

Turning 791

Chapter 791

"If I... if I further aid the Cavalry... can they save Nahan?" Hossana asked tentatively.

'Indeed, this is the crux of the matter,' Yuder thought, unsurprised. Having assisted the Cavalry and verified the truth, what else could follow but such a plea? However, Yuder did not betray his thoughts and quietly spoke up.

"I fail to grasp your meaning. Do you believe Nahan's life is in peril?"

Hosanna, trembling yet continuing haltingly, said, "The sage, is merciful, or so I thought... but those around Nahan are different. Those who dislike him will not miss this chance, especially after he directly opposed the sage and even suffered injuries. And if the Cavalry is added to the mix..."

Unable to continue, Hosanna covered his face, bowing his head, his breathing ragged with fear.

"It's surprising. Even you know of the deep animosity between those following the sage and those loyal to Nahan within the Star of Nagran."

Even individuals like the brothers Gayle and Doyle, who followed the sage and disliked Nahan, had good relations with Hosanna. Those who knew him generally spoke well of him, so his awareness of this discord was unexpected.

"How could I not know? I have been closer to Nahan than anyone else..."

Hosanna slowly lowered his hands, revealing the fearful and sad eyes of a young man of southern descent.

"In the Star of Nagran, many empathize and align with Nahan, but more do not. Until now, I could confront them, but not anymore. And if the sage's allegiance shifts... who will mediate then?"

This notion of 'mediation' suggested much.

It revealed that Hosanna hadn't lived in ignorance, but rather, had been making efforts to keep the surrounding atmosphere harmonious at Nahan's side.

The most dangerous kind in such entanglements is someone like him – innately good, gentle, and kind. But this shouldn't be mistaken for harmlessness. Hosanna, in his benevolence, would go to great lengths to find ways to favor Nahan.

'A fragile appearance should not be underestimated...'

Help isn't only through great physical strength. Sometimes, a single word can sway hearts and lead to mistakes.

Though thinking this, Yuder remained unmoved in posture and expression and continued, "So you're saying, in your view, Nahan would likely lose if he confronted the sage? Is that a fair assumption?"

"..."

"Then why should the Cavalry intervene in a self-destructive fray, especially to save him? Are you aware of the innocent imperial citizens he's killed, the buildings destroyed, and the suffering he's caused?"

"That is..."

The truth was that the Cavalry would benefit from acting first, given the clear risk of their self-destruction and the looming danger of a disaster in the south. Particularly for someone as unpredictable and dangerous as Nahan.

However, unaware of these broader circumstances, Hosanna's complexion turned deathly pale.

"He argues that Awakeners must be protected unconditionally, while non-Awakeners can be killed without reason. But being Awakeners isn't innate. Yesterday's non-Awakeners could suddenly become Awakeners tomorrow in this world."

The truth was, due to the rare occurrence of Awakenings and the newness of this phenomenon, many harbored misconceptions. There were no predetermined Awakeners; conversely, an Awakener

could lose their powers at any moment due to a rampage or injury, becoming indistinguishable from a non-Awakener.

"So, whom does he intend to protect and whom to kill?"

"..."

Hosanna bit his lower lip so hard that it bled.

"Moreover, even the Awakener siblings he claimed to protect were left to be captured while he fled. You yourself have been abandoned. And yet, you ask to save him using your power as leverage? Is Nahan more important than your own life? It's preposterous."

Hosanna could not counter Yuder's words. He trembled, his shoulders shaking, and in a tearful voice, he murmured, "I know. The crimes committed by Nahan are... grave. But... he wasn't always like that. He saved many suffering Awakeners, sacrificing himself to protect the Star of Nagran, longing for a safe haven for everyone... His only promise with the sage was just that."

Yuder's attention was caught by the mention of a promise with the sage amidst the incoherent sobs.

'According to Kanna's speculation and reports, the sage's brainwashing ability seems to involve subtly embedding simple commands through speech, likely effective only once per person.'

The command 'trust the sage' was presumably ingrained in most Awakeners under the Star of Nagran. Hosanna's reactions so far suggested he was likely under the same influence.

However, Nahan had been subtly opposing the sage for some time. There had been speculation that even this opposition was orchestrated by the sage, but recent events seemed to disprove that.

A sage with brainwashing abilities wouldn't need to use someone like Nahan as a scapegoat to build trust and loyalty within the group. If he could make everyone believe in him completely, why bother with such tedious methods?

Until Yuder fully understood the sage's powers, he considered the possibility that the sage deliberately set up others to take the fall for him. But knowing the nature of the sage's power now changed things.

If Nahan had been fully brainwashed like the others and deliberately made to be the antagonist, he should have stopped when it was time to fulfill his true purpose.

But what was the reality? Nahan's opposition to the sage had grown more intense and definitive. This indicated that Nahan did not fully trust the sage like the other brainwashed Awakeners, suggesting a different kind of manipulation.

Could the key to understanding this lie in the 'promise' Hosanna mentioned?

"A promise with the sage. What is that about?"

"Just, a promise. The one Nahan made when he first met the sage... before everything started, in the desert..."

Hosanna mumbled incoherently, tears still streaming down his face.

Yuder focused on the part about the conversation they had when they first met.

It was said that the sage's brainwashing was attempted only after lightly fooling those who had just entered the Star of Nagran. However, according to the information, Nahan met the sage long before the Star of Nagran was properly formed, in its very early stages.

Yuder was convinced that this promise was the key.

"I'd like to hear more about this story."

Hosanna, with tearful eyes, looked up. Seeing Yuder's serious expression, he appeared confused yet slowly opened his lips.

"...Is this story important?"

"It might be, or it might not be. Don't beat around the bush; just tell it. I'll be the judge of that."

"..."

Hosanna, who had briefly harbored hope, once again dropped his gaze to the ground. Hesitating, he sighed and began to speak.

"To tell you about that promise... I have to break my promise with Nahan. I promised never to speak of the past to anyone again."

"So, you're saying you won't tell?"

"...No. I will tell. But I hope you won't reveal to others that you heard this story. It might seem trivial, but for me, and for Nahan..."

Yuder exhaled shortly and raised a hand in a simple gesture, typically used when making a vow.

"Understood. I swear, except for the Commander, this will remain a secret. Is this satisfactory?"

"...Yes. I trust you."

Hosanna let out a deep sigh, casting his eyes downward.

"Nahan belonged to the nobility of this place."

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"Nahan belonged to the nobility of this place."

Yuder's eyes briefly narrowed in a twitch before relaxing again.

He felt a slight surprise upon learning that the man who despised nobility and power the most was, in fact, of noble descent – of the Empire's nobility. But upon reflection, it didn't seem strange.

'From the outset, it was clear he was of mixed heritage, with blood from the Southern countries. It's not uncommon for someone to grow even more hostile towards the group they were originally part of...'

The explanation of his origin seemed to make some of Nahan's blind hatred understandable.

"You're not surprised," Hosanna muttered, looking at Yuder, who showed little reaction to the shocking revelation.

"It's easier and more intense to hate what you know than what you don't," Yuder responded.

"I see. It's easier to hate what you know... I've never heard that before, but it sounds right."

Hosanna continued softly, as if barely audible.

"It's not a pleasant story. Nahan was almost imprisoned from birth because his mother was from the Southern countries. And I was just a child hired to care for him."

"Then, where do you come from?"

"The South. I was an orphan. To survive, I became a courier for traders crossing the desert... and they sold me off, finding it too troublesome to take me back."

Hosanna smiled bitterly.

"Back then, I barely spoke the language of the Empire. In Nahan's house, being without relatives and unable to speak the language, I was seen as ideal for secretive tasks."

'I can guess what happened.'

It was common for nobles to hire mute servants to hide family scandals. In this case, it seemed they intentionally hired someone from the same ethnic background but effectively mute to conceal a mistress and her child from the South.

"Lord Nahan was truly kind and intelligent, even as a child. Despite the suffocating environment, he never complained and was always gracious to me. I learned the language of the Empire from him... I really admired him."

Hosanna seemed unaware that his reference to Nahan had shifted to a more respectful form.

While he spoke of admiration, the deep and dark emotion in the eyes of this Southern youth differed significantly from that of others who admired Kishiar, like Nathan Zuckerman. Yuder sensed something familiar in those profound feelings.

