration between the Emperor and Kishiar,' Yuder concluded.

If only the Pope and his close associates knew this, it might have stayed a rumor. But others had witnessed it too, dispelling any notion that it was merely hearsay. Kishiar had walked the path he was meant to take, looking remarkably relaxed, as if he couldn't possibly be bolstered by sedatives and headache medicine.

"What's the reason you've waited for me this far? And what's this about a tactical game board?" Kishiar inquired.

The man who unsheathed the sword and placed it on top of the magic stone stove approached Yuder. His shadow flickered, growing larger and smaller as it danced in front of the multicolored flames of the magic stone stove.

"I have something to discuss with you, Commander. But this caught my eye," Yuder replied.

"It wasn't exactly placed conspicuously," the man retorted.

"It caught my eye nevertheless," Yuder insisted.

Yuder tapped the tactical game board and pieces that he had taken from Kishiar's drawer. Kishiar's eyes momentarily narrowed as he observed the board, perfectly arranged according to the rules they followed when playing the game.

"You said you learned a little as a child, but you seem rather well-acquainted with it," Kishiar observed.

"It's no lie," Yuder confirmed.

By Yuder's standards, considering it was a game he had learned ten years ago in his previous life, stating it as a childhood memory wasn't wrong. He hadn't enjoyed the game since Kishiar's passing, so in a way, he had only learned it for its cultural significance.

Kishiar reached for a game piece representing a lord that was closest to him. As he did, an old imperial adage slipped from his lips, "There's no tool like a tactical game for simplifying matters."

In his previous life, Kishiar had taught Yuder the tactical game, uttering the same adage.

'It is said that Farnacius, the genius strategist during the era of Secret Emperor always played a tactical game when discussing important matters. Sometimes, playing a game can be helpful for an honest exchange.'

Of course, Yuder hadn't agreed with this, promptly forgetting it shortly after hearing it. However, when he decided that today was the day for an important conversation, that saying was the first thing that came to mind.

"Alright, let's play after a long while," Yuder agreed.

Without asking further, Kishiar took a seat opposite Yuder.

His golden hair, usually impeccably styled, now slightly disheveled and covering his forehead, captured Yuder's attention.

Yuder picked up a black piece laid in front of him.

"Let's begin, then," he announced.

Turning

Chapter 569

"Let us begin then."

The original name of the tactical game was 'Imuran Yute Mesis.' A complex and lengthy name derived from archaic words, few ever pronounced it correctly.

The game's pieces consisted of eight types, twenty-four in total. When played by two people, most often two types would be excluded, leaving six types with eighteen pieces. Yuder surveyed the set before him: a king, a general, a minister, a knight, a priest, and a common piece.

Made from smoothly polished stones with wave-like patterns, Yuder had handled these pieces multiple times in his previous life, when he had learned the game.

When Kishiar left his position as Commander to go to Peletta, he had left most of his belongings in his office, including these pieces. Yuder subsequently tucked the unused game board into a drawer, never to take it out again as Kishiar never took his position again.

It was strange how, even though these were certainly the first pieces he had touched in this new life, they still felt familiar in his hands.

White and black pieces. The view of the Commander's office where they both sat facing each other. And Kishiar La Orr before him. Everything was both the same and different.

Yuder moved a piece. As he advanced a common piece, Kishiar also lifted his hand and moved his white common piece. The graceful way Kishiar held the piece, the expressionless look on his face until he placed it down, everything was as Yuder remembered.

'Yes... you may not know, but I do.'

How Kishiar initiated the game to lightly gauge his opponent's intentions. Which pieces he used under what circumstances. How he moved each type of piece. Yuder knew it all.

Information gleaned from the countless games he had played with Kishiar resurfaced in his mind, one by one. Without hesitation, Yuder dove back into those familiar patterns.

Snap. The white piece Kishiar placed was promptly captured by Yuder's black piece. Then, another white piece behind it attempted to seize the opportunity through sacrifice. But even that move was anticipated, and the black piece gracefully dodged it.

Though Kishiar seemed to take his time placing his pieces, Yuder barely hesitated as he swiftly countered each move. As a result, the game progressed unusually quickly.

After losing three pieces in quick succession, Kishiar finally paused and slowly spoke, his eyes fixed on the board.

"This... You're not thinking about tactics and strategy before moving, aren't you?"

His gaze shifted to Yuder's hand, and then to his face.

"It seems more like you're anticipating my moves and countering accordingly."

For a moment, a thrilling sensation coursed through Yuder's heart.

'As expected.'

He had believed that Kishiar La Orr could discern the hidden truth from this game alone.

