

Turning 441

Chapter 441

With an inscrutable expression, Robel began his story.

He was one of the Awakeners who had surfaced not long after the Red Stone fell. Fleeing from his family and relatives who feared him, he eventually left his hometown. After much hardship, he met other Awakeners who helped him, and that place turned out to be the Star of Nagran.

When he first joined, the Star of Nagran was significantly smaller than it was now. To show his commitment, Robel met the Sage, and it was then that he first learned of Nahan.

"...Are you saying you met him back then?" Yuder asked, his eyes widening in surprise at this unexpected revelation from Robel's story.

"Yes, but only briefly. Back then, he was famous for blindly following the Sage. Rumor has it that the Sage saved him when he was on the brink of death."

According to Robel, Hosanna had also been with Nahan since that time. Robel did not know when they first joined the Star of Nagran since both had arrived before him. He had merely heard murmurs that the Sage had rescued them from a city near the southern desert even before naming the group.

At that time, they were concerned that if too many joined the Star of Nagran, it would attract attention. So, they were just establishing bases. Robel, being from the western region and wishing to live quietly, headed toward a base situated within the Great Sarain Forest.

Since then, he had lived as peacefully as possible, occasionally hearing news from other bases. Rumors reached him that Nahan was actively involved in rescuing and recruiting other Awakeners, but Robel considered it none of his business.

Neither the formation of the Cavalry nor the gradual shift in public perception of the Awakeners had anything to do with him.

But all that changed due to this recent incident.

"The Star of Nagran as I knew it wasn't really an organization. It was just a place where people who wanted to survive could help each other. The Sage encouraged us to empower ourselves for self-defense, but never told us to misuse our abilities against others."

Robel had met the Sage only once when he first joined, but he held him in high esteem. Despite knowing little more than what he had just revealed, the sincerity in his eyes when he spoke was undeniable.

In contrast to Gayle and Doyle, the brothers who had been reticent about discussing the Sage, Robel was relatively open. Although his less-guarded demeanor indicated he wasn't deeply involved in the inner workings of the organization, the genuine reverence he showed was identical.

'It seems evident that the Sage, unlike Nahan, tends to keep information about himself concealed. Could he be someone capable of leading people?'

"Even if I could return there after all that's happened, making enemies of those I considered comrades, I have no intention of doing so... But I do believe the Sage is a genuinely good person. Whether he knows about this situation or not, I can't say."

Well, did the Sage really not know about what was going on?

Whether or not the Sage was a good person as Robel believed, Yuder trusted his experiences from his past life a bit more. Even if many things had changed in this life, the internal strife beginning to unravel within the Star of Nagran had long been evident.

Nahan, who once blindly followed the Sage.

The Sage, who knew Nahan was going down a dangerously aggressive path but did nothing to intervene.

'Whether he can't or won't intervene, I still don't know...'

Something ambiguously connected between the two must have been the key to the internal strife and destruction in their past lives. Yuder's experience and intuition whispered that only by knowing the truth could they protect themselves and prevent Nahan from doing greater harm.

'And beyond that, I also want to find out if the identity of the so-called Sage has any connection to the person I met in my past life.'

"Thank you for sharing your honest opinion. It will be very helpful," Kishiar said, offering a grateful smile.

"If there's anything more you wish to say, feel free to do so now."

"Ah, in that case... please forgive me, but I have something to add."

With hands clenched tightly in tension, Robel cautiously began to speak.

"I am aware that you chose not to swiftly mete out punishment to the individuals captured by the Cavalry but instead conducted thorough investigations to determine the severity of their crimes, and even provided medical treatment for their injuries. Since learning this, I've wondered how things might have been different had I not fled from Great Sarain Forest and instead met with the Cavalry to exchange words. Now that I know more, I regret that decision."

The reason the Cavalry had begun chasing after the Star of Nagran was to find Nahan. They had no interest in indiscriminately capturing or punishing ordinary Awakeners simply because they belonged to the same organization.

However, people like Robel were not well-informed about what Nahan had done. They only knew that in the usual course of trying to rescue Awakeners, they had clashed with the Cavalry and casualties had ensued, putting the Star of Nagran in peril.

"Since this incident, I've felt firsthand a drastic change in how people from the West view Awakeners. I would never have known this without your help. Yet, the majority of people within the Star of Nagran are still unaware of this reality," Robel said, bowing politely.

After Robel left, Kishiar sank into contemplation. Yuder replayed their recent conversation, observing Kishiar's expression.

"The next in line is Sir Zuckerman... shall I call for him?"

"Before that, may I ask what you thought when you first became an Awakener?"

Instead of a reply, an unexpected question came back. Yuder paused, then searched his memory.

'What was it like back then?'

Unlike Kishiar, for whom only about two years had passed since Awakeners first appeared, for Yuder it had happened well over a decade ago. Recalling those times took effort.

Before awakening, Yuder was somewhat bored with his monotonous life in the mountains. Sometimes, his curiosity to see the wider world gripped him, but with no clear purpose, he simply continued on with his daily routine.

Things were much the same right after he Awakened. Initially, he was a bit startled, but with no family to witness his powers, there was no one to react. Life went on as usual. At most, cutting down trees and traversing mountains became a bit easier.

Until he heard about the recruitment for the Cavalry, Yuder had spent the two years post-awakening aimlessly wandering alone, devoid of excitement.

'I'd only heard rumors that many were Awakeners, but since I was the only Awakener around me, I didn't even think my powers were anything special.'

"I had no particular thoughts."

"Typical of my assistant."

After long contemplation, Kishiar chuckled as if he were joking upon hearing Yuder's conclusion.

"You probably already know, but for me, that was a tremendous blessing and a lifeline. But it might not be for others."

"..."

"Listening to his story reminded me of the content of the diary I read yesterday."

At the sudden mention of the diary related to the works of the first Duke Tain, the corners of Yuder's eyelashes subtly quivered.

"Wasn't that a time when magic had only recently started to take shape? The diary contained some speculation about the confusion that mages must have experienced. Strikingly, what we've heard isn't much different."

It was an entirely unexpected line of thought.

What did it mean that the initial experiences of mages, documented in a diary, mirrored the experiences of today's Awakeners?

"After having this conversation today... I feel like I need to read that diary once more."

Kishiar looked at Yuder as he spoke.

"Would you like to go through it together tonight?"

Was this an offer based on Yuder's displayed interest in the diary?

Slower than yesterday, yet still profoundly, Yuder's heart began to beat.

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All day, he had acted as if the events of the previous night held no significance. Yet, as the sun began to set, he spoke words that held a sense of gravity.

Yuder's gaze moved beyond Kishiar's back to the slowly darkening sky, then settled back onto Kishiar's eyes. Just as he was about to speak, his thoughts swirling with what Kanna and Enon had said, the sound of a knock on the door broke the tension.

"Let's discuss it after we wrap up today's last duty."

Kishiar softly muttered and offered Yuder a slight smile before turning his head. Nathan Zuckerman entered the room.

"I've brought what you asked for, my lord."

Unaware of the complex and delicate exchange of emotions that had just occurred, the man solemnly placed a box on the table.

"Is everything there?"

"Yes. Both items are present."

Pleased with the answer, Kishiar playfully commended his dutiful subordinate.

"Well done, Nathan, especially considering the time constraints. Anything else to report?"

"We've found traces of the one we were chasing."

A new development regarding Nahan emerged. Instead of pondering the complexity of his thoughts, Yuder focused on Nathan's words.

"As you already know from previous reports, the individual evaded me and dove into an underground sewer. The many exits made it unclear where he had escaped to, but after a thorough search, we found evidence near the north gate."

"The north?"

"Yes. Please look at this."

Nathan Zuckerman pulled out a small piece of cloth from his pocket. The deep blue fabric was torn, as if caught on something, and was filled with dark bloodstains that made it hard to discern its original color.

"This was found by those chasing the merchants who escaped from the secret auction house. Initially, they thought it was the merchants' belongings, but they brought it to me because it was soaked in blood and water."

The southern merchants who had fled from the secret auction had used a hidden passage leading north. Nathan Zuckerman, upon seeing the torn piece of fabric discovered near the north gate, quickly recognized it as belonging to Nahan, whom he had fought.

"It's rather coincidental that this cloth was found in the same direction the merchants had fled."

Hearing Nathan's report, Kishiar's eyes turned icy.

"An enemy of an enemy could well become a friend under certain circumstances. We must consider the possibility that the merchants and Nahan crossed paths and aided each other during their escape."

When they had encountered each other at the security management team that day, the southern merchants and Nahan's group had faced each other. The southern merchants falsely believed that Nahan's group had robbed their auction storage, while Nahan and his associates harbored open hostility toward the merchants, who were minions of Duke Tain and Baron Willhem.