"Lord Nahan had a dream. When he became an adult, he wanted to return to his mother's homeland in the South. I wished to serve him until the end and go with him to the South. But... that plan could never be realized."

Hosanna clenched his fists on his lap, his eyes filling with pain.

"Since childhood, there was someone who took care of Lord Nahan. We trusted this person because they were always kind to us. But when they learned of Lord Nahan's plans to leave the house, they didn't hesitate to inform the family."

"How did they find out?"

Hosanna's head drooped, his voice trembling thinly.

"It was my fault... I thought we didn't have much time left, and I felt I had to say goodbye to that person..."

Hosanna's character appeared unchanged from the past to the present.

In fact, bidding a final farewell or informing a close acquaintance isn't inherently foolish. However, in this instance, the other party never intended to honor that confidentiality.

'If that person reported it immediately, his belief that they had a human connection was a misunderstanding. That person was likely planted there to monitor them,' Yuder coldly speculated.

"The escape failed, and we were punished. I thought Lord Nahan would never forgive me for revealing the plan... But he forgave me. He was only curious why that person betrayed us."

Hosanna covered his face with his hands, his shoulders trembling slightly.

"We soon learned the answer. The betrayer was brought to our prison for committing a new crime. They said they were also a bastard of the same house, sent to watch us and seize any opportunity to rise by betraying us."

A betrayer's reward for their deed was usually not advancement, but punishment. A house that carefully concealed its secrets would not have let an ambitious bastard go unchecked.

Hosanna's words confirmed this.

"But they said it would have been better not to try such a thing. They regretted their actions and warned us never to stay with that house. Lord Nahan could not forgive them, but agreed to another escape attempt, made possible by his newly awakened abilities."

'Is this really the story of Nahan? Was he that soft-hearted?'

Trusting the same person twice after being betrayed once was not just naive. Had it been someone close to Yuder, he would have hit him on the back of the head and told him to come to his senses.

Yuder couldn't imagine Nahan being so forgiving.

'He's lucky if forgiveness didn't drive him mad.'

According to Hosanna, while imprisoned, Nahan awakened his illusionary abilities. They planned to use this for their escape.

The plan was simple. Use the illusion to fake a fire, and escape in the chaos when the guards fled.

"At first, it seemed to work. But before we completely escaped... we realized we were betrayed again."

Their plan was exposed, again due to the betrayer who had promised to escape with them.

'Incredible.'

"We were caught... and Lord Nahan... was punished by having half his face burned. Then they left us in a truly burning house."

The logic was clear: better to erase a scandal as an accident than risk exposure.

"But you survived, so you must have escaped."

"I awakened my own powers," Hosanna said, with a low and sad laugh.

"I had been searching for a way to escape, and in that moment, my power emerged. If only... it had come a day earlier."

Among the Awakeners, some feared and regretted their newfound abilities, wishing to return to their previous selves. But Hosanna's case wasn't unique. Yuder had encountered countless such individuals in his past life.

Typically, those like Hosanna, who spoke similarly, tended to use their abilities without sparing anything. This approach often led to rapid growth in their abilities, but because they did not spare their bodies, many of them had short lifespans.

"..."

"Yet, Lord Nahan... he wanted to save that person. He insisted we couldn't go alone and asked where that person was. But when we found them in the burning place... they were already dead."

The betrayer had paid the price for their deceit twice, receiving punishment instead of reward both times. Their folly was indeed great, and the consequences terribly harsh.

"I dragged Lord Nahan away from there... We must have moved desperately. We wanted to cross the desert to the South, but in our condition, it was impossible. We lost consciousness while fleeing and were barely saved by a passing traveler's kindness."

A passing traveler. Yuder's intuition sparked.

"Was that traveler the sage?"

"Yes."

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"Was that traveler the sage?"

"Yes."

Hosanna nodded in affirmation.

"Thanks to the sage and those who followed him, we survived. Lord Nahan's face and my leg were irreversibly damaged, but still, being alive is a matter to be thankful for."

Yuder was reminded of Hosanna's own disability - his inability to use one of his legs properly. It seemed that the injury had occurred during that same time.

"Did your leg suffer the same fate as Nahan's face, a 'punishment' from that same period?"

"Ah... Yes. But it's nothing compared to what he endured..."

Hosanna sincerely seemed to believe that his leg's condition was trivial compared to Nahan's plight. Yuder observed Hosanna, who seemed to hide his leg, nervously gripping the hem of his trousers.

'They tried to escape using the illusion of fire, and for that, one was branded with the fire's mark and another crippled leg as punishment. Despite being treated as a disgrace by the family, such harsh punishment was unnecessary.'

The so-called 'punishments' were almost akin to torturing a convict deserving death. In fact, they were abandoned in a burning building, not much different.

It's not something to be proud of for a noble of the Empire to have a mixed-race child with someone from the Southern countries. But it wasn't a reason for such extreme treatment. It might have been better for them if Nahan had disappeared into the Southern countries as an adult, without dirtying their hands. Why go to such extremes?

'Hmm. There must be a reason. Maybe it's a family that devoutly believes in their religion?'

Yuder kept his thoughts to himself, continuing the conversation naturally.

"So, the promise between the sage and Nahan was made because of the life-saving bond back then?"

"Well, yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"Unlike me, Lord Nahan wasn't initially grateful to the sage. He dismissed it as a pointless act, both towards me and the sage. He refused to go to the Southern country... For months, he showed no will to heal or eat, almost like a living corpse."

Despite successfully escaping from his family, Nahan's joy faded. He abandoned eating and refused treatment, wasting away in confinement. Hosanna feared that Nahan wished for death.

"Fortunately, the sage mercifully didn't cast me aside, allowing me to endure that period. Truly... I'm deeply grateful for that."

Hosanna said this with a complex expression. He believed the sage showed them genuine mercy, but Yuder had a different view.

'That person, who even used those who trusted him as human shields, wouldn't show mercy without a reason.'

Yuder decided to confirm his suspicion.

"Back then, how many followed the sage?"

"Three... no, about four."

"And how many are still alive?"

"Two... I think."

"If their number was that small, they must have faced many difficulties. I don't know if they were used to a life of wandering, but probably they weren't."

"Yes... Unlike me, most of them were suddenly awakened and had to leave their homes."

"Then, in the daily life challenges they faced, you must have been quite helpful."

"Well, helping with chores like cleaning and preparing meals didn't seem like a big deal, so I continued to take care of them..."

Hosanna appeared puzzled as to why such a trivial matter was being asked. Yuder simply nodded silently in response.

'As I thought. Hosanna was being used as a free servant.'

Indeed, tasks like preparing meals and doing laundry for a few people in the outdoors weren't considered significant. However, this was only true for someone accustomed to such work.

Even Cavalry members, hardened by rigorous survival training, would struggle with fatigue as their period of homelessness prolonged. For a sage, who had never ventured on long travels and was used to a more sophisticated life in the capital, such assistance in mundane tasks would have been unexpectedly vital. To maintain an air of elegance, unseen efforts must be made.

One can only imagine how relieved the sage, weary from the strenuous and dirty life of a wanderer, must have felt upon encountering Hosanna, a young man accustomed to servitude and survival even in harsh deserts.

While it was difficult to gauge exactly, it's plausible that this comfort was enough to overlook a patient who had lost the will to live, merely lying there.

It was a crucial but easily overlooked detail, so minute that even the parties involved might not realize its significance.

"So, when exactly did Nahan make a promise with the sage?"

"It seems to have been around the time when Lord Nahan's facial burns were almost healed, and we needed to decide whether to leave or stay. One day, the sage came to speak deeply with Lord Nahan."

The sage, it was said, did not make long speeches in front of Nahan, who would not even respond to questions.

"The sage said that there was a burning flame in Lord Nahan's heart. A flame that could have warmed someone, but remained unused because no one accepted it."

It was an allegory, almost perfectly mirroring Nahan's situation. Probably, the sage had crafted these words based on the information naturally extracted from Hosanna. His choice of words, reminiscent of sacred texts, was typical of the sage.

"Did Nahan react to that?"

"At first, he disliked it. He even got angry, wondering if they had investigated our background. But then the sage suggested using that fire to burn something else... that there are many in the world who need such a fire. When he spoke of future tasks, Lord Nahan showed the first sign of response."