Hiding his rapidly beating heart, Yuder tightened his grip on his piece.

"Would you like to concede defeat?"

"No. That's not an option."

Kishiar placed a new piece. The piece landed on the board with a click, its orientation subtly different from before.

"Let's see how you respond to this move, shall we?"

This time, Kishiar made an unusual move with his priest piece—a piece that traditionally stayed between the king and the general and scarcely moved until the game's latter half. It was as if he had thrown out this piece to see how well Yuder could read him, employing a tactic he wouldn't usually use.

‘True, the usual Kishiar would never play such a move.’

A typical person might have assumed that Kishiar had recklessly played a suicidal move and would immediately take advantage of the opening by advancing other pieces. But Yuder did the opposite. He also deployed his priest piece, positioning it to protect the other pieces on the board.

‘If I had advanced, I would've been captured instantly. I already know he's adept at using his priest piece when pretending to be careless, all the while hiding a knife behind his back.’

A faint smile crossed Kishiar's lips when he realized Yuder had once again seen through his move.

"So you've figured this out as well. Then..."

All of a sudden, Kishiar's pieces began to move haphazardly across the board. The movement seemed random, as if meant solely to create chaos. Half the moves appeared genuinely thoughtless, like they were just to sow confusion, while the other half were deceptive moves with hidden intent. The board became as chaotic as if played by children learning the game for the first time.

From that moment on, Yuder also took more time to think about his moves. The number of his black pieces being captured by the white pieces began to increase. Yuder briefly exhaled, watching his black pieces fall one after another to Kishiar's rapidly moving hand.

‘Creating chaos to keep me from reading his strategy makes his task doubly difficult. Yet, he's managed this far.’

Should he credit that to Kishiar being Kishiar? Although the odds were clearly in Yuder's favor, he felt a hint of peril. Kishiar's skill at quickly swinging the board's momentum in his favor was indeed remarkable. Had Yuder shown even a trace of confusion or made an error, he might have lost control of the game.

'But... that can't be a reason for me to lose.'

Yuder meticulously recalled how Kishiar played in their previous games and matched his moves accordingly. No matter how chaotic the board became, the strategy was still fundamentally Kishiar's.

The answer was definitely in his memory.

The black pieces advanced unabated across the chaotic board. The two sets of pieces, facing off and baring their teeth, seemed almost mirror images of each other.

After Yuder effortlessly captured the chaotic pieces, Kishiar was left with too few pieces to turn the tide. The most straightforward path to victory was now clear: capture Kishiar's last remaining king piece, called "Imum."

Yuder toppled Kishiar's king piece and declared the end.

"I declare victory."

"How unfortunate."

Kishiar smiled and dropped his last remaining common piece. Yuder furrowed his brow, realizing that if that piece had moved as planned, it would have taken his own Imum, his king piece.

"When did that piece get there?"

Even if Yuder lost a king, it couldn't compare to Kishiar losing both his. But if this were a real war, it wouldn't have been an entirely satisfying victory, having lost one of his king pieces.

Yuder silently gazed at the man before him who had managed to get this far in a situation where he was at a disadvantage, facing an opponent who seemed to read him all too well, and on top of that, without having slept properly. Kishiar broke the silence, his tone tinged with jest.

"Shouldn't you be happier about winning?"

It was his first victory in this game, but he hadn't won by fighting his way; he didn't start the game to win in the first place. Therefore, he had no reason to be jubilant.

"You of all people know that I didn't truly fight," Yuder retorted.

Kishiar responded with a silent chuckle.

"In the second round, we'll use special pieces."

Yuder sorted the two sets of pieces by color once more. This time, the board was rotated so that the white tiles came to him and the black tiles went to Kishiar. Before starting the game, each placed their tiles in their respective positions and secretly selected a special piece.

Yuder picked one of the standard tiles and designated it as a special piece, then set it back in place.

'Kishiar's special piece will most likely be the knight tile,' he thought.

The second game commenced.

"Not applying the special piece rule in the first round was your way of showing how well you understand all this, wasn't it?" Kishiar made the first move, his piece meeting the board with a small clack.

"You know exactly how I play this game, don't you?"

"Yes," Yuder acknowledged, sending his own piece out to meet Kishiar's. Clack.

"That's a separate matter from skill," he added. Clack.

"If you already know your enemy, you won't struggle," Kishiar declared. Clack.

"Yes. And that dream is similar to this for me," Yuder spoke up. Silence.

Kishiar's fingertips, which were to move the next piece, hesitated for a moment. Yuder kept his gaze fixed on the piece in front of him as he continued speaking.

"The dream you saw signifies the end of a game I lost. Are you not going to make your next move?"