Yet, the fleeing southern merchants were not genuinely loyal to Duke Tain and were also Awakeners.

Although the likelihood of them running into each other while escaping in the same direction was low, considering the similar timeframe, Kishiar felt that the possibility couldn't be entirely ruled out. Nathan Zuckerman seemed to share this cautious view.

"Given Nahan's capabilities, it's entirely possible that he could have influenced not just the merchants, but also others he encountered, to aid him," Nathan spoke cautiously.

"That's more likely, but we should keep all possibilities open for now."

"Yes."

"Send that piece of cloth to Kanna Wand as soon as possible. Make sure she also gathers information from the surrounding area where it was found. As for you, focus your search to the south."

"Understood."

It was suspected that the contraband goods from Duke Tain were originally intended to be partly auctioned off, and the rest, including human trafficking victims, would be headed south where illegal fighting arenas were rampant. Kishiar seemed to think that the southern merchants who had fled with just a sack of drug powder would still be heading in that direction.

And Yuder's thoughts were not much different from Kishiar's.

'They initially said they met Duke Tain while trading in the South, and they're originally from the southern lands. They would naturally head south.'

Furthermore, according to what Robel had said earlier, the headquarters of the Star of Nagan, where he had gone to meet the sage before relocating to the western base, was also in the south. If Nahan, who had escaped alone and survived despite severe injuries, was still alive, he too would most likely be heading south.

"Do you have anything else to report?"

"No, that's all."

"Then finally, you'll have some time to rest. Take your time preparing to return to the capital and try to rest for a while."

It was the first time Yuder saw Kishiar openly telling Nathan Zuckerman to rest. Nathan's fine, dark eyebrows moved subtly upward. The knight, who had endured hardship from his reckless behavior, seemed less than thrilled to be told to rest.

"I've had plenty of rest since I came here..."

"Rest when you're told to rest. You pursued Nahan relentlessly for days after fighting him alone. It's time to step back. Don't underestimate that person's capabilities, especially since you've seen what he was like in the past."

"I've only seen it, so it had no effect on me," Nathan retorted.

Yuder's gaze shifted to Nathan Zuckerman, understanding why Kishiar had insisted that his adjutant take some time off.

He had heard that Nathan had faced both Nahan and Hosanna simultaneously and yet did not sustain a single significant injury. However, that didn't mean he hadn't been subjected to Nahan's illusions.

Nahan's ability forcibly opens a person's mind and shows them all sorts of horrifying illusions, causing mental collapse. Sometimes mental scars were harder to recover from than physical wounds.

Though Yuder didn't know what 'past' illusions Nathan had seen, if Kishiar was that concerned, there must be a reason.

"It's your judgment that it had no effect. This is my judgment, as someone who has personally experienced that man's abilities. It's not an excessive worry. I presume my assistant would agree."

Suddenly, the arrow of conversation was aimed at Yuder. Come to think of it, all three people present had experienced Nahan's powers. Yuder met Nathan Zuckerman's eyes and quietly expressed his agreement.

"...Yes, I think it would be wise to heed the Commander's advice for the sake of future operations."

"Understood."

Finally, Nathan Zuckerman conceded and let out a small sigh, along with a salute. The broad shoulders of the knight, who had come to report on his mission activities and unexpectedly gained a period of rest, somehow looked a bit deflated.

"Well, that wraps up today's business."

Kishiar rose from his seat, turning his eyes towards the deepening twilight outside the window.

"Let's head back."

"Commander, are you returning to your quarters?"

The guards by the door greeted Kishiar in loud voices.

"Yes. You guys should head back too; it's time for a delicious dinner. You've worked hard."

"Oh, not at all! Be careful when you go out the main gate; some rowdy folks are still around."

"Are they still out there? They're quite persistent. Very well."

What the soldiers were referring to were the servants of nobles, who had surrounded Baron Willhem's mansion since the day after the party, wanting to meet Kishiar. These people were sent by the relatives of those who had been imprisoned due to crimes connected with Baron Willhem or for participating in the secret auction.

Originally, after the incident, various indirect pressures and bribes were expected to flood in toward Kishiar and the Cavalry, causing significant disruptions to the investigations and daily work. However, Kishiar, without batting an eye, seemed to have preemptively anticipated this. He sent them all away and, instead, posted a large notice in front of the mansion and the security force's headquarters.

"After this point in time, anyone obstructing the investigation under the pretext of saving criminals will have to meet with the Cavalry Commander in person to clarify the intent behind their actions. Those who are confident should step forward and express their views in court."

While the nobles badmouthed Duke Peletta for his outrageous behavior, none dared to directly confront Kishiar, especially after the rumors had spread about his bold actions at the party.

So, all they could do was to send their servants to lament their grievances outside the main gate.

Yuder followed behind Kishiar as they walked through the garden. Traces of the battle that had not yet been cleaned up were still evident throughout the mansion, now vacated by Baron Willhem and his family.

"Have you gathered much information about the task we decided to perform tonight?"

Kishiar, who was walking a step ahead, threw the question over his shoulder. Yuder tensely sealed his lips before nonchalantly opening them to reply.

"Yes."

"Hmm? You seem a little less confident than usual."

The tone was playful and teasing.

"No, that's not the case."

"Do you think you can handle it?"

"...I'll have to try to know, but I intend to do my best to ensure no harm comes to you, Commander."

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"So, what about the question I asked earlier?"

The question followed naturally, like water flowing downstream.

Feeling Kishiar's gaze waiting for an answer to his suggestion to read the diary of the First Duke Tain once again, Yuder paused for a moment before slowly responding.

"If I complete the task successfully, I'd like to do as you suggested."

Although he'd conditioned it on completing the task successfully, Yuder's willingness to accept Kishiar's extended hand remained unchanged.

And so did the various meanings that lay within that commitment.

"Well, whether that task comes to an end or not, I consider it a separate issue. But if that makes you more comfortable, so be it."

Before the playful retort could conclude, the back gate of the mansion, their destination, appeared. Yuder, who had expected the place to be deserted as usual, suddenly widened his eyes upon spotting a familiar shadow.

'...Enon?'

It was indeed Enon, no illusion. Leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, the man turned his gaze upon hearing footsteps. The somewhat softened smile that briefly crossed his face upon seeing Yuder disappeared.

A guess at why Enon would be here at this time crossed Yuder's mind, casting a brief shadow over his thoughts.

'Could it be... Has he really come to reveal his identity to Kishiar? Here and now?'

If he were alone, he could have asked directly, but conveniently, Kishiar was also present. With an expression that seemed to say he knew Yuder would come, Enon approached. Kishiar, stepping forward, asked with a smile,

"Did you come to see Yuder? Coincidentally, my assistant and I have urgent matters to attend to. If it's a long conversation you're after, it might be difficult right now."

"No, my visit today isn't aimed at him. And it's not a long matter either."

Bowing his head in a perfunctory greeting, Enon's gaze squarely met Kishiar's. Recognizing that Enon's business was with him, Kishiar's eyes widened briefly before narrowing in deep interest.

"Oh? Intriguing. What's the matter?"

Yuder involuntarily closed his eyes. But the answer that came a moment later was a bit different from what he had expected.

"I heard that a rather interesting item was unearthed from the underground dungeon of the security management team yesterday."

"Did you hear that from my assistant?"

"Yes."

Yuder opened his eyes again. The two men were conversing without looking in his direction.

"True. An intriguing historical document was indeed discovered. So, what about it?"

"I would like to take a look at it."

Enon's attitude was surprisingly casual for someone addressing a Duke and a Commander. Yet, there was something about him that made such a demeanor feel oddly acceptable.

Kishiar, too, was unfazed by Enon's casualness and simply stared back at him.

"...You might know that the document is a complex mixture of Gore script and early Imperial languages. Even I find parts of it difficult to read quickly. Are you saying you can read it?"

"If I couldn't, I wouldn't have come."

"Remarkable. These days, it's rare to find a temple teaching Gore."

After responding with what seemed to be genuine admiration, Kishiar's eyes deepened further.

"So, why do you absolutely need to read it?"

Though the conversation seemed light, the atmosphere for those watching was far from it. Enon, who briefly glanced at Yuder's frozen expression, swallowed hard and let out a short sigh, as if trying to hold back an immense tension within.

Yuder sensed it—a gaze that seemed to read even the emotions he himself wasn't fully aware of.

"Watch closely," it seemed like Yuder whispered, shifting his lips. Before he could express any doubt, Enon spoke up without hesitation.

"To speak before answering your question, it was I who informed that fellow about the Protection of Blood hidden in the fourth floor of the underground dungeon."