Finally, the sage openly shared with them his past actions and future intentions.

The sage, persecuted for being an Awakener and forced to leave his homeland, and his companions, who followed him for similar reasons. This was similar to Nahan and Hosanna, who had been tortured and abandoned upon their awakening.

The sage expressed his desire to help others like them, providing a safe haven for them to hide and rest. He hoped for their assistance in this endeavor.

Hosanna was quickly moved, but Nahan was different. Nevertheless, the sage offered the proposal with a compassionate face.

"The sage said, we are all brothers and sisters as Awakeners... so please kindly observe what your brother is doing. You can decide later whether to stay or leave..."

What part of these words moved Nahan remains unknown. However, he accepted the proposal for the time being and observed the sage.

"And not long after, there was an incident where Lord Nahan saved someone who was being beaten and left to die by relatives and villagers, just for being an Awakener. Lord Nahan's abilities were truly a help when we were escaping with that person. Everyone was astonished. And then, that night... Lord Nahan went to see the sage."

"That day must have been the day of the promise."

"Yes. Lord Nahan told the sage that he wanted to help as long as the sage's heart remained true. The sage was overjoyed at this and suggested that to commemorate the day, Lord Nahan should give us all names."

"The Star of Nagan."

At Yuder's murmur, Hosanna nodded with a proud yet nostalgic expression. His eyes grew slightly misty.

"Right. It was Lord Nahan who came up with that name then. It was a name that embodied our goal to eventually depart for our own perfect paradise with other troubled Awakeners. And... it was the day his name was chosen too."

"His name as well?"

"Originally, he was called by a different name. A name that was hardly ever used, and one Lord Nahan truly detested. So, on that day, he chose 'Nahan' as his new name. It signified killing his former self and being reborn."

He remembered hearing that the word 'Nahan' meant revenge. That conversation echoed in my mind.

"..."

"After the name 'The Star of Nagran' was decided, the sage made a promise to Lord Nahan. Since Lord Nahan had named it, he asked him to do his utmost for that cause. He said that if we did, we could really go to paradise, together."

That was their promise.

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After Hosanna finished speaking, he seemed to become immersed in old memories, sealing his lips in silence. Yuder did not ask another question, making the room instantly wrapped in a sudden quiet.

Then, a gentle knocking sound broke the silence, causing the previously dazed Hosanna to startle back to awareness.

"Yuder, do you think we need more time? I feel it might be time for us to leave."

Recognizing the knocker as Kanna, Hosanna quickly relaxed, the anxiety in his eyes dissipating. This revealed that he still didn't fully understand Kanna's abilities, yet he trusted her greatly, acknowledging her competence in handling matters.

Yuder stood up, dusting off his seat.

"No, we're done here. We'll be leaving soon."

"Uh..."

Hosanna hastily grabbed at Yuder's garment.

"My request to you..."

Filled with fear and guilt, he couldn't meet Yuder's eyes. His grip was so tight that his knuckles whitened. Yuder, after a brief silence, finally spoke.

"My thoughts remain unchanged. However, I'm unsure of the Commander's opinion and need to investigate further based on your story. We'll discuss this later."

Honestly, Yuder expected everyone to share his view, but saw no need to provoke Hosanna unnecessarily with his blunt words.

"Understood."

Yuder contemplated, looking at the crestfallen Hosanna, who let go of his garment.

Nahan, who had personally verified the survival of Gayle and Doyle in the Cavalry, must have realized that the Cavalry's policy wasn't to easily take lives. Thus, he must have surmised Hosanna's survival, yet he had made no effort to find him.

Even when encountering Cavalry members in the capital, Nahan didn't inquire about Hosanna's wellbeing. Given the relationship they had, Nahan's lack of concern was extraordinary.

Hosanna, having been with Nahan long before becoming an Awakener and even saving his life in critical moments, should have been like a real brother to him. Yet, Nahan didn't seem to place much importance on Hosanna.

'I thought they had been together since before Hosanna entered the Star of Nagran, assuming it was merely a long-term master-servant relationship.'

Such unbalanced emotions and relationships – were they all a result of the sage's brainwashing? Or something else...

Lost in thought, Yuder mused aloud.

"But which prestigious family despised the southern bastard child so much? I don't recall hearing about that."

Hosanna hesitated for the first time upon hearing this question.

"It's..."

"Why?"

"..."

"Is there a problem?"

"...That has nothing to do with my request to you."

It was the first real resistance he had shown.

'He refuses to answer just this part?'

Observing Hosanna's face closely, Yuder pressed again.

"What if it is related? Can't you answer then?"

Hosanna's face tightened, beads of sweat forming. He seemed to waver, suppressing pain. His fingers trembled slightly, and his muscles twitched involuntarily.

In a barely perceptible manner, yet growing ever more significant like a bubble about to burst, Hosanna hesitated.

"If that's the case, I must tell you... I..."

"Wait. I understand. You don't have to answer," Yuder interrupted, raising his hand to stop him just as Hosanna struggled to speak. At this, all the subtle reactions stirring within Hosanna ceased abruptly.

Seeing this, Yuder was certain.

"So, you're unable to answer, aren't you?"

"..."

"An oath, perhaps?"

"I can't answer that."

"Do you know if Nahan is under the same restrictions?"

"I don't know."

The responses to both questions differed. Yuder gleaned enough from this alone.

"I see. I'll not question further on this matter."

Yuder then left the room. Kanna, who had been waiting outside, glanced quickly inside the room before approaching him.

"Is it over?"

"Yes."

"What was Hosanna trying to tell you?"

"You probably have guessed it already."

"Ah. From your tone, it's about Nahan, isn't it?"

Kanna easily deduced the correct answer.

"Did he try to persuade you to surrender? Or just ask for mercy?"

"Seems like he hoped for mercy, if possible."

"That's asking too much. If we spare Nahan, would he even expect it on his end?"

Kanna smirked, wrinkling her nose. She didn't wait for Yuder's response, answering her own question.

"A person like Nahan would rather die than surrender, I bet."

"My thoughts exactly," Yuder agreed briefly, eliciting a laugh from Kanna.

"So, what did you tell him?"

Yuder relayed the entire conversation with Hosanna to Kanna. She seemed slightly thrilled to finally learn the past stories they couldn't uncover during their investigations.

"I've learned as much as I can for today. What do you think?"

"Hmm... Sometimes, letting someone speak on their own is better than trying a hundred times with my power," Kanna noted, slightly frustrated.

"I read information, not thoughts, so it's hard to be certain about such distant past events... But the information you provided today should make future readings easier."

After saying this, Kanna lowered her voice and began listing their next steps.

"I'll try to find out the name of the family Hosanna couldn't speak of due to his oath. It'll be my first attempt to break through an oath, so I'm not sure how it'll go. Probing more into the relationship with Nahan might also reveal answers about the parts you're suspicious of. And..."

Her counting fingers paused briefly.

"The brainwashing commands applied to Nahan."

Her gaze sharpened.

"It's likely the command to 'do his utmost for the Star of Nagran.' That explains why he didn't follow the sage blindly but was still dedicated to the Star of Nagran's purpose, unlike others."

Yuder shared her view. The sage must have used such indirect brainwashing because he hadn't established a proper trust relationship with Nahan at the time.

Back then, the sage would have seen Hosanna as more useful than Nahan. However, Hosanna was Nahan's servant.

If Nahan had decided to leave the sage's side, Hosanna would have followed him without question, regardless of the circumstances. This was a certainty, an unbreakable truth, even if Hosanna was in a state of complete brainwashing, fully trusting the sage.

Thus, to prevent the valuable Hosanna from leaving, it was necessary to ensure Nahan couldn't depart. However, Nahan wasn't easily swayed by the sage like others. The sage at that time must have been quite impatient.

'Especially after realizing Nahan's abilities were better than expected.'

"Even if it was an indirect method, it must have seemed like a good idea at the time, right? I think making Nahan name the 'Star of Nagran' was the beginning of the brainwashing."

Kanna shared her speculation with the thoughtful Yuder.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. There's no better way to instill a sense of responsibility than by naming something, right? I know from my experience with pets. The ones I named myself were always more dear and lovable than those I didn't."

"...Responsibility."

Yuder had never considered the link between naming and responsibility.

