

## Turning 451

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"It's essentially similar in nature to other powers," Kishiar continued, observing the look in Yuder's eyes.

"Meaning, it doesn't provoke a strong reaction when mixed with other powers. Instead, it may even protect the vessel that holds it. It's like dough before it takes shape—a power that can envelop anything and change it as it pleases."

"I get what you're saying."

There were no fixed rules governing the power of the Awakeners. Though categories had been arbitrarily established for convenience, not a single power was the same as another, a fact evident from looking at the Cavalry members alone. Even among those with similar abilities, the nuances were all different. Thus, it was difficult for anyone to claim a comprehensive understanding of the Awakeners.

That was also the case for the power Yuder had absorbed through his hand. That power was simply 'power' in the purest sense. What exactly it could accomplish and how far it could go remained an enigma.

"If you grasp that point, it may be quite helpful when assessing His Majesty's vessel," Kishiar mused.

A power like dough that could become anything.

Though the pure form of that power was indescribable, even described as pure poison by Enon, calling it 'dough' oddly made it feel whimsical and gentle.

"Yes, I understand," Yuder said, nodding with a relaxed expression.

"Before we proceed with His Majesty, let's try a few more times like today. It might be tough, but are you okay with that?"

"Of course, I am. I was going to ask you for it myself."

Kishiar gave a faint smile. Taking a deep breath, he reached out and patted the seat next to him—a signal to lie down.

Yuder silently got up and lay down on the right side of the space where Kishiar had been sitting. As soon as he did, Kishiar turned his body so that his face was visible to Yuder. In the dim light cast by the lantern, he whispered,

"Everything will be over after I meet the Star of Nagran left here tomorrow. How do you feel about returning to the capital?"

"It still doesn't feel real to me."

"Things will change once you go back. For better or worse."

Yuder wasn't sure why he felt so strange thinking about walking back into the barracks. Despite concluding everything in a much shorter time and with significantly fewer casualties than in his past life, the sensation was inexplicably peculiar.

Yuder's gaze shifted toward Kishiar's face.

'Once we go back, staying in the same room like this won't happen.'

Baron Willhem had been captured, so technically there was no need to continue the pretense of being lovers. Yet neither had suggested separate bedrooms. Though their comrades thought this was just due to sharing space within the same lodging, Yuder knew that wasn't the case.

Originally, it would have been unfathomable to casually lie next to a man who should be as distant as the sky. Yet he had adapted to this situation so quickly that he could hardly believe he had slept alone all his life.

'Ah, I see.'

As he sketched the outline of Kishiar's eyes that met his own, Yuder suddenly understood.

The weird feeling arose precisely because he had become so accustomed to it.

It was strange that someone he had once considered impossible to grow accustomed to had now become closer and more familiar to him than anyone else. Different from family yet in some ways closer, it was an indescribable feeling.

"Commander, how do you feel?" Yuder quietly asked, lost in thought.

"Are you talking about me?" A man who always enjoyed when Yuder asked him questions chuckled softly.

"I think we're fortunate that everything went better than anticipated, even if there were points for improvement and regrets."

"..."

"If I had to grade myself, I'd give a 5 out of 10."

"Couldn't you rate yourself a bit higher?"

In the eyes of others, the Cavalry had achieved a result beyond the score of 10, verging on 20 or even 30. Yuder wasn't completely without regrets, but he was greatly satisfied that there were far fewer casualties than he had seen and experienced in his past life.

At the center of it all was Kishiar, who had managed everything better than anyone else. He certainly deserved more than half of the points he had given himself.

"My assistant seems to have generously rated me. Excessive, even."

"It's not generous; it's merely the truth. What the Cavalry achieved this time goes beyond merely completing a mission. It could have..."

Hesitating for a moment on whether to continue, Yuder decided to speak his mind.

"...potentially averted greater chaos and tragedy that could have spread to the West and the entire Empire. All of this was possible because you were there, Commander. That's what I believe."

Kishiar opened his eyes a bit wider and chuckled. "That sounds almost like a prophecy."

"..."

"The Prince of Nelarn, who considered himself your new close friend, said something similar before leaving. As if you knew he would awaken, you gave him some rather insightful advice."

At the unexpected mention of Prince Ejain of Nelarn, Yuder momentarily furrowed his brow but quickly smoothed his expression.

"He said that, but he also mentioned that you have no prophetic abilities, so it's likely not the truth. I had thought then that maybe my assistant's particularly keen sensitivity to power would allow him to sense someone on the verge of awakening."