"..."

"How would an ignoramus in magic suddenly know that information? I assumed that you would already be aware of what I've done during my monster research. Am I wrong?"

In response to Enon's counter-question, Kishiar, who had remained silent until now, calmly nodded his head.

"Yes, you're right. I've already heard about your contributions this time. You're on par with Hellem, who received praise as one of the most outstanding monster researchers in history. No, you might even surpass her. It was not easy to comprehend that a mere apothecary could achieve such knowledge and results."

Kishiar had already heard praise about Enon's skills from Hellem. But hearing it like this gave it a whole new meaning. Regardless of Yuder's spine stiffening with tension, Enon showed no signs of surprise or confusion. He asked, as casually as if he were serving a customer in his apothecary.

"Is there anything else?"

"Nathan mentioned that your casual advice and medicine helped him break through a training barrier. Mick also reported seeing traces of time in you that one would expect to see in ancient trees. You display an abundance of such traits, usually only visible in centenarians. When asked, you admitted it was just as it seemed."

This was news even to Yuder.

"What on earth have you been up to all this time without my knowing?" The question was uncomfortable, but Enon simply ignored Yuder's gaze. His face suggested that he had anticipated such a response.

'So when he said yesterday that revealing his identity would make work easier... it wasn't just a casual comment.'

"Well, if you've heard that much, there's no need for further explanation."

"So, what conclusion have you come to based on the reports you've heard so far?" Enon looked at Kishiar, who slowly opened his mouth.

"A person who's neither a mage, a swordsman, nor a priest but has profound knowledge in all these fields, bearing the passage of time even older than an ancient tree. It's hard to guess your true identity as a mere human, but..."

His voice trailed off, resuming after a moment.

"It makes sense to consider you could be one of the other races that once existed in this land."

At that moment, a strong wind brushed past them.

Yuder clenched his fist, suppressing his wildly beating heart.

The answer that Kishiar arrived at, based solely on the bit of information that Enon had let slip, was eerily close to the truth. A faint, inscrutable smile appeared and disappeared on Enon's face upon hearing the answer.

"Well, you're not exactly wrong."

"Hmm. If this isn't the complete answer, the world is indeed a vast place. I need to improve further."

Kishiar shrugged his shoulders and chuckled, putting forth his response with dry humor.

'Is he not surprised?'

Though Kishiar was skilled at concealing his emotions, Yuder hadn't expected him to maintain such composure during this astonishing conversation. He wondered what the man was thinking, but all he could see was the back and the side profile of someone who was one step ahead of him.

At that moment, Enon's gaze briefly shifted back to Yuder. His yellow eyes, brimming with an inscrutable meaning, met Yuder's before returning to Kishiar.

"Let me be clear. The reason I came here is because of that guy, and unless something changes, I intend to continue living peacefully as I have been. I assume the Commander would share the same sentiment, correct?"

Kishiar responded to Enon's somewhat probing, somewhat confirming statement with a flawless smile and an extended hand for a handshake.

"Exactly. I appreciate your taking the initiative to clarify that."

There was no explicit confirmation of trust exchanged between Enon and Kishiar. Yet both seemed to understand that everything that needed to be verified or discussed had been settled, nodding their heads in unison.

"In that case, I'll send over the item I brought yesterday tomorrow. For me, it has no value beyond that of a historical artifact."

"Please do so."

'...Is that it?'

Really?

While Yuder was swallowing his bewilderment, Enon shook hands with Kishiar one more time, turned without a trace of hesitation, and brushed past him. As he did, he whispered something softly.

"..."

For a long time, Yuder watched Enon's retreating back.

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"Wouldn't it be better to start with a meal?"

Kishiar, heading towards the simple food and wine that the servants had prearranged in their lodging, looked back at Yuder and asked. The astonishing conversation he'd just had with Enon seemed to have already vanished into the distance.

Yuder glanced at the table Kishiar had pointed to and shook his head.

"...I'm fine."

His appetite was far from roused given the circumstances. The bread that emitted a delicious aroma, the fresh fruit—right now, they all looked no different than clods of dirt.

However, Kishiar was not the type of man to be deterred by a refusal.

"It's better not to skip meals, even if you're not hungry. Don't tell me you're going to let me eat alone?"

"..."

"Really?"

Yuder found it impossible to ignore the smile that softened Kishiar's otherwise stern face.

What on Earth is he thinking?

With a trace of self-reproach, Yuder took a seat across from him. Without any hesitation, Kishiar picked up a slice of bread soaked in honey and apple and passed it over. Initially, Yuder planned to eat just that one slice and get up, but as soon as he finished it, another piece of bread appeared before him. When he hesitated, Kishiar subtly shook the bread as if suggesting his arm was getting tired. Eventually, Yuder took the second piece.

After finishing the second slice, a third and then a fourth followed.

"..."

As Yuder silently accepted morsel after morsel from Kishiar, who himself took large bites of his own share, something peculiar began to happen.

The taste started to come alive on his tongue.

First, it was the sweetness of honey. Then, the creamy richness of the white filling. Next, the tart crunchiness of the fruit. And finally, when he could even discern the saltiness sprinkled atop the butter, Yuder felt as if something that had been rigidly frozen inside him had astonishingly melted away.

The man responsible for that melting was, of course, the one sitting before him.

When Kishiar skillfully split the last remaining piece of bread and handed it over, Yuder accepted it but didn't put it in his mouth.

Instead, what escaped his lips was a question, now noticeably drained of vigor.

"...Weren't you surprised?"

"Why should I be surprised when I didn't even guess correctly?"

The response came back smoothly, as though he had been waiting for this moment.

"Weren't you concerned it could be dangerous?"

"The person before me has already provided sufficient proof of trustworthiness."

The hand holding the last piece of bread trembled for a moment.

As if he had waited a long time for this very response, Kishiar's eyes met Yuder's.

"You don't need to know everything about someone to be with them. Knowing their character and intentions from what they've shown you can be enough."

You don't need to know everything about someone to be with them.

The weight of that statement, unmistakably directed at him, struck Yuder like a hammer.

As he stared into the dark pupils of the man in front of him, unable to blink, Kishiar gave a soft smile.

"It took a day of waiting, but finally, my assistant is truly seeing me."

"..."

"It took quite a while."

No, Yuder had been observing him all along.

He had thought he was observing, but a voice deep in his heart quietly raised a question.

Could he truly say, with confidence, that he had?

Had he truly faced Kishiar throughout the day without merely 'observing' him?

Yuder couldn't answer that question.

Then what had he thought he had been seeing of Kishiar today?

One thing was certain: Kishiar had neither forgotten last night's events nor was he indifferent to them, as Yuder had initially believed.

"Were you waiting for me to speak first?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you just ask me first?"

"You already know why I didn't."

Kishiar laughed quietly.

"There's no point in forcing an unwanted answer from someone. Especially not from you."

In essence, Kishiar was saying he had not acted because he knew Yuder would not want him to.

"See, by waiting, you spoke first. So waiting for a day has its merits."

He said it was enough, but Yuder didn't feel the same way.

"I might not have lived up to your expectations and faith."

"There's no chance of that. Fortunately, I have plenty of time to wait."

It was a skill, being able to joke about waiting indefinitely for someone to open up. And it made Yuder feel all the more foolish for being easily swayed by such words.

As Yuder exhaled, an unbearable heat surged from behind his eyes. Yuder spoke, looking downward.

"I can never truly match up to you, Commander."

"Interesting. That's a thought I have every day when I look at my assistant."

Grinning, Kishiar leaned his chin on his hand.

"I don't know what's making the assistant so hesitant, but if it has anything to do with me, there's something I'd like to say."

Yuder should have asked what it was, but his tongue seemed paralyzed. Captivated by Kishiar's piercing gaze, he listened.

"Do you know that worrying is something that you can only do about things that you ultimately consider to be that important?"

"..."

"If the one who has taken my heart worries because of me, then I am a man who would be more than happy with that. I am quite the opportunist. Ah, did you already know that?"

The one who had taken Kishiar's heart.

Yuder's thoughts stalled, pierced by an unexpected strike. Words that Kishiar had once uttered in the depths of the Great Sarain Forest flashed like wildfire across his mind.

'Why bring that up now?'

As Yuder lost his words, Kishiar smiled gently with curved eyes.

"A joke, perhaps? But I'm serious."

He had been closely watching every nuance of Yuder's reactions.

"Anyway, the fact that someone as unreadable as my assistant would worry enough to observe me through others gives me hope. It may be a wild guess, but it seemed that way earlier."

Although he called it a wild guess, his eyes conveyed anything but. And in reality, it was far from a mere guess.

Yuder recalled the last words left by Enon.