Chewing over Kanna's words, Yuder found himself drawn to the notion of naming. He suddenly remembered a man who had given him a name.

'...'

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'...'

He knew pondering over unsolvable matters was nothing but a waste of time, nothing more, nothing less.

Even if Kishiar La Orr had felt something when he bestowed the name Yudrain, what did it matter?

Still, Yuder couldn't help but ask, despite knowing better.

"...Is it really common?"

"Huh?"

"The act of naming something, does it really evoke a sense of responsibility?"

Kanna, who had been eagerly speculating, looked puzzled by his question.

"Uh... I always thought it was obvious, but now that Yuder mentions it, I'm not so sure... It must be common, right? The sage and I think so, so it must be. Or, is there something strange about it?"

Yuder shook his head.

"No. It's just that I'm wondering if it's a common judgment. I've never had that experience."

"Really?! I thought Yuder lived in a very rural area. Haven't you ever raised livestock? Dogs or cats? Or even named inanimate objects?"

Kanna bombarded him with questions, surprised.

"I've raised livestock other than dogs or cats for short periods, but never named them. And objects... Why would I name objects?"

At Yuder's frown, Kanna chuckled.

"No, you see. Some people give nicknames to their cherished items. In our group, many name their weapons. They choose these names so carefully. Just like Nahan, 'Star of Paradise.' You can tell a lot of thought went into it!"

Yuder faintly understood. He knew of people who named their weapons, but he never paid much attention to it.

"Why not try naming your sword to see if it really does bring responsibility and affection? The sword and sheath you carry were both gifts, right? You treasure them."

Yuder glanced at his sword hanging at his waist. Both the sword and sheath were precious gifts from Kishiar, rare and well-maintained.

But did it show that much to others?

Yuder fiddled with the sword handle, then shook his head.

"No. I don't think that's necessary. But I get your point."

"Ah, I was curious about what kind of names Yuder would come up with. That's too bad!"

Yuder couldn't understand why she felt disappointed.

'Anyway... the conclusion seems to be that it's common.'

If it was common to feel enough responsibility from naming something to influence behavior, then the man who named him Yudrain might have felt the same.

'I guess he chose a good word. It turned out to be meaningful... Whether it was whimsical or not, I don't know.'

Yuder had only recently learned that the name Yudrain was a combination of ancient words, meaning both beginning and end, and in a way, eternity. The strange feeling he had when he first heard its grandiose meaning was unforgettable.

Eternity.

Yuder wondered why the man had chosen such a word. Was there truly an intention behind it?

After their conversation about the act of naming, he became curious about this.

In the midst of these thoughts, Kanna suddenly spoke up as if she had been contemplating the same thing.

"If you think about it, the reason Nahan is so obsessed with the goal of leaving for a world only for the Awakeners may be because of the name the 'Star of Nagran.' They say a name carries the wishes of the one who names."

Yuder's eyes flickered briefly, but the movement was so subtle that Kanna didn't notice.

"For example, my mother named me Kanna, hoping I'd grow up strong and beautiful like the Kanna flower. So, Nahan, who named the 'Star of Nagran' might have wished more than anyone to reach paradise."

"..."

"Ah, of course, now his goals and means have completely degenerated into madness!"

After her playful remark, Kanna turned to her silent friend and was startled.

"...Huh? Yuder? What's wrong?"

Yuder Aile, known for his unchanging expression, looked strangely distorted. The unfamiliar turmoil in his deep black eyes made Kanna wonder if she had said something wrong.

"It's nothing."

But the change disappeared as quickly as it had come. Yuder returned to his usual self and quietly gazed at Kanna.

"Let's end this conversation here. It's gotten late."

"Ah... Ah, right! We're underground, so I lost track of time. Let's go up and rest!"

Had she seen something wrong? Or had the conversation sparked a different thought in him?

Though worried, Kanna decided not to pry or react uncharacteristically unless Yuder chose to speak about it.

The two quietly left the underground. It seemed as if nothing had happened.

But after parting with Kanna, Yuder's thoughts on the old name lingered for a long time, a fact known to no one.

—

"...I've returned."

Yuder murmured as he opened the door to the Commander's temporary office. He still shared accommodations with Kishiar, so this was his only place to return to.

However, Kishiar, whom he expected to find there, was not present. Only the prismatic flames of the magic stone stove, burning fiercely, indicated that Kishiar had recently stepped out.

Yuder sighed deeply and hung his coat on the rack beside the stove. He placed the translated version of Enon's writings and the book he had carried on the desk and sat down in his chair. That's when a soreness around his eyes began.

It was a symptom he occasionally experienced when his body was extremely fatigued, ever since he gained the Eye of Magic power.

'It's been a busy day.'

Yet, when Kishiar returned, he needed to report the day's events and address more tasks. It was too early to rest.

'I should look over Enon's translation now. Kishiar reads faster than I do, so he'll finish quickly, but not me...'

Reaching out for the translated document, Yuder found that his hand wasn't moving as swiftly or fluidly as usual. It was unusually sluggish, but not due to fatigue. More precisely, it was a lack of motivation that seemed to be affecting his physical response, despite knowing he needed to see it.

Usually, if there was a task that needed to be done, no matter how tired he was, Yuder would immediately attend to it. Such reluctance was exceedingly rare for him. However, Yuder wasn't particularly surprised by this. During his previous life as a Commander of the Cavalry, he had occasionally experienced similar feelings.

'Back then, I would have turned to alcohol, but now, that's not an option.'

He had realized that the sensation he once thought was intoxication was actually similar to the effects of mild poisoning. Even if someone offered it to him now, he couldn't drink it.

Yuder gazed at the blazing stove, then leaned his head back in the chair and closed his eyes.

The crackling sound seemed to calm his nerves, which had been on edge all day.

If he didn't feel like doing what needed to be done, and there was nothing else he could do, then shutting off his senses and resting like this was the best option.

He intended to stay like that only until Kishiar returned.

'...'

But when his consciousness hazily reawakened, Yuder found himself surrounded by scenes from a day long past, unexpectedly unfolding before his eyes.

'...It's been a while since this happened. I thought it was an illusion, but to think it's real is astonishing.'

The somber ash-gray Peletta Castle. The extinguished stove. Kishiar from that day.

Yuder looked down at the sword in his grip, then clenched his teeth tightly.

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'...It's been a while since this happened. I thought it was an illusion, but to think it's real is astonishing.'

The somber ash-gray Peletta Castle. The extinguished stove. Kishiar from that day.

Yuder looked down at the sword in his grip, then clenched his teeth tightly.

Everything around him seemed to melt into a blur. In the midst of his fragmented and flowing memories, Yuder found himself, almost instinctively, plunging his sword into the heart of that man. A warm liquid, the only source of warmth in this cold and dark place, gushed forth. After a momentary glance at the fallen man, he discarded his sword and turned, heading for the secret passage.

But when he came to his senses, Yuder found himself once again facing that same man.

'...It's been a while since this happened. I thought it was an illusion, but to think it's real is ...'

Staring blankly at the man's face, Yuder raised his sword once more, bringing it down over the man's smiling visage. Again, everything seemed to end.

And when he emerged from the secret passage into the darkness outside, Yuder found himself once again before Kisiar.

'...It's been a while since this happened. I thought it was an illusion, but to think it's real is ...'

He repeated his actions in a frenzy, stabbing over and over.

Yet, no matter what he did, he couldn't escape the presence of the man, who bore the same smile.

Gasping for breath, Yuder ran through the pitch-black corridors of Peletta Castle's secret passages.

'Pant... Pant...'

Strangely, he heard the sound of water splashing beneath his feet, though no water was present. Turning reflexively, he saw crimson footprints in disarray, ending right behind him.

His head throbbed intensely. Ignoring the sticky liquid clinging to and dropping from his shoe soles, he kept running forward, no longer looking back.

Where must he go to escape this place?

Where indeed...

Then, in the midst of the darkness, he collided violently with someone.

'Ugh...'

Caught off guard, he nearly rebounded, but the other person quickly grasped him, pulling him close. Yuder struggled instinctively, trying to push the other away, but their strength was unexpectedly formidable.

"It's okay," whispered a gentle, familiar voice close to his ear.

"It's okay..."

The repeated whisper sent shivers down his spine. Only then did Yuder cease his struggling. The arms embracing him felt strangely comforting, like a protective barrier.