"...I was momentarily contemplating a clever move," Kishiar finally said, his fingers picking up a piece and placing it gently on the board. Yet the sound of the tile meeting the board this time was softer, almost inaudible.

Without waiting, Yuder quickly grabbed his own piece and moved it. Clack.

"I may not be very good at games, but I've never lost the same way twice. I intend to keep it that way this time as well," Yuder declared.

Kishiar picked up a new tile, and with a slow motion, his fingers let out another soft clack as he placed it on the board.

"...But you have lost before."

"Nobody wins every game they play," Yuder countered.

"The way you played earlier, it was the way of someone accustomed to it after overcoming numerous defeats," Kishiar lifted his head.

"That's my way," he affirmed.

Turning

Chapter 570

In the brief meeting of their eyes, indescribable emotions flickered and passed.

The way Yuder had played the game so far was a mirror image of Kishiar's own style. It was fundamentally different from mere perceptiveness or cunning.

Every move Yuder made, every piece he laid down without a moment's hesitation, even the choices he made when selecting his strategy—all resonated with how Kishiar would have acted.

Neither flinched when employing rarely-used self-destructive moves or deliberately flawed plays that seemed to forfeit victory. A shiver pierced through Kishiar as if he were facing another version of himself.

Could anyone truly mimic another's behavior in unpredictable situations—even small habits—to such an extent, even if they already knew the future?

No, this was something beyond human senses, beyond evidence. It was as if an old callus, formed over many years and perfectly melded to the body, had appeared.

Therefore, this was neither the result of insight nor foresight.

Things that couldn't be comprehended by logic alone amalgamated, spreading across the hexagonal board like a universe encapsulated in a small array of tiles.

Kishiar recalled the numerous surreal feelings he'd had since meeting Yuder, and all the enigmatic remarks Yuder had made. The moments when he understood with his heart, not his head, what it meant to desire a future. Those desires, ambitions, and the connections that no one else could see.

Everything he couldn't figure out, had set aside, or hadn't known all mixed together in his thoughts.

Each thought had originally been like a frail, thin thread. But as they all came together to form a single conclusion, those fragile threads twisted into a robust, unbreakable tapestry.

Clutching the piece tightly, Kishiar summed it up in one sentence:

"The person who taught you this game was me, wasn't it?"

It was an extraordinary conclusion.

Yet, if the result stood before one's eyes, it was impossible not to believe. From the moment they had met, their world had contained no impossibilities.

Yuder put down his piece on the board in front of the waiting Kishiar.

Snap.

"Yes."

In that moment, the gaps between Yuder's white tiles perfectly closed, completing a beautiful formation.

It was a regular tile that normally couldn't move in that direction. However, beneath the tile Yuder placed, a symbol glowed, indicating a special tile.

It was the 'Formation of Wings,' the strategy Kishiar had first learned and preferred in tactical games.

Originally, the formation involved an arduous and complex task: advancing pieces that should retreat and retreating pieces that should advance. Only then did it radiate its true potential—a tactical

formation that enveloped the opponent without them realizing, reversed the colors both inside and out, and struck like a blazing fire, symbolizing a miraculous victory.

For a long time, both Kishiar and Yuder couldn't take their eyes off the completed formation.

"Actually, this is the first time I've successfully completed this formation since learning it," Yuder quietly spoke.

"You like the Formation of Wings, don't you?"

"...I do."

Though he had never admitted this to anyone, Kishiar's voice dropped to an almost inaudible murmur. Yuder averted his eyes from Kishiar's trembling crimson pupils.

Through the small world of a tactical game, Kishiar had come to fully grasp the secrets of Yuder.

It was not a simple vision or information existing in the current timeline that haunted Kishiar's dreams, but a different future that had already transpired yet would never come.

The reasons behind all the actions Yuder had taken thus far alone.

And even where the enigmatic way Yuder presented evidence had originated from.

The answer was simple, but believing it was not. And even if one did believe, how to perceive it was uncertain.

Yet, the man before him...

Kishiar looked at Yuder with a sorrowful, but not angry, gaze. The slightest flicker in those consistently calm eyes shook Yuder's heart without a sound.

He truly believed everything Yuder had shown him, and it seemed he had easily guessed why Yuder had finally decided to reveal it all.

Yuder saw him set down the piece he had been holding, outside of the board.

"I concede defeat."

With a heavy voice, the second game ended in Kishiar's forfeit. Yet neither touched the formation completed on the board.

"In the dream, I was you, but not you," Kishiar's voice softly echoed out of nowhere.

Yuder immediately realized this must be more detail about his own death, vaguely dreamt by Kishiar.