I've shown you everything. Now do as you please.

Enon had displayed his true identity—a secret difficult to understand logically—as an offering, showing Yuder how Kishiar would react. Thanks to that, Yuder could initiate the conversation, and for that he was grateful.

But Kishiar had also sensed another hidden agenda in that conversation. His manner of almost acknowledging it while pretending not to was truly like him.

In truth, what Yuder sensed wasn't solely hope. Yuder faintly discerned traces of other carefully concealed emotions within Kishiar's smile.

"Still, the fact that he only mentioned hope could mean..."

"Don't overthink things. No matter how strong or exceptional one is, everyone needs time now and then. If talking with me makes you feel better, then do so. If not, that's fine too."

A thin breath escaped from between Yuder's lips.

If today had been a game of tactical chess between them, Yuder felt he had just been utterly defeated.

‘I've never actually won in my previous life anyway,’ he mused.

Finally, he exhaled all the air he had been holding and released the words that had been lurking even deeper within him.

"As you said, I have indeed been pondering over matters concerning you today."

Words that had been excruciatingly difficult to utter felt astonishingly insignificant once they were out.

Suppressing his emotions, Yuder then threw out another question.

"What do you think I've been worried about?"

He wanted to find out even the aspects he had not been curious about until now. What did Kishiar think of him? Kishiar had come close to guessing about the true nature of Enon, so what were his thoughts about Yuder?

Catching Yuder's gaze, filled with such implications, Kishiar soon opened his mouth to reply.

"Well, the dream I claimed to have had last night and the sleep talk that I don't remember could be the most likely culprits, but I can't be certain."

It seemed Kishiar had also judged that Yuder's attitude had markedly changed from that moment. Yuder cast another question while staring at the swirling dark-red liquid in the wine glass Kishiar was idly holding.

"You mentioned that you sometimes sleep like that when you're tired. Do you recall how often that happens or when it started?"

"It's difficult to keep track of all the dreams, so I can't give you an exact answer. However... there was one instance where I slept so deeply that I had a nightmare after someone woke me up."

"When was that?"

"When you applied to join the Cavalry. Nathan thought I had physically collapsed due to overwork."

'When I applied to join the Cavalry...'

Coincidentally, that was also when Yuder became aware that he had returned to the past. As he recalled this, a cold shiver ran down his spine.

Could this really be a coincidence?

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"There have been a few times since then when I've woken up with a vague feeling of having had a rather unpleasant dream. No one else was beside me when I slept and woke up, so I can't say for sure if there's a connection."

"Do you have no recollection whatsoever of what you dreamt?"

"None at all."

Kishiar nodded with a mild expression. He said that when Nathan Zuckerman woke him up, he did not sleep talk like this time.

Since he couldn't remember, it was hard to say with certainty whether these events were related. But Yuder had a compelling reason to think otherwise.

"Yudrain."

His train of thought abruptly halted at the voice that seemed to read his mind. His fingers twitched noticeably, but the shock wasn't as intense as it was the night before.

"So, that's the cause of your concerns."

Kishiar's eyes narrowed as he studied Yuder's expression. Yuder thought he would naturally ask for an explanation, but Kishiar's question was about something entirely different.

"Do you know what was inside the box Nathan brought earlier?"

"Cookies, or so I heard."

Puzzled by the unexpected question, Yuder watched as Kishiar pulled a box wrapped in cloth from the corner of the table. Unfolding the cloth, he revealed what was inside.

"There are cookies, but... that's not all."

Kishiar opened the box, and along with the carefully wrapped cookies, an old book was revealed. It was the same book used for learning the Gore language.

"If it's not meaningless gibberish, I felt you should know its true meaning. It felt similar to Gore, so I reached out to Baron Koelt."

If it had been the capital, Kishiar could have used his own book, but they were in the west. Fortunately, Baron Koelt, who had recently established contact with them, was a scholar proficient in Gore and had the book Kishiar was looking for.

Yuder recalled that Nathan Zuckerman had reported that he brought 'both things' in that box to Kishiar. He had assumed it was merely different types of cookies, but he was wrong. The truth lay here.

Even without Yuder saying anything, Kishiar was already moving so swiftly ahead.

'And if I had said nothing, he would have kept everything he discovered buried in silence.'

Kishiar began flipping through the book. He seemed to know exactly where to look, and Yuder did not stop him. Instead, he thought about the name that had once been his.

Yudrain. That name was a gift he had received before becoming the Commander of the Cavalry in his past life. To be honest, until recently, he had nearly forgotten all about it. Had he not heard Kishiar mention it in a dream, he might have continued to forget who had given him that name and how he had received it.

'I heard in the dream that it was made in Gore.'

However, he had not heard its meaning. Even looking back on his past memories, he couldn't distinctly recall what the name had meant. Not that he was particularly curious, given that it was a name he had abandoned and had no intention of reclaiming.

'If I hadn't heard it again last night, I could have buried it forever.'

He felt bitter. And then, the faces of those who had mockingly accused him of intentionally changing his name to noble-sounding to erase his past flooded his mind. Yuder ceased his reminiscence there.

Normally, receiving a name was considered an honorable gift and a source of pride. People assumed that Emperor Katchian had bestowed the name upon Yuder, and Yuder did nothing to correct that assumption.

However, the man who had given him that name was right in front of him, flipping through a book.

Could he, who had long carried the name without fully understanding its meaning, rediscover its essence now? Amidst a sensation as if someone were gently tickling his gut, Yuder silently waited for Kishiar to speak again.

"... There's really no word that fits exactly," Kishiar finally said.

"Is that so?"

"If you think of it as a single word, yes."

Setting the book down where Yuder could see, Kishiar pointed to a specific section with a peculiar smile.

"In the Gore language, 'ra' serves as a connector between words, much like the word 'and'. Assuming the 'ra' in Yudrain has that function, and we look at the original forms of the surrounding characters... do you see?"

Above Kishiar's fingertip, the word for 'beginning,' 'Yud,' was visible.

"Yud, which means 'beginning.' And on this side, 'In' means 'end.' When 'ra' connects them..."

"Beginning and end?"

Muttering these unfamiliar words, Kishiar chuckled softly.

"Literal translation would suggest so. However, considering the semantics of the two words and ancient grammar, it could translate differently. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"..."

"Eternity."

The beginning and the end, connected by the letter in between, could signify eternity. Even though Kishiar continued to speak more elaborately afterward, nothing more registered in Yuder's mind.

Hadn't he said to cherish the name, as it contained good meaning?

The memory of Kishiar's dry voice, almost like a joke from a dream, suddenly resurfaced. In front of the meaning of his name that he had come to understand after such a long time, Yuder kept silent for a moment before closing his eyes.

A warmth he had never felt before, not even when cauterized with hot iron, pulsed through his head in sync with his heartbeat. He couldn't suppress the sensation.

"Commander."

"Hm?"

Yuder interrupted Kishiar's words.

"Why such a grave face? Did my conjecture miss the mark again?"

"Do you remember, in the Great Sarain Forest, you mentioned you had seen something connected to me?"

Kishiar's expression, once tinged with levity, changed for a moment. Yuder looked into his eyes and whispered softly.

"I never mentioned it, but I also saw something similar recently."

When fighting against a southern merchant in the pitch-black darkness of a secret warehouse, a thread-like something appeared to guide him as he desperately searched for Kishiar, whose location was unknown. Without any explanation, he knew that Kishiar was at the other end of that thread, and indeed, he was.

"And I believe that mysterious connection between you and me..."

His dissipating voice even sounded distant to him. Yuder cleared his throat and finished what he was saying.

"...might be connected to that dream of yours. Otherwise, you couldn't possibly speak of things only I know about, even while you were asleep."

"..."

He couldn't say everything, but this much would surely give Kishiar something to think about.

"I hesitated because I was afraid the truth would be confirmed."

Yuder gave a faint smile, his face reflected in his red eyes.

"Nothing else in the world scares me; only you, Commander, make me feel afraid."

Swallowing the deep-seated emotions and indescribable memories within him, Yuder laid bare his somber confession.

"Perhaps, you are the only one who could make me this way."

Before, and even now.

In the silence, a droplet of water trickled down the glass Kishiar had been drinking from. The droplet slid slowly then quickly down the cup filled with cold liquor, finally dropping from the handle onto the white lace tablecloth, leaving a small, dark stain.

Perhaps the fear Yuder Aile felt for Kishiar La Orr began in much the same way. What was thought to be a small stain grew larger, eventually altering the original color so profoundly that it became impossible to hide.

Yuder waited quietly for a response. After unburdening himself to some extent, he felt like a condemned man awaiting the executioner's blade. Just as a new droplet began to form on the outside of the glass, a low voice broke the silence.