"Do you recognize me?" asked the voice, once Yuder had calmed down.

He ceased his labored breathing and lifted his head, which had been buried in the other's chest.

At first, he couldn't make out the other's face in the darkness of the passage. But as he blinked, his vision gradually cleared, as if black ink was being washed away.

A sharp jawline. Red lips. Pale, smooth cheeks. Long eyelashes framing glass-like eyes that gazed into his.

And the golden hair, just like the one he had seen fading beneath his sword moments ago.

"!" Yuder stiffened and tried to push him away, but the other grabbed his wrist and brought it to his face.

"Here, feel for yourself."

The overlapping hands fluttered above the other's face. This direct approach surely made the other's presence known to Yuder. Initially, Yuder just let his face be touched, shrinking his fingertips as the other led, but at some point, his hands became free. Yet, he continued to gently caress without realizing.

The man allowed Yuder to touch his face anywhere, obediently bowing his head. When Yuder brushed against the soft eyelashes, they curved beautifully. The plump lips were no different. Strangely, it felt familiar, but the sensation was still too vague to grasp.

Suddenly, a warm breath laced with laughter escaped through the man's lips. Unable to understand why he laughed, Yuder stopped his hand, prompting the man to speak.

“...Do you remember? I’ve touched you like this before.”

“...”

“Back then, and even now, we're following the same path. Perhaps this is what it feels like to know who the other person is just by the touch of fingertips.”

At first, Yuder didn't understand the meaning.

But those words, like the last drop in a full cup of water, slowly awakened Yuder's blurred consciousness.

Yuder slowly and awkwardly opened and closed his eyes.

Then, he finally gazed straight into the eyes of the man before him.

“...Kishiar.”

Despite his hoarse, almost torn voice, the man smiled gently, softening his brows.

“...Commander?”

“Yes.”

The man overlaid his hand on Yuder's, which still rested on his cheek, tilting his head.

“It's me.”

His eyes, filled with tender blurriness, disappeared behind the lowered eyelashes, and his lips pressed firmly onto the palm. Yuder then realized that the drenched blood had somehow vanished completely.

“What's this? Why am I here... Earlier, it definitely wasn't... this place...”

“Dreams are like that. You don't dream because you want to, nor avoid because you don't.”

Kishiar answered firmly yet gently.

“So, shall we leave now?”

“...But how... Where exactly?”

“Isn't this Peletta Castle? I guess we just have to go that way.”

The fact that up until now, no matter where he went, he had only encountered Kishiar of 'that day', made Yuder agitated. However, Kishiar started walking down the corridor, unfazed, holding Yuder's hand.

Yuder hesitated but then followed him.

What if, at the end of this, the same scene unfolded again? Would it be another repeat in front of Kishiar?

As Yuder gripped the hand in the pitch-black confusion, Kishiar turned his head.

He spoke as if knowing why Yuder was acting so.

“It's alright. Whatever awaits us at the end...”

“...”

“I won't be the one to let go of this hand first.”

In response, the man's fingers intertwined tightly with Yuder's. The strength and warmth of the firmly held hand captivated Yuder, making it impossible to pull away.

With each step toward the end of the corridor, the surroundings grew increasingly hazy, but it no longer felt like a dark maw about to swallow him.

Why, he wondered. The answer came surprisingly easily.

This time, it wasn't just him alone. There were two of them.

“-...”

Yuder softly opened his mouth, inhaled, and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the flame of the burning magic stone stove. As he blankly stared at it, a voice came from beside him.

"Did you sleep well?"

"...Commander?"

"Yes."

The man who had been embracing Yuder from the side pressed his lips to his cheek and lightly rubbed his forehead. His eyes, as if having just woken from a shared sleep, looked languid.

‘...Wait a minute. Why are we like this?’

Yuder blinked and suddenly felt as if he'd been doused with cold water, jolting awake. He quickly sat up and looked around.

“What... What happened? I thought I just closed my eyes for a moment in Peletta... No. In the dream, the Commander...”

“Yes. We were connected in the dream. Just like last time.”

Although Yuder was the one who had the dream, Kishiar responded calmly, as if wondering why Yuder was so surprised.

“When I came back, my lovely assistant was sleeping with such a tired face. I tried to take you to the bedroom, but you wouldn't wake up easily, and it seemed you weren't having a pleasant dream.”

“So... What did you do?”

“I wrapped you in a blanket and held you tight, praying fervently for you to sleep well. And then, voila. Suddenly I was there.”

The tone was so light it was hard to believe. But there was no reason for Kishiar to lie in such a situation, so it must be true.

Yuder bit his lip and cautiously asked.

“...So, did you see it this time too?”

“See what? Your dream?”

“...”

“All I saw was you wandering through the underground passages of Peletta Castle. Unlike before, I was glad I could catch you without having to call out several times.”

That meant Kishiar hadn't seen the scene of himself dying. Yuder exhaled deeply, relieved.

‘That's fortunate.’

Even if one knows about it through words, seeing such a scene directly is decidedly different. Moreover, this dream... it felt similar yet entirely different, distorted in a new way. It felt less like reviving forgotten memories and more like only glimpsing shattered fragments.

Even now, awake from the dream, all that remained was a faint sensation of seeing Kishiar that day and the dreadful feeling of wandering through the passage. There was no sense of gaining new information or feeling like any gaps had been filled.

“Anyway, I never expected to see the secret passages of Peletta Castle like that. So, it must have been that time in this dream.”

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Even now, awake from the dream, all that remained was a faint sensation of seeing Kishiar that day and the dreadful feeling of wandering through the passage. There was no sense of gaining new information or feeling like any gaps had been filled.

“Anyway, I never expected to see the secret passages of Peletta Castle like that. So, it must have been that time in this dream.”

Kishiar did not elaborate on when 'that time' was. The mere mention was enough. Yuder, too, had no desire to elaborate on witnessing in a dream the moment Kishiar La Orr, from his previous life, was killed by his successor, Yudrain Aile. He merely nodded in agreement.

"Are you feeling alright? Not feeling unwell like before?"

"I am fine."

Indeed, there was no physical pain. Unlike the times he dreamt of the white gloves, there was no strange reaction or loss of appetite.

Yet, even when he should have risen, Yuder remained still, gazing down at the blanket half-slipped off him.

There was no issue. He was simply reminiscing the last moments of the dream, where a man had tightly held his hand and led the way.

Kishiar's last words, vowing never to let go first, resonated with him. Even now, Kishiar held Yuder's hand in the same manner, blurring the lines between dream and reality, stirring an indescribably difficult emotion within him.

He had saved Yuder from the nightmare, without a moment's hesitation, fully aware of what the dream entailed.

"Yuder?"

Concerned by Yuder's unusual behavior, Kishiar called out to him. Yuder, avoiding a direct response, cast his eyes down and spoke.

"If you permit... may I stay like this for a bit longer?"

Kishiar's eyes widened slightly, but he soon smiled.

"Of course, as long as you like."

He did not question the reason behind Yuder's sudden request. He simply adjusted the blanket slipping off Yuder's shoulders, holding him closer to provide more comfort.

For a long time, the two sat closely, looking at the fireplace, enveloped in a tranquil stillness. Yuder suddenly became aware of the familiar scent enveloping him. It was different from the faint body odor he usually sensed up close. This was the scent of a second gender manifestor, intermingling with his will.

The scent, usually well-contained within the owner's body, now gently caressed Yuder's entire being. Yuder, responding to it, did not restrain his own scent from mingling similarly.

As their scents flowed and slowly intertwined, Yuder felt an additional sense beyond the usual five, distinctly aware of their movements. The unseen scents carrying intentions, how they enveloped and caressed each other's bodies – all these sensations were palpable, gradually raising a warmth in his body.

To a non-Awakener onlooker, they might seem motionless and silent, but it was far from it. Their interaction resembled animals comforting each other by grooming, akin to an inaudible conversation.

Despite having spent a busy, energetic day, Yuder felt something dormant within him come alive, breathing life anew.

"Haah..."

It felt like he was finally coming to life. Odd as it sounded, it was true.

Reacting to his breath, Kishiar pulled Yuder closer into his embrace. Yuder turned to meet his gaze.

A pale, expressionless face reflected in the deep, sunken red eyes.