"That's not the correct answer."

"I see, so this isn't it either," Kishiar responded, slightly disappointed. Yuder paused before speaking.

"But assuming he would soon awaken is, in fact, correct."

"Even without a prophecy?"

"Yes."

"So should I take that you said it considering the real possibility that it could have happened?"

Instead of replying, Yuder simply nodded. Kishiar's gaze deepened.

"You don't hold such certainty in everything. Therefore, the difference between what you are certain of and what you're not might be the key to the truth."

A tingling sensation lightly radiated from within his chest.

However, Yuder quickly suppressed the sensation and said nothing.

After what seemed a long period of silence, the man finally spoke. "Thank you."

For saying that.

A brief, tender kiss landed on Yuder's forehead, then pulled away. Staring blankly at Kishiar's unusually youthful smile, Yuder furrowed his brows. His throat tingled inside his tightly sealed lips.

...

Finally, the day to return to the capital after wrapping up all matters had arrived.

The Cavalry stood in formation, dressed in their black uniforms, just as they had upon their arrival. The people of Tainu, regardless of their social status, gathered to witness their departure.

"The atmosphere is completely different from when we first arrived," Ever mused, her face awash with a complex mix of emotions. "Back then, no one paid any attention to us, and if they did, it was only to show hostility."

"While there are still those who are hostile, it's amazing how the overall atmosphere has changed," he continued.

While Ever, Emun, and the remaining members were finishing preparations for departure, Baron Koelt rushed over and dismounted from his carriage. Though his face showed signs of fatigue from already beginning to deal with matters related to Tainu on behalf of Baron Willhem, his expression was noticeably brighter and more fulfilled.

As Baron Koelt surveyed the area, bewildered by the sea of black uniforms, his eyes finally settled on Yuder. He approached cheerfully and greeted him.

"Sir Aile, it's unfortunate we must part ways. Do you happen to know where His Grace the Duke is?"

"He stepped inside for a moment, but he'll be out shortly. Please wait a bit," Yuder responded.

True to his word, Kishiar soon emerged with Nathan by his side. The sight of him in his white uniform temporarily stunned many around them, creating an awkward silence where there had been noise. The Cavalry members, now accustomed to Kishiar's appearance, chuckled quietly at those who seemed to lose their souls upon seeing their Commander's face.

"Ah, Baron Koelt has arrived."

"Your Grace," Baron Koelt greeted, bowing his knee.

Rather than bestowing gifts or flattery upon Kishiar, Baron Koelt quickly discussed several matters, one of which was about the old mage laboratory on the fourth floor of the Security Management Team's underground dungeon.

"I'm sorry I can't return the diary we took immediately. It turns out to be more interesting than expected, so I'll examine it further and send it back to you later. Is that alright?"

"If you need to, please feel free to examine it as much as you want. I don't have the time to study it properly at the moment either. It will be a few months before I can start any meaningful research," Baron Koelt responded.

Yuder's gaze subtly shifted toward Enon, who was standing not far away with Hellem. Mick had decided to return due to some upper-level matters, but Hellem had ultimately decided to accompany the Cavalry to the capital. Hidden within the cloth-covered box that Hellem was carrying was the still-living Pethuamet, or rather, Penpen. Inside the bag that Enon was carrying was the diary of the First Duke Tain.

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Kishiar had given the diary to Enon as promised, but he hadn't forgotten that his original plan to examine it with his assistant had been unexpectedly thwarted. Thanks to that, Yuder received the translated version of the diary the very next day after their deep conversation.

Yes, it was a translation written in Kishiar La Orr's own handwriting.

Yuder wondered when he had found the time to write it all. Kishiar explained that he had diligently read and transcribed it in the few hours while Yuder was meeting with Enon.

"When reading difficult texts, it helps to take notes as you go along. This is just a first draft, so don't read too much into it," he said with a casual smile, the image of which still lingered in Yuder's mind.

Although Yuder didn't have the time to read the translation immediately, he stashed it in his bag, planning to review it as soon as he could.

While Kishiar and Baron Koelt were wrapping up their conversation, the Cavalry had almost finished loading most of their baggage onto the wagons. All that remained were the farewells with the guests who had come to see them off.

Yuder once again exchanged greetings with Micalin Punt, the leader of the Western Mage Union, who had arrived a bit later than Baron Koelt. Micalin mentioned that he would be stopping by the Pearl Tower for research and would later attend trials related to the West in the capital. He hinted that he'd like to visit the Cavalry