"May I come to you?"

Across a single table, their eyes met. The moment Yuder gave a slight nod, Kishiar rose from his seat. The chair toppled back and rolled on the floor, but no one paid it any mind.

Approaching, he pulled Yuder into an embrace without a word, a strong scent wafting through the air, heady enough to make one feel dizzy.

"Comm—"

Before the word could escape his lips, deeply overlapping mouths silenced him. After a long time, the man who had imprisoned Yuder between the chair and his embrace finally pulled back, whispering softly through their mingled breaths.

"There's only one person who could make me this way, too."

At the sound of his deep, husky voice, goosebumps rose on Yuder's skin.

"And that person is right here in front of me."

Strangely, it was then that he felt he truly understood Kanna's words.

The deeper fear dug its claws in, the more it blinded one from seeing the path ahead. He couldn't understand why he hadn't noticed that, when you peeled back a layer, the other person was not so different from himself.

Every aspect of Kishiar La Orr had been directed toward him with such blind faith from the very beginning.

What he had hesitated to say, avoided so endlessly as if it were a lie, now surged up as emotions he had suppressed for so long erupted in a fiery whirlpool.

Chapter 446

Yuder reached out to caress Kishiar's cheek, as if guided by his emotions. The man caught Yuder's wrist and buried his face in the palm of Yuder's hand. Lips that grazed the cheek hesitated for a moment when they touched the tip of a thin glove but soon parted to nibble lightly on the fabric's edge.

The moment a small piece of cloth fell to the floor, the flickering emotions in Yuder's eyes revealed themselves as dark as pitch but remarkably clear.

With a defiant grin, Kishiar kissed the revealed fingers and the crimson stains that had randomly colored his knuckles. Yuder could vividly feel, through his own skin, lips filled with intense desire and joy tracing a curvaceous line upwards.

In a moment of unintended reflex, Yuder's hand clenched, and a wave of warmth rushed from the depths of his belly. Yuder hastily pressed his lips back onto the lips of the man holding his hand. Kishiar gladly received the kiss, steadying Yuder to prevent him from falling forward.

Their lips eventually parted amidst heavy breaths, and an alluring, excited voice flowed out.

"Tell me more."

Anything is good, just more.

As if enchanted by that call, Yuder knelt in front of Kishiar and rested his forehead against the man's tightly embraced shoulder.

"I don't know how this connection between Commander and myself came to be. What power it holds, I also don't know. You said you can't remember the dreams... perhaps someday through that, you'll come to know more."

"Are you afraid of it?"

Yuder remained silent, forehead still resting on the shoulder, then responded with a barely audible voice.

"If it was before, I would have said no. But now, I am afraid."

"Shall we find a way to sever it?"

The counter-question momentarily halted Yuder's breath.

"Would it alleviate your fear a little if I swear never to look for any more information about this bond between us?"

Kishiar would find a way to sever the unseen bond and he swore not to dig any deeper concerning Yuder.

It was an irresistibly sweet offer, yet Yuder couldn't bring himself to reply.

He knew Kishiar would keep that promise the moment he nodded. But Yuder also knew better than anyone that all his fears wouldn't simply vanish by agreeing.

The secrets that twisted like thorny fruit peels within Yuder Aile would never disappear as long as he lived. Every time he looked at Kishiar while living this life, they would without fail scream and leap.

Such was the price for being so deeply enamored with the presence before him.

"No."

Drawing in the unique scent emanating from Kishiar's sturdy nape, Yuder reiterated.

"It won't be."

"That's difficult."

Kishiar chuckled as he stroked Yuder's back. Yuder felt that touch, kept silent for a moment, then spoke.

"Yudrain was my name."

"I had thought it seemed like some sort of title. Whoever gave it to you chose well."

"Do you think so?"

Even those well-versed in Gore had to consult their books to understand the complicated grammar involved. Clearly, a lot of effort had gone into this. "The name seems as if it was given more thought than even the one I gave to Nathan. Wouldn't you say it's a good name?"

At this point, neither the name Nathan Zuckerman nor Yudrain could be credited solely to him. Instead of answering, Yuder let out a long sigh.

"To be honest, I never fully understood the meaning of that name. But I think the meaning you've shared is probably correct."

"You mean the one who named you didn't tell you the meaning?"

"He might have, but... I really don't know."

He hoped that Kishiar wouldn't detect the emotion hidden beneath his parched voice.

"Well, it's better to know than not, I suppose."

Kishiar didn't ask who had given Yuder the name or why Yuder didn't know its meaning. Instead, he gently pressed his lips to Yuder's hand and cheek again, as if encouraging him to say more.

"Though you may already suspect, the diary of the first Duke Tain that Enon wished to read was something I wanted to know about first. The moment I heard the section you read yesterday, it felt like it might be connected to questions I had, which is why I discussed it with him."

"If we can find out where the cursed ones come from, perhaps time that doesn't flow in reverse could also be on our side."

Kishiar recited the section he had read before.

"You mean the ambitious research goal of finding out where the monsters come from?"

"That's part of it, but it's mainly about the reference to time."

While Yuder hesitated about how to articulate his thoughts, Kishiar muttered something as he gently stroked the back of Yuder's head.

"To me, it looked like just one of many historically interesting concepts, but if it means more to my assistant, there must be a reason. If it's too difficult to say, you don't have to. Is there anything else I should do besides giving that to Enon tomorrow?"

"...No."

"That's a shame."

As he spoke, Kishiar again brushed his lips past Yuder's ear, leaving a light kiss. A small laugh escaped Kishiar's lips as Yuder's grip tightened on his clothing. The hand stroking Yuder's hair became softer, more tender.

This sensation prompted a new thought, a new impulse in Yuder.

"Do you think, Commander, that time could ever be on someone's side?"

"While there are plenty of sayings about time favoring the patient, that's probably not what the diary meant. Taking it at face value... I don't think it's possible. If it were, countless mages would have already bent time to their will."

His answer was reasonable and within expected parameters.

No one in history had successfully manipulated time with magic. Not even the Archmage Luma. Time was impartial to all, and everything in existence went through rises and falls before dissipating into the wind. No matter how powerful or influential, no one could escape this absolute rule.

Yet, for Yuder, time had indeed flowed backward.

What would Kishiar think when he eventually arrived at that conclusion? What would his expression be, what words would he speak? Though Yuder couldn't know now, he hoped that he would still be by Kishiar's side when that time came.

To continue in the same vein as before would not suffice. To ensure that Kishiar's long patience had not been in vain, Yuder too needed to strive to find tangible proof of the truth, worthy of the faith bestowed upon him.

As Yuder's thoughts began to diverge from what they had been, becoming something a bit different and more far-reaching, another voice broke his reverie.

"...However, I'm not so sure about the present era."

Almost involuntarily, he looked up, his eyes meeting Kishiar's deep red gaze, which softened tenderly.

"Isn't this the time when the age of mages wanes and the age of the Awakeners rises? Much like a thousand years ago, when it was openly said that the era of priests was fading and the age of mages was dawning."

This was new information. When Yuder blinked in surprise, Kishiar explained the source.

"It was written in that diary. Just like back then, anything could happen in this era, so think carefully about what I said today."

"..."

"The responsibility of pondering and judging lies with the listener, not the one who has spoken. I'll think it through and come up with my own conclusions. Then, it will be your job to tell me whether I'm right or wrong."

Smiling as if to ask, 'Is this good enough?' the man changed the overwhelming sense of impending rupture, which had been a blend of Kishiar's unique scent and the solidity enveloping him, into different emotions entirely.

Yuder could no longer resist the urge to be closer to the being in front of him. Wrapping his arms around Kishiar's neck, their lips met again. Just before Yuder could slump off his chair, Kishiar caught him and stood, making further conversation impossible.

Chapter 447

Yuder remembered the moment when he had first kissed Kishiar after returning to the past.

A burning desire that swallowed hesitation and resistance in an instant. Even though he knew that the result of the choice he had willingly made was nothing more than a simple touch of skin that anyone could experience, for Yuder Aile, it was a world-shaking revelation.

What had the sharp sensation of offering something internal, something existing within his flesh, to another without any protective barrier felt like? The momentary satisfaction and thrill of drinking in the other's essence in return for giving his own? Even now, everything felt as vivid as if it had just happened.

In the invisible entanglement, there was no chaos as he had anticipated. Only his existence and Kishiar's were distinct in a world he could perceive. He doubted he would ever forget that moment, so enormous and seemingly eternal.

Whenever they repeated the same action afterward, the crimson desire didn't become more familiar; it only intensified. Right now, it was almost at its peak.