After a moment, Yuder first lifted his head and, as if entranced, pressed his lips against the other's. As their lips slowly met, his tongue slipped between them and gently teased Kishiar's, which had been still. Kishiar, momentarily startled, soon looked down with tenderly curved eyes and wrapped his hands around Yuder's neck, as if to support it. The direction of their inclined heads shifted, deepening their kiss abruptly.

As their tongues intertwined, the sensation of a hand gently caressing through the hair sent a tingling pleasure throughout the body, causing it to shiver. Yet, more delightful was the sensation of being even closer to Kishiar.

Their lips briefly parted, and breath flowed from both without precedence. Their gazes met intensely, yet again no words were exchanged. Then, once more, this time Kishiar initiated, pulling Yuder close and caressing under his lips before continuing into a second kiss.

The deep, lingering kiss, no different from their earlier mingling scents, continued unceasingly. Occasionally, when Yuder gasped for breath, they would briefly part, yet even then, their clasped hands and bodies did not stray from each other.

As the kiss deepened, their bodies gradually tilted until they almost lay across the sofa's armrest, yet neither expressed nor even thought of any discomfort.

In the heat that rose thanks to their mingled scents, Yuder desired nothing but Kishiar La Orr in front of him. And Kishiar felt the same.

"Ah..."

In the midst of the unending kiss, clothes fell away, and bare skin met. The heat below was already more intense than above. Yuder knew his body had softened enough without need for further preparation.

The shame of his body, relaxed and wet with the viscous fluid, did not come to mind. Rather, it was almost pleasing.

"Even if you have to think about tomorrow, you wouldn't want that, would you?"

A low question came unexpectedly. It wasn't intended to sober the mood with reason, as before, but seemed more like a confirmation from someone who clearly understood Yuder's intentions.

Instead of answering, Yuder drew in Kishiar's lower lip again, biting it gently.

That alone was enough to convey his desire to have the person before him.

He wanted to embrace and engulf him more tightly than ever before.

Only that mattered, nothing else was needed.

Not the coming tomorrow, nor the days after, nor anything else.

Responding to that intense yearning, Kishiar's eyes clouded over, sweetly and painfully. To him, nothing seemed more tender and lovely in this world than Yuder.

And Yuder now clearly understood that his own reflection in Kishiar's eyes was not much different.

"Ah..."

Soon, their two bodies completely overlapped. Without a gap, an invisible scent around their nakedness mixed and filled the space, vibrating as one.

Yuder embraced the man with his whole body, as if he would never let go no matter how the world shook, burying his head. The throbbing of their two hearts, palpable through their touching skin, felt so clear. Even as his head spun with overwhelming emotions and his stomach swelled from taking in the other, he writhed not in pain but in deeper longing. Never before had he felt so alive as he did in this moment.

Knowing there was no deeper way they could connect, yet the thought of wanting it if possible crossed their minds.

Every time Yuder could not contain his emotions and embraced Kishiar tightly, the man responded by pressing his lips to his. So closely entwined that it was difficult to move, yet they continued without stopping.

Unspoken emotions, unable to form into words amidst the uncooled heat, flowed and overflowed for a long time.

"Haah..."

After a long kiss, Yuder parted his swollen, reddened lips to breathe out. The dying light of the fireplace flickered over the half-collapsed sofa.

The man lying in his arms responded by gently brushing his lips below Yuder's ear. The only things hiding their still-entwined naked bodies were the darkness filling the room and the blanket that initially wrapped around Yuder.

Even after their intimacy subsided, the heat did not fade. And thanks to that warmth, Yuder finally managed to smoothly articulate the thoughts that had been brewing inside him.

Even after their intimacy subsided, the heat did not fade. And thanks to that warmth, Yuder finally managed to smoothly articulate the thoughts that had been brewing inside him.

"I met Hosanna earlier, as he wished to see me. He requested Nahan's salvation. I thought it wise to use this opportunity to learn about their past from him, and finally uncovered the brainwashing Nahan had been subjected to by the sage."

"What kind of brainwashing was it?"

"To dedicate oneself completely to the Star of Nagran."

Kishiar did not seem surprised.

"The loyalty to a group and to a person might seem similar, but are ultimately different stories. It appears the sage of that time either failed to understand this distinction, or was so desperate that he thought it was the best course of action, even knowing the difference."

"Yes. The sage had Nahan name the group before making this request, with Kanna suggesting that the act of naming played a key role in the effectiveness of the brainwashing," Yuder said, pausing briefly.

"Actually, the idea that merely naming something could engender enough trust to believe the words of someone you don't fully trust felt quite foreign to me. I've never given it much thought before."

"That's possible. Have you never named anything?"

"No."

Kanna had said that the name carries the hopes and intentions of the one who bestows it. That a simple name could embody more than just responsibility, but deeper emotions.

Perhaps it was this revelation that had so profoundly shaken Yuder, to the point of haunting him through nightmares.

Yuder, feeling Kishiar's breath tickle his neck, slowly began to speak again.

"When I heard that, I thought of the name I was given."

Now, he remembered not his birth name, Yuder, but rather the second name, Yudrain, that first came to mind.

"I wondered if there were also hopes placed in that name. It's strange. I've never been curious about it before."

He had never even sought to understand the full meaning of his name, let alone the intention behind it, until the moment of his death.

This seemingly trivial and unanswerable thought had quietly yet profoundly shaken Yuder. He couldn't explain why he had reacted so strongly, but it was the truth.

"I think that thought might have been the reason I suddenly felt so exhausted and had that nightmare. But I don't think it will happen again."

The one who had named him Yudrain in a previous life was Kishiar in the previous life. Ordinarily, Yuder would have chosen not to speak of this matter to Kishiar.

However, Yuder now understood how much concern Kishiar felt when he was acting strangely, having learned from past experiences. Yuder knew that Kishiar's desperation to connect with his dreams was indicative of a much greater concern than what was apparent. Therefore, he wanted to share this much for the one who had rescued him from that dream.

Indeed, Kishiar's caressing touch ceased momentarily, and a slightly different silence ensued.

Then, the man spoke softly.

"I see."

"Yes."

"And now that you're awake, do you still not wish to know the answer? Are you still not curious?"

Yuder, gazing at the burning fireplace, replied.

"That's something whose answer will always remain unknown. I think it's pointless to dwell on it further."

"So, you still wish to know," he deduced, picking up on the subtle meaning hidden in Yuder's silence. The man chuckled as he kissed Yuder's shoulder, his laughter subsiding into a low voice.

"Believing that mere thought will prevent anything from happening is more a hope than a realistic solution. Sometimes, it's better to seek even an unclear answer than to suppress and ignore a nagging issue."

"An unclear answer, you say..."

"Like my thoughts, for example."

Yuder's intended response halted abruptly at the man's unobstructed flow of words.

The man continued, gently stroking Yuder's stiffened body, "I haven't named many things in my life, but I always put a lot of thought into it. I agree that naming involves responsibility, various emotions, and wishes."

Yuder remained speechless. The man who had named him Yudrain was not him, but he was, in essence, Kishiar.

"When I named Nathan, I hoped his future would literally be a blessing. I chose the name from a southern proverb, wishing him to love his roots. And the surname Zuckerman was selected from an extinct knightly family known for producing the bravest knight."

Kishiar went on with an unasked explanation, citing legends of a knight from that family who single-handedly slew over a hundred monsters.

Then he spoke of the Cavalry.

"Naming the Cavalry was quite a struggle. We had to borrow from existing terms as there was no single word that could instantly describe our powers. I named it to imply a power that was sometimes magical and sometimes like a weapon. Did you know that?"

"I think I've heard it every time I introduced the Cavalry to outsiders."

Kishiar, being the first Commander and founder, obviously named them, but this was the first time Yuder heard him personally mention it.

"But if I were to share a deeper thought, I initially wanted it to mean that the Awakeners are no less than mages or swordmasters and possess a power as great as the combination of both."

Kishiar revealed that this second meaning was his original intention when naming the Cavalry. However, fearing it would easily provoke opposition due to its audacious spirit, the Emperor suggested softening it to the first meaning. It was an unexpected backstory.

"That seems... more in line with His Majesty the Emperor's wisdom."