"When the dream kept recurring, when the darkness gradually lightened, and after seeing the reflections in the eyes of those leading the way, I finally knew who it was."

Even then, when he didn't want to be sure.

"All I could think of was stopping it if it were to happen later. But what scared me more was..."

Kishiar hesitated for a moment, then met Yuder's eyes.

"The irrational speculation that it might have already happened to you, and you came to me after everything had ended without my knowledge. If all has already occurred, and my hands now can do nothing, how could I possibly save you? That thought alone filled my head so much..."

His choked voice briefly stopped, then continued with a bitter smile.

"...I hadn't felt this powerless since I first arrived in Peletta."

A young Kishiar mentioned by the mage Hellem popped into Yuder's mind. Even just a fragment of a story heard directly from Kishiar's lips provided a suffocating sensation.

"You didn't seem to show it," Yuder finally said.

"I was confident I could hide it. Although it seems that's not working too well these days," Kishiar responded, joking but without humor.

Yuder kept silent for a while before asking dryly, "So, how do you feel now that you've finally found the answer?"

"I was just thinking that the old saying about truth losing its taste the closer you get to it isn't wrong."

"Truth be told, I came here prepared for you to expel me in anger, citing deceit."

"I thought I knew all of my own habits, yet it appears I still don't know myself that well," Kishiar said with a faint smile.

"Exercising caution with unbelievable answers isn't deceit; it's a virtue. Wasn't it me who said I wanted to find the answer to the secret you hold?"

"..."

"Of course, I'm angry and it's incredibly painful, but that emotion isn't directed at you. How could it be?"

When he spoke those words, his eyes were colder and more distant than ever before. Yet that gaze vanished in an instant, leaving only a look of desperate yearning directed at Yuder.

"There's only one answer I wish to convey to you. A gratitude for enduring all the moments leading to this answer, for standing in front of me, alive and breathing."

Gratitude.

"And... if you would allow me, the powerless desire of a man in love to hold you, as you are now."

And desire.

Every word that flowed from Kishiar's lips felt as if it were on fire, searing and painful. If words had temperature, Yuder would have been reduced to ashes by now.

"May I go there now?"

Yuder closed his eyes and then opened them, answering not with words, but by pushing the chair away from him first.

The moment Yuder tightly yet gently hugged Kishiar's neck, a flood of indescribable emotions washed over him—fears and dark worries that he'd carried this far, and all the unfamiliar, desperate trembles that he'd thought had corroded away in the past.

If this was love, Yuder most certainly loved Kishiar.

Neither could say anything more.

They simply held each other, inhaling deeply as if they were one.

"Since I've won again, may I make another request?"

Some time later, Yuder asked for one thing while nestled in Kishiar's arms. Regardless of winning or losing, Kishiar would have probably granted any request, but Yuder insisted on stating a reason anyway.

"Go on."

"Please return those useless forbidden texts. The answer lies with me, not within those books."

"...Nathan told you, didn't he?"

"He told me in order to keep me on my guard. It's a brilliant decision befitting him. Don't say anything."

Kishiar's lips twisted in a bitter smile.

"It's not just the forbidden texts. There are also diaries and records from the First Empresses and palace women from the First Emperor's time. Rare documents you won't find unless you're searching the palace archives."

"I wasn't aware of that. Still, please return the forbidden texts. No matter how much we read about forbidden magic that artificially preserves the flayed, it'll be useless."

"I understand."

Kishiar, who had agreed to do so, looked down at the board he'd left mid-game.

"It's a shame we'll never see this again once it's put away."

Yuder interpreted the melancholy in those words a little differently.

"Don't worry, this won't end with just two games. A third match can be requested at any time."

"That's not what I meant, but...actually, upon consideration, perhaps taking our time to start a new game might provide a better opportunity for conversation."

The man who had been contemplating turned the board once again.

"Very well. Let's restart the game. But this time, for every fallen piece, you have to answer one of my questions. What do you say?"

"Sounds good."

Yuder had no intention of ending the conversation at this point either. If the game could facilitate the dialogue, then that was even better.

"Since I lost the last round, shall I go first again?"

"Well, either side can go first, but... If we're to play the game, shouldn't you let me move to the opposite side? You'll have to let go of me, won't you?"

To restart the game, they would have to return to their original positions. Yet the man who had Yuder sitting on his lap showed no sign of letting go.

"Wouldn't it be fine to keep this posture, as long as we're not applying any special rules?"

"How could it be fine? It's uncomfortable to make moves from this distance."

"You can just rotate the board."

"If you insist..."

Though it was somewhat baffling, in the end, the two of them ended up in the ludicrous act of sitting together and playing a tactical game.