Even as he felt Kishiar lifting him up and moving towards some unknown destination, Yuder remained tightly clutched and focused solely on the kiss. Anything less would not have sufficed to quell the storm-like impulse raging within him. The turbulent emotions were neither skillful nor smooth, but Kishiar fully accepted them, though it did not imply leisure.

As Yuder's lips and tongue intertwined, his body responded intensely. In equal measure, Kishiar's breath and gaze were also shaken. Their eyes, wide open so as not to lose sight of each other, continued to focus on the same spot even as they fell onto the bed.

Yuder felt an invisible energy flowing through his body. Until now, he had occasionally sensed Kishiar's unique scent through the tip of his nose when they were close, but now it revealed itself differently.

Far different from any perfume, the scent unique to a second gender Awakener being deepened like an energy with a will, penetrating Yuder's face, arms and legs that wrapped around Kishiar, and even deeper areas where no clothes covered. It felt like entrusting his entire body to an invisible current.

It wasn't just Kishiar's scent that took on such a form. Yuder could sense that something that had left him was penetrating into Kishiar just as intensely. It was a foreign sensation that he had never felt before in either his past or present life, but its nature felt instinctual.

This was the scent that Yuder had carried ever since his second gender manifestation. Because one normally could not perceive one's own scent, this was the first time he had truly become aware of its existence.

People without second gender could only know it through smell, so they often mistook it for a unique body odor. But the scent he actually felt was somewhat different. In certain situations, it intensified to reveal its presence clearly, perceivable not just through the sense of smell.

"Do you feel it?" Kishiar momentarily pulled away from Yuder's lips and deeply inhaled along Yuder's neck.

"It feels like you're captivating me and pulling me to the ends of the earth."

It was a remarkably accurate description. After all, the scent of Kishiar that had penetrated into Yuder's body was evoking the same sensation.

In a way, it was similar to the sensation he had felt when he drank alcohol laced with the blood of a monster. Yet, what existed now was far hotter and more intense than what he remembered from back then. The fact that they could feel this way just from mere contact struck him as astonishing.

"I feel the same," Yuder replied.

Upon hearing the soft-spoken reply, Kishiar grinned with delight. Yuder slid his hands into his golden locks, enveloping him as if holding onto the man who had just kissed his neck. The feeling of his soft and silky hair wrapping around his fingers alone ignited a heat within him, somewhere deep in his belly.

'More.'

He wanted to touch more.

He wanted to entwine further, to share even more.

As Kishiar's hungry touch traced the tips of Yuder's pale ears, the usually hidden nape of his neck, and his broad shoulders, he also moved his lips to the vulnerable area below Yuder's ear, to the collarbone, and to the moist lips. Despite the absence of force, Yuder found himself gasping for breath, his waist involuntarily twitching.

"Ah...ah."

As if wanting to be even closer, Yuder embraced him tightly and suddenly felt the distinct, heavy warmth of another being near his legs.

'Ah...'

A moment of clarity allowed Yuder to recall a time not long after they had arrived in Tainu. They had entangled in a similar way on a sofa that was now damaged and replaced. Through that experience, Yuder understood just how much Kishiar was restraining himself physically.

The brief promise that Yuder had made—that once he fully recovered from his injuries and regained his strength, he would no longer be able to hold them back—had finally come to fruition right before them.

Looking at the shadow between Kishiar's legs, which felt hotter and more imposing than in his memory, Yuder felt not fear or reluctance but a sense of eager welcome for a long-awaited presence.

Kishiar, in turn, had forgotten none of the small conversations and promises he had shared with Yuder. The feeling of this affirmation was overwhelmingly certain.

A deep thrill surged up swiftly, resonating within their throat.

"...You kept your promise."

Catching his breath, Kishiar lifted his face, slightly furrowing his brows as he smiled.

"I said I would, didn't I?"

"..."

"Actually, I was thinking of holding back until we returned to the capital... but the moment I touched you, I couldn't think of anything else."

Anything else. In a low voice, almost breaking, he whispered repeatedly and met their lips once again. As if the eye of the most violent storm is actually the calmest place, so too were Kishiar's eyes.

Yuder tugged on the fabric hanging precariously on the man's shoulders, a piece of clothing that was close to ripping. Their bodies entwined deeply without further words. The buttons on Yuder's shirt popped off somewhere, Kishiar's soft cloth around his neck was not only removed but ripped, yet they had no care for such trivialities.

As their lips continuously met, their bare skin was exposed faster than in any of their previous encounters. Yuder tilted his head as he felt the heat Kishiar firmly held in one hand below.

"Mm..."

For the second time, they were directly aligned. Every time the calloused palm, toughened by daily sword practice, massaged their respective organs, waves of pleasure so intense it felt like his brain would combust flickered through his mind.

Yet, what captivated Yuder's gaze more than anything else, then and now, was Kishiar's face.

A face completely entranced by Yuder, unable to think of anything else.

Under the bright light, the fervor of a man feeling the same pleasure and reacting to the same sensations was more vivid than anything else.

"Ah... Ah, hm. Ah."

Every point of contact between them trembled with ravenous desire and fierce joy. In the midst of a yearning to be even closer, a poignant and agonizing warmth surged up from within.

Yuder overlaid his own hand atop Kishiar's. As their hands—backs and fingers intertwined—caressed their exposed flesh, Kishiar grimaced and clenched his teeth. Even his face, stripped of its smile, was breathtakingly beautiful.

Chapter 448

Despite the familiarity of it all, every action felt refreshingly new.

Even though Yuder had intertwined bodies with Kishiar countless times, he had never willingly extended his hand like this before. It was also the first time he freely let out his voice without worrying about someone overhearing.

Nothing was shameful, and he wanted to miss nothing.

Yuder's face, lost in deep satisfaction and concentration, turned almost expressionless as if devoid of emotion. If it weren't for his heated breath escaping between slightly parted lips, and the darker-than-usual flush tinting his eyes, no one would have known the extent of his passion.

But Kishiar, in a state no different from his own, was able to fully read the intense emotions Yuder was experiencing. The look in Yuder's eyes, as he moved without inhibition like shedding a layer of self-control, seemed like a flame burning within ice.

How captivating, yet poignant, awe-inspiring, and intoxicating the raw and pure desire revealed by this typically secretive and quiet person could be—Yuder probably didn't even realize it himself.

Instinct and reason flickered dangerously close, crossing paths incessantly. For that moment, neither could think of anything else.

"Eh, ah, ha..."

Finally, the climax arrived, turning his mind hazy.

Yuder, trembling with a pleasure akin to a tidal wave, clashed lips with Kishiar once again. The small sensations of their lips not aligning perfectly, of bumping and sliding, brought a sense of euphoria.

How many seconds could they have endured such overwhelming sensations? Only then did a semblance of rational thought begin to return.

"...Haah."

The first thing he felt was the warm liquid that had wetted both hands. Most of it had pooled in Kishiar's palms, but some had splattered onto their bodies and the hem of their clothes.

Lying beneath Kishiar who covered him entirely, Yuder felt as if he was trapped in the world's smallest, most solid, and comforting cave. Glancing down at his exposed stomach and the liquid trickling down, he raised his eyes to scan Kishiar's body.

If Yuder's attire was disheveled, Kishiar's was ripped and torn to an even greater degree. It would have looked less messy if he had taken everything off.

The reddish marks faintly visible between his shoulders and collarbone caught Yuder's eyes. They were handprints, left in haste as Yuder had grasped him. Those small areas of flushed skin, damp from sweat and heat, looked surprisingly obscene.

The same went for his face, revealed through the disheveled golden hair.

Leaning in to gently rest his forehead against Yuder's, Kishiar softly bit and sucked on Yuder's lower lip before letting go. The kisses that followed—on the lips, the jaw, the neck, and even the wet hand that he elegantly pulled towards himself—felt like hot brands.

The stigmas that had marked Yuder in his past life had never shaken him, but the brands Kishiar offered, filled with fervent and scorching heat, were different. Without uttering a word, they profoundly shook Yuder's core. At every touch, his skin trembled and his heightened senses focused solely on that spot. Still intoxicated by the lingering pleasure, Yuder looked at him. And Kishiar looked right back.

His lips, flushed as though they were about to burst from countless kisses, were impossible to look away from.

"..."

Like himself, Kishiar also couldn't extinguish the internal flames boiling within him with just one evolution. The locked gazes, the scent that thickened enough to fog his mind, and the persistent heat below, despite having been relieved once, left no doubt in Yuder's mind.

He didn't know how far Kishiar was willing to go, but he had a rough idea of what the next step would be.

Could they proceed further? Upon contemplating, the answer effortlessly flowed in.

If possible, he wanted to go ahead.