"Oh, I thought you would understand this spirit," Kishiar murmured playfully, fiddling with Yuder's hand. Yuder, letting him fiddle as he pleased, replied, "I agree that the Awakeners possess unmatched power, but if we had promoted the second meaning, we would have been subject to the existing powers' opposition for decades before accomplishing anything substantial."

Kishiar's hand paused for a moment.

"That's... from experience."

"Yes."

Indeed, in his previous life, the Cavalry, while reigning as the continent's supreme force, constantly faced opposition from swordmasters and mages. Had they known the name's original intent, the opposition would have been tenfold.

'Of course, things have changed a lot now. It wouldn't be the same as before.'

Back then, the attitudes of the mage organizations, which had been at odds like archenemies, had transformed remarkably after a series of events in the west. It was hard to believe they were the same groups when observing their current behavior towards the Cavalry. With Kishiar's revelation as a swordmaster, the response of the existing swordmasters was bound to change significantly and much more rapidly than before.

Realizing this, Yuder was surprised to find that he had regained his usual composure enough to contemplate such matters.

Kishiar's words, indeed an 'unclear answer' as he had put it, seemed to have been quite helpful to Yuder in many ways.

The intent behind the name Yudrain, given by the man in the past, remained a mystery. Even during the times when Yuder was trapped in a dream of eternal death, he had thought he would never want to know if such things were eternal.

However, the depth of thought, effort, and affection that Kishiar showed while talking about the names he had given were unmistakably sincere.

What, then, could the word 'eternity' mean to such a man?

Yuder took a deep breath and ventured to ask a question he had thought impossible just moments before.

"Previously, you mentioned that the name Yudrain could be interpreted as 'eternity.' Do you remember?"

"Of course."

Kishiar's response was slightly delayed, but Yuder did not notice.

"To me, 'eternity' feels like a word too far removed to be comprehensible. What are your thoughts on this word, Commander?"

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"To me, 'eternity' feels like a word too far removed to be comprehensible. What are your thoughts on this word, Commander?"

Kishiar, who usually responded promptly to any question, uncharacteristically remained silent. Sensing the quickening of his own heart, Yuder added, "You need not force an answer if it's difficult for you..."

"It's not that it's difficult. Rather, it's quite simple," Kishiar finally spoke.

"I remember the emotions I felt when I delved deeper into the meaning of that word while reading ancient texts. To us, living in the present, 'eternity' feels like something infinite, without beginning or end. However, people in the era of ancient languages didn't see it that way. They viewed it as the two ends of a string. Like this."

Kishiar then showed Yuder something right before his eyes. It was a golden, glittering string from the coat he had cast off earlier.

"When a string exists as one, its ends seem to face opposite directions. But when these two ends meet..." Kishiar brought the ends of the string together, forming not a straight line, but a circle.

"The moment the beginning and the end meet, we can no longer distinguish between the two. They continue in an eternal cycle, together."

Yuder gazed at the circle formed by the joined string, just as Kishiar had said.

"So, 'beginning and end' came to mean 'eternity'," he mused.

"Yes. It's a paradigm shift from the old belief that the end is simply the disappearance of everything. It's not about being infinite and expanding, but about being constant and unchanging," Kishiar explained, tying the string into a complete circle.

A circle where the beginning and the end become indistinguishable. One end is the start of the other, and vice versa.

"After realizing this, the meaning of 'eternity' has significantly changed for me. It's no longer a vague goal or ideal, but rather a comfort and a wish."

It wasn't easy to comprehend immediately, but emotionally, he felt he somewhat understood.

Kishiar tightly embraced Yuder, who was deep in thought, and rested his head on him.

"This is purely my current perspective; I can't know for sure what the original creator of the name intended. But, if I were to guess, it might not be too different... Is this too much of an unnecessary story for you?" he wondered.

Through these brief words, Kishiar conveyed much to Yuder.

Even without Yuder's confirmation, Kishiar had already surmised who had coined the name 'Yudrain.' He had given his best in answering Yuder's question.

And he was fully aware and concerned about all the cold and piercing feelings and doubts Yuder held towards Kishiar La Orr from his previous life.

Feeling the strong heartbeat of the man embracing him, Yuder closed his eyes, pondering for a long time before finally speaking.

"No. It was I who asked to hear it. Your response is more than sufficient. Thank you."

A little more strength was added to the man's embrace upon hearing the small gratitude. Yuder, nestled in his arms, turned his gaze to the string, now tied in a round shape and swaying before his eyes.

A cycle where the end is not the end but a new beginning.

Eternity.

As he continued to look at it, he thought that it was somewhat similar to his life, which did not end after he died but came back here and started again from the beginning.

"If that's the case... perhaps I have truly lived up to my name."

It was a humorous thought. However, considering that this very notion led him to meet the man he was now sharing warmth with, it didn't seem too bad.

No, it definitely wasn't bad.

—

Several days had passed since then.

The volunteers from the capital had adapted wonderfully to the south, dedicating themselves to their duties. Thanks to their efforts, the southern region, which had been in chaos due to the death of the Second Prince of Herne and the sudden appearance of monsters, quickly stabilized. People returned to their daily lives as if nothing had happened.

Yuder, too, was no longer plagued by the nightmares of the past, allowing him to devote himself to his work as before.

And now, he stood a step behind Kishiar, welcoming a special visitor to the southern branch.

"Duke, or rather, Commander of the Cavalry. It's been a long time since we last met."

"General Gino. You look well, which pleases me."

General Gino, whom he had not seen in a long time, looked almost unchanged from the last time they met. Even for a swordmaster, known for their slow aging, it was a remarkable case of youthfulness.

Considering that a swordmaster's aging slows with the accumulation of aura and depth of training, it meant that even at his age, the general had not neglected his practice.

'I wonder how skilled he actually is. I never saw it in my previous life.'

While Yuder observed General Gino with an expressionless face, Kishiar exchanged handshakes and engaged in easy conversation with the general.

"It's nice to see you in your uniform after such a long time. It brings back old memories."

"Well, there aren't many occasions to wear this uniform. But since I'm here, I might as well attend the funeral."

"The death of the Second Prince of Herne was truly a tragedy."

The body of the Second Prince of Herne had been recovered by the First Princess after the examination was completed after the murderer was caught. The funeral was being prepared, but it was uncertain when it would take place as the Duke of Herne had yet to arrive.

"Speaking of which, I heard some delightful news. Is it true, Commander, that you have become the new swordmaster of this nation?"

"Haha. You're asking about that right away? You must have been very curious."

As Kishiar laughed playfully, General Gino nodded seriously.

"Of course. Since me, there hasn't been anyone in this Empire who reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, and I was deeply saddened by that. You must know better than anyone."

After saying this, General Gino looked at him with intense earnestness.

"So, is it really true?"

Even though the rumors were as good as fact, hearing it confirmed from the person himself was different. He wanted Kishiar to confirm the truth.

Kishiar smiled enigmatically for a moment, then finally nodded emphatically as General Gino became visibly anxious.

"Yes. It's as you heard. That's what happened."

"By God! This is incredible."

General Gino's eyes reddened with emotion. He immediately knelt on one knee before Kishiar and bowed his head.

"I sincerely congratulate you. I have always dreamed that when a new swordmaster emerged, it would be you. Now that my dream has come true, this old swordsman has no more regrets."

Behind the emotionally overwhelmed general, his subordinates, not knowing what to do, also dropped to their knees in a collective gesture.

"Don't do this, General. I am no longer a Prince, but Duke Peletta and the Commander of the Cavalry. There's no need for such formalities. Your men seem uncomfortable behind you."

"Oh, my apologies. I got carried away in my joy, reverting to old habits..."

General Gino then stood up again. Yet, he continued to gaze at Kishiar, his eyes moist, unable to stop smiling.

"Long ago, the time I spent teaching the Young Princes swordsmanship remains one of the most treasured and shining moments of my life. When such a talented individual as yourself chose to no longer wield a sword, it pained me deeply... but it turns out you've been practicing all along."

"Haha. I hope you're not too upset that I kept it a secret, even from you?"

"Upset? Not at all. Rather, I admire that even during difficult times, you never abandoned the sword. As a fellow swordsman, that's worthy of respect. Truly... it's a blessing for the Empire."

General Gino seemed undisturbed by the fact that Kishiar had kept his status as a swordmaster hidden even from him. Kishiar, smiling, responded.