Though it was not a mating season, and even though he didn't yet know if Kishiar wanted to go further, a remarkably firm resolve reared its head.

Any fear related to the act was gone. All he desired was to reach Kishiar La Orr more deeply, and more completely.

He wanted to reciprocate all that the man before him had given.

He wanted to see more faces of Kishiar that he didn't know...

"Commander..."

In order to convey this conclusion, the very moment Yuder reached his hand toward Kishiar's chest, something happened.

Before he could even complete the gesture, the thick scent around them suddenly reacted strangely. Just as Yuder's scent explosively intensified, light burst out from the point where his hand made contact.

‘What...?’

Opening his eyes, he saw the light wasn't coming from Kishiar, but from his own hand. The faintly glowing red light spread up his arm, vivid enough to shine through the skin. Yuder noticed various colored energies emanating from beyond Kishiar's chest where his hand had touched.

It was something he had seen before.

Startled, he pulled back his hand, and the light that had enveloped it began to fade. The energies visible beyond Kishiar's chest also disappeared.

Kishiar, too, looked at the scene with widened eyes and softly whispered,

"What was that just now?"

Yuder looked down at his hand, still faintly wrapped in the red light. The shock caused his arousal to subside, and he finally remembered what they were supposed to be doing tonight.

Getting lost in someone to the point of forgetting even what they were originally supposed to do was a first in his life, no matter how exceptional the circumstances had been since yesterday.

Sitting up silently, Yuder turned his head toward Kishiar. In the man's eyes, he could see a look that suggested he had some idea what was going on.

"It seems like I've managed to unlock the power flowing within you, Commander."

Should he feel relieved that he succeeded even in this situation? His mind thought so, but his feelings were somewhat complicated. It was an unfamiliar sentiment.

Kishiar also sat up and gave a small smile.

"That's good to hear. Do you feel any pain or anything unusual?"

Yuder shook his head. Taking a deep breath, Kishiar spoke.

"Getting greedy beyond this point may be difficult. Let's clean up first, and then we can try that again properly. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

Standing up from the floor, the man seemed to have an idea and extended his hand toward Yuder.

"Although it's a bit regrettable, shall we bathe together? We've never shared a bathroom while staying here, after all."

A playful arch of the eyebrows and a smile adorned his face, a lingering warmth still palpable. Although an unexpected incident had occurred, he wasn't disappointed in the least. The moment Yuder sensed this, he was finally able to quell his astonishment.

"Yes."

Kishiar grinned brightly. Led by his hand, Yuder entered the bathroom with him for the first time.

Chapter 449

The bathroom they had been using was a lavish space, almost mistaken for an art-filled lounge if not for the large, white tub in the center and the mirror that hung before it.

The round floor was covered in smooth, water-resistant white stone tiles, bordered with gold-accented tiles that formed intricate patterns. Beside the bathtub stood a large ceramic basin, its edges finely etched with delicate designs, placed atop a lavishly crafted wooden stand.

Scattered throughout the room were valuable gemstone pieces and paintings that, at a casual glance, seemed merely decorative. In reality, they were magic tools, allowing one to easily turn the water on and off or ventilate the space.

As soon as Kishiar stepped into the bathroom, he began undressing himself without waiting for an invitation. There was a time when he had deliberately avoided looking at that body, but now, Yuder found it hard to look away from the man's exposed form.

Even when clothed, Kishiar's physique didn't seem scrawny, but the revealed flesh was truly remarkable. His muscles were tightly coiled from years of rigorous training, and his long, solid limbs were a sight to behold. The balance between his bones and skin seemed like a meticulously crafted sculpture. Even the genitalia that Yuder had just touched moments ago seemed perfect.

This was the first time Yuder had looked so candidly at someone's naked body without feeling either awkward or repulsed. However, it was likely that anyone who saw that body would feel awe or admiration rather than shame.

After undressing, Kishiar turned his head to look at Yuder, who was still in the midst of disrobing. Although he must have sensed Yuder's gaze upon him, Kishiar calmly smiled and gestured to Yuder's half-removed shirt.

"Need help undressing?"

His voice was both blatantly seductive and teasingly soft.

"...No," Yuder shook his head and quickly shed his nearly buttonless shirt. While Yuder finished taking off the rest of his clothes, Kishiar leisurely watched, pressing a statue to fill the tub with water.

"You know," Yuder had just removed his last piece of underwear and straightened his back when he heard Kishiar's voice behind him. "My assistant has a beautiful back. Straight posture, slender waist. It was attractive enough in uniform, but even more so without."

"...Really?"

Caught off guard, Yuder turned his head, only for Kishiar to move closer. Beyond the sound of warm water pouring and the steam filling the air, Kishiar's natural scent permeated.

"And your legs are also beautiful, especially when you run or leap. They seem like they were born to run," Kishiar continued, his eyes scanning Yuder's thighs and calves before returning to his face. "Didn't you grow a bit taller since you first joined the Cavalry?"

"...Yes, you're correct. How did you know?"

Yuder had continued growing even beyond his age in his previous life, and this life was no different, albeit he had grown a bit faster, possibly due to better nutrition. It was such a minuscule difference, he was surprised Kishiar had noticed.

"How could I not?"

'Because I'm always watching you,' Kishiar replied, smiling.

The bathtub was large enough to accommodate two men taller than average. Skillfully, Kishiar opened a container by the tub's edge, sprinkling in high-end bath soap shaped like flower petals. As they dissolved, the petals transformed into a translucent golden froth, enveloping the two submerged bodies.

In his previous life, Yuder knew that nobles often used special soaps, but he had never understood the point of using such extravagant items. Thus, he had hardly ever tried them out. Even now, knowing that he was in a bathroom, he had focused solely on quickly washing up and leaving, opting for the ordinary soap always placed near the sink.

However, as he reclined amidst the golden bubbles and looked at Kishiar through dampened lashes, Yuder finally seemed to understand the allure of such luxuries.

Yuder's gaze shifted toward his reflection in the mirror beyond the bathtub. He noticed something he hadn't when undressing: multiple discolored spots on his neck and collarbone area. All were places Kishiar had been lingering with his lips.

"I'm sorry. You'll likely have some marks left," Kishiar said, as if knowing exactly where Yuder's attention had drifted. Yuder blinked a few times before shaking his head.

"It's fine."

Though a bit surprised, he wasn't upset. He lightly touched the marked areas, feeling a tingling and slightly stinging sensation on his skin. As he reflexively pulled his hand away to touch the spots again, Kishiar reached out to stop him.

"...It's already quite stimulating just by looking; let's leave it at that."

His voice had dropped lower, tinged with a languid quality. Startled, Yuder withdrew his hand. Kishiar grinned.

"You've never used this soap before, have you? Is it to your liking?"

"Yes."

"Good to hear."

"Have you always been using it?" Yuder inquired.

"No. It's usually too much of a hassle," Kishiar said, lowering his head as his lips curled into a secretive smile. "But this is a special occasion. I was curious to see what it would be like to watch you enveloped in these bubbles."

"And how do you feel?"

"I have to acknowledge the dedication of whoever created this just for a beautiful bath; it's quite satisfying."

At that moment, when Yuder looked into Kishiar's face turned toward him, his heart skipped a beat. He exhaled deeply, gazing at the man who seemed to admire him like a work of art. His voice came out soft and distant.

"I think... I find it nice too."

"Hmm?"

"Your body is much more beautiful and pleasing to look at than mine."

"..."

Kishiar seemed not to have expected a compliment in return, and his eyes widened for a moment before he burst into unreserved laughter.

"Thank you for that."

'...Did I truly become a beast?'

Although his inner self argued that this reaction was normal, Yuder couldn't help but doubt whether he was too easily affected by Kishiar, once more.

Regardless of his internal debate, Kishiar relished the bath. He playfully scooped up bubbles to lather on Yuder's face, and then gave him a peck on the tip of his nose.

As Yuder tried to ward off the man's nonsensical offer to shampoo his hair, their bodies accidentally touched. Frozen for a moment at the sensation of their skin meeting amidst the silky foam, Kishiar pulled him into a deep kiss. The strong feeling that surged through him when long fingers caressed his foam-covered face was intense enough to send shivers down his spine.

When Yuder regained his senses, he found himself reciprocating the kiss, his body now straddling Kishiar in the water.

Eventually, he grew comfortable enough with the gentle, playful touches that caressed his bare skin, and it was only after sullyng the water once more that their fervor subsided.

After changing his clothes, Yuder sat waiting for Kishiar to emerge, reflecting on the conversation they had earlier.

The reason Kishiar could spend the whole day without giving any indication to Yuder, quietly waiting for him to speak first, was that he now had ample free time compared to his previous life. Because he sincerely valued the opportunity that time afforded, he was able to extend his hand in anticipation of what would come next.

Some might call this waiting and patience a waste of time, but Yuder couldn't agree. The moments that Kishiar had let pass had greater significance to him than any words or actions, and had paved the way for outcomes like the present one.

Today, Yuder had told Kishiar several clues to the truth, including his own name. Given what had been revealed so far, Kishiar might be able to come very close to the actual truth.

However, that wasn't the whole truth.

Yuder himself still didn't know why or how he was able to travel back to the past. Telling fragments of a truth that even he wasn't fully aware of would only result in reliance on the other's faith, without yielding any concrete results.

Kishiar had said that providing the answer and having Yuder confirm it would be enough, but Yuder thought that wouldn't suffice. How could he confirm something when he himself didn't know the whole truth? Such an act would not serve as an adequate answer for Kishiar.

To prove that the enormous patience shown by Kishiar was justified, and to stay by his side in the future, Yuder needed something more than just relying on the other's faith. The missing pieces of the entire truth, which were currently not in Yuder's possession, were precisely that requirement.

Chapter 450

‘Until now, my priority was saving Kishiar and preventing the calamities I remembered from my previous life, rather than finding out why I returned or how to recover my lost memories. But from now on, both will be of equal priority.’

Yuder recalled the image of Kishiar in the last dream he had. Even the certainty of his death was now shrouded in uncertainty; he couldn't keep fearing the unknown.

His eyes gleamed with a newfound determination.

"Well, shall we begin anew?"

Kishiar emerged in a robe, laid down on the bed with a cheerful expression, and Yuder sat in a chair next to him, looking down at his exposed chest and stomach.

The warmth still lingering from a recent bath, the scent of the same soap they used wafted from his damp, golden hair—just looking at him was enough to unsettle Yuder's mind.

"How should I position myself? Is this okay?"

Observing the man with his hands clasped on his upper chest, showing no signs of tension, Yuder frowned. Though graceful, the posture felt rather awkward.

'It looks like a pose one takes in a coffin.'

It was not a good pose to adopt, especially in front of someone who had seen him lying in a coffin in exactly that position.

"Just lie down as you usually would when sleeping. There's no need to change your posture."

"Alright."

Kishiar obediently lowered his hands.

Yuder took a deep breath, feeling Kishiar's gaze on him. After several deep breaths to calm his racing heart, he placed his hand on the lower part of Kishiar's abdomen and felt the warmth of a living being. It strangely touched a deep part of his soul.

The dark red mark on the back of Yuder's right hand remained unresponsive.

"Based on previous experiences, the power of the red stone within me seems to manifest not when I want something vaguely, but when I desire it with clear intent."

"So, was it the same earlier?"

"At that time..."

Though his thoughts had been somewhat hazy, he distinctly remembered what he had wished for. He had wanted to know Kishiar deeper, more completely. The sensation of their bodies meeting had been overtaken by that overwhelming desire, and red light had flowed from his hand.

When he had previously looked into Kishiar, he had initially wanted to gauge the extent of the Awakener's power within him. Though not exactly the same, the core desire—to know more about Kishiar—was similar.

If that had been the key to invoking the power of the red stone within him, then it should work this time as well.

"...Yes, well, it's somewhat different, but it seems the power within me responds in a similar fashion."

"Is that so..."

Kishiar's expression changed, teetering on the edge of a smile. Yuder closed his eyes, focusing on the hand he had placed on Kishiar's body. As before, he decided to begin by attempting to see the Awakener's power within him.

"If it hurts, let me know."

Kishiar responded not to worry, but Yuder remained cautious.

Carefully exhaling, he focused on a single thought: wanting to look deep into the power within Kishiar. How long had he focused, concentrating every nerve on the sensations in his right hand?

The dark red mark on the back of his hand slowly began to swell and pulse.

Yuder's eyes snapped open, and in that instant, a light flared as if timed to his movement.

It was a success.

Of course, it wasn't as quick and effortless as when he had briefly glimpsed Kishiar's inner workings earlier. The moment the light emanated from Yuder's hand, a considerable resistance arose within Kishiar, attempting to push the light away.

Yuder immediately seized his momentarily faltering right hand with his left, pressing it down. The expression on the face of the reclining Kishiar also changed.

'Still, compared to the first time I saw inside Kishiar... the resistance is much weaker.'

As he strained to maintain control, the skin within the area touched by the red light gradually began to turn oddly transparent. One of Yuder's eyes took on a golden hue as a breeze stirred, but he was so intensely focused that he didn't notice.

Moments later, the taut resistance finally began to wane. Alongside this, various colorful energies slowly emerged within Kishiar as if they had been waiting for this moment.

Bright, clear divine power, an aura that moved like blue wind, golden magic energy that branched out like a tree, and finally, the red energy of an Awakener that enveloped them all.

The four types of energy seemed almost sentient as they moved, each following its own path.

'The condition doesn't seem to have changed much from before. Some tangled parts remain... has the amount of magic energy decreased a bit?'

Yuder's gaze moved toward the point where the entangled energies were flowing and converging. Near that final destination, the life point, there existed a massive bundle of energy, pulsing strongly, as if a second heart.

Wrapped in transparent red energy, it was an indescribable something that exuded an overwhelming power just by being looked upon. That, right there, was Kishiar's 'Vessel.'

Even after all this time, the sight still filled Yuder with an intense sense of power. Unlike before, he felt considerably better this time. The eyes that used to hurt just from seeing this direct manifestation of energy were less painful, and he felt less drained.

And because he wasn't in pain, he could naturally scrutinize it more clearly and in greater detail. Yuder waited until he felt that all the energies were fully revealed before cautiously speaking.

"...Can you see it?"

"Yes. Astonishing."

As before, the power revealed by Yuder's touch was visible to Kishiar. Whether it was only visible to him, or to third parties as well, remained uncertain, but it was still a significant discovery.

The man who had been scrutinizing his own inner workings for the first time looked up to meet Yuder's gaze.

"Is there any discomfort or pain?"

"I'm fine. However..."

Kishiar, who had been staring intently at his assistant without even blinking, maintaining a sharp tension behind his emotionless eyes, quietly asked,

"Did your eye turn golden again?"

Caught off guard by the unexpected question, Yuder blinked.

"Pardon?"

"The light is very strong. Looking up at it, it's like a star in the night sky."

Yuder turned his head to look into a small mirror beside the bed. The sight of one eye shining in the dim room was rather eerie. No matter how he looked at it, it was no star.

'Wasn't like this when it flashed briefly earlier... is it because I'm actively using the power of the red stone now?'

Enon's description of that eye as a "window to wisdom" or something of that sort came to mind. He felt that it had become easier to exert his power here; perhaps that eye had something to do with it.

Yuder quickly averted his gaze from the mirror and changed the topic.

"The red energy among these four types is the energy of the Awakener. That was the only power I could interact with before. And the largest mass enveloped by that power is probably... what I think is your vessel, Commander."

"I suspected as much, but it's not particularly pleasant to see. I suppose I should be grateful to have at least one ugly part."

Kishiar chuckled, making a joke. Yuder did not smile, not even a little.

"Before, when I touched one of the tangled areas, it was absorbed into me... This time, I won't recklessly touch it."

"Good. Proving that it can be controlled by will is what's important for now. Let's stop here and withdraw your power."

Yuder nodded and closed his eyes again. A dull pain ran through the back of his hand as his energy waned. The light that had brightened the inside of his eyes also disappeared.

"Are you alright?"

Kishiar immediately grabbed Yuder's hand and helped him sit up. Despite lying down, beads of sweat were forming on his forehead.

"...I'm fine."

Only after assessing Yuder's complexion did the man let go of his hand. Yuder looked down at his own hand before speaking.

"The power seems to be following my will much better than before. With this, I think I can safely inspect His Majesty's body very soon."

There was no more reason for Kishiar to object, now that it was proven it could be done. The man, lost in thought and looking down at his body, slowly nodded.

"Let's discuss this in more detail after we get to the capital."

Afterward, Kishiar and Yuder exchanged a few words about the flow and position of the energy existing within his body. Most of it was asking whether the state of the power had been the same when they had seen it before, but even that was enough to gather ample information.

"It's quite interesting that the Awakener's power envelops the vessel. I haven't been able to see the inside of Levlin Shand Apeto, so I can't be certain, but perhaps his insides are similar to mine."

Revlin, the third son of the Apeto Duchy, was inherently frail due to a hereditary disease, but became healthy upon awakening, which made him similar to Kishiar.

"This is just my speculation, but I believe the power of the Awakener may share intrinsic properties with all other types of power," Yuder added.