"To receive such praise from a teacher who was always so strict is overwhelming. But tell me, General."

"Yes?"

"Have you not heard the rumors that I am not the only swordmaster?"

"What?"

General Gino blinked in surprise.

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"To receive such praise from a teacher who was always so strict is overwhelming. But tell me, General."

"Yes?"

"Have you not heard the rumors that I am not the only swordmaster?"

"What?"

General Gino blinked in surprise.

"I thought you would have heard. Rumors claim there's another swordsman here who can wield the Aura, not just me."

"Well... I did hear such talk, but naturally, I assumed it was a distortion of the truth..."

General Gino's skepticism wasn't unusual. Ordinary people, ignorant of the truth, eagerly believed the rumors of two swordmasters, but those with even a slight knowledge of swordsmanship knew better.

Once, the Empire boasted dozens of swordmasters, but now, scouring the entire continent, one would be hard-pressed to find even ten. This number dwindled further when considering only those actively revealing themselves.

In Yuder's previous life, the longstanding tradition of the Orr Empire that only a swordmaster could be appointed as General was broken after General Mook and General Gino before him. The Empire had no choice but to fill the ranks with others.

'Emperor Katchian found it deeply humiliating,' he reminisced.

Due to the lack of swordmasters, Yuder Aile, the leader of the Cavalry, had to engage in duels, disguised as sparring matches, with renowned swordmasters from abroad to prove the Empire's might.

General Gino, most aware of the shortage of swordmasters, would have questioned his own judgment had he believed the rumors immediately.

"It's not a distortion. It's all true," Kishiar cheerfully revealed the truth to General Gino.

"The protagonist of those rumors is none other than my adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman, standing right beside me."

Nathan Zuckerman, standing behind Kishiar like Yuder, indifferently received the astonished gazes of General Gino and his subordinates, bowing his head. His revealed identity seemed to be of little concern to him.

In fact, as long as it was Kishiar's wish, he appeared utterly indifferent to whether his power became widely known or remained unrecognized.

General Gino, looking at Nathan in disbelief, muttered, "Good heavens... You? Really?"

"..."

"I still vividly remember you as a young servant... To think you became a knight, I assumed it was merely an honorary position, but what exactly happened?"

"Nothing special. It's just Nathan's talent and potential was that exceptional," Kishiar replied, not Nathan.

"Remember, General? When you were teaching me swordsmanship long ago, Nathan was always watching from behind."

"Yes, I remember. You insisted on letting the servant observe and even bet me on it."

"That's right. Even then, Nathan could perfectly mimic what he saw me practicing."

Kishiar replied with a mischievous smile.

"It's just a case of a promising seed growing tall. I've always regretted letting such talent go to waste by my side, but now I'm glad to properly introduce him."

General Gino seemed profoundly moved by these words.

Lost in thought, he gazed at Nathan Zuckerman before nodding gravely and bowing his head in deep respect.

"I had thought the lineage of swordsmanship talent in this Empire had met its fate... but it seems it was merely my aged ministerial eyes blinded by narrow-mindedness. Your presence enlightens me. Even when establishing the Special Forces, I've come to realize so much more."

"Ha, what are you saying with such words?"

"No. If not for your words, didn't you guess that I would've challenged that knight to a duel to prove his aura?"

"Hmm? Were you going to do that?"

Kishiar tilted his head and blinked, a completely natural expression.

To Yuder, it indeed seemed like the general had acted first as he anticipated.

'Well, there's no need to request a duel for evidence just to reveal that Nathan Zuckerman is the real swordmaster. That would be an inquisition, not an honorable method.'

"Sir Nathan Zuckerman. It's truly regrettable and I am sorry that I've only recognized your talent now."

"I don't think there's any need for the general to apologize. I've learned that a knight's purpose is not to seek someone's recognition."

Nathan Zuckerman's response was concise and neat. General Gino looked at him anew, scanning him up and down several times.

Yet Kishiar, unsatisfied, interjected again.

"General. Among the rumors that reached the south, have you not heard of the hero of the Cavalry? Surely there must be stories."

"...Ah, are you referring to that member who performed greatly in the West?"

General Gino's voice and expression subtly differed from before. Yuder easily guessed that he must have also heard various rumors about himself.

"Yes. Without him, even a swordmaster couldn't have caught the massive monsters raining down like rain so quickly and without harm. He's also a skilled swordsman. Since he's here, how about exchanging greetings? It would be an old acquaintance for the general."

"Ah... Is that so?"

Upon hearing he was an old acquaintance, General Gino blinked and looked around. The office, as usual, was filled with many people.

Yuder, standing near Kishiar, thought the general would immediately spot him, but Gino merely glanced at Yuder and looked away nonchalantly.

"Hmm..."

After scanning faces unfamiliar to him, General Gino's gaze lingered on the members he had met during the Red Stone retrieval mission.

Finally, his gaze stopped on whom he thought most plausible – the dazzling Cavalry's Rose, Gakane Bolunwald, with bright red hair, vibrant green eyes, a kind beauty, and a sturdy physique.

"Is it that person? When I briefly saw him before, I thought he was unusually tall and striking... With such an appearance, in many ways... Ahem. I can understand why there are widespread rumors."

"...Ah..."

"...Ugh!"

Gakane, meeting the General's gaze, was both embarrassed and the surrounding members quickly turned their heads, biting their lips to suppress laughter.

"That's not him, General. My assistant is right here; I don't know where you're looking."

"What?"

At Kishiar's call, General Gino, who had been sharply scrutinizing Gakane, looked flustered. Yuder silently kept to himself as the General belatedly turned his way.

"No, that... young man? To catch a huge monster alone and be so renowned across the capital for an extraordinary appearance that caught the Commander's eye... I naturally assumed..."

General Gino's gaze flitted bewilderingly back and forth between Gakane and Yuder. It seemed he had not the slightest inkling that Yuder was the protagonist of the rumors.

"I'm puzzled why you mistook, having heard the correct rumors. Isn't my assistant the one endowed with sufficient stature and ability to vanquish monsters, not to mention overflowingly beautiful?"

"Ah, of course... That young man also appears tall enough and... well... handsome, I suppose..."

However, calling Yuder Aile 'overflowingly beautiful' in front of Gakane and himself was fraught with many problems. Yuder, in an attempt to salvage the situation for the perplexed General Gino, sighed and spoke.

"Please, Commander, cease this jest that puts others in an awkward position."

"Jest? I've never once spoken insincerely about my assistant."

"If you continue to embarrass the General further, I would have no choice but to leave here for the sake of rectification."

"That won't do."

Kishiar straightened up, smiling radiantly.

General Gino let out a small sigh and gave Yuder a glance filled with slight gratitude.

The conversation that followed flowed smoothly without any personal matters.

General Gino decided to stay at the Charloin Southern Army base, not far from the Cavalry's southern branch, and promised considerable cooperation with the Cavalry. He seemed to take very seriously the opinion that the strange crack and monsters that appeared earlier might reappear.

Before leaving the branch after the conversation, the General looked alternately at Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder Aile with a significant gaze and left a meaningful farewell.

"I had been contemplating retirement, but seeing such talents makes me realize many things anew. Next time, I shall visit with my Adjutant, who unfortunately could not join us today."

After everyone, including the General, had left, Yuder, now alone with Kishiar, seized the moment to speak.

"I had no idea General Gino was considering retirement. Maybe that's why he disappeared in the previous game."

"That could be."

"Do you know who the Adjutant he mentioned is? Someone important?"

The fact that he specifically mentioned bringing the Adjutant next time piqued Yuder's curiosity.

"I believe it's Gino's protege and successor. I heard the skills are quite commendable. Rumored to be a future swordmaster, along with the Imperial Knight's commander. Gino has been quite worried about his Adjutant's recent lack of progress in swordsmanship; he might want to bring that person to broaden the horizons."

'Hmm... Gino's protege and successor. Could it be... that person?'

Yuder recalled someone from his previous life who succeeded General Gino as the Southern Army General. A person who became General without being a swordmaster and faced much gossip, seldom visiting the capital and thus having almost no acquaintance but not a good reputation.

The new Southern Army General wasn't fond of the Cavalry, often failing to cooperate in times of need.

'That person wasn't the only one like that, but thinking about the southern earthquake and what followed still irritates me.'

"Could I know the name of this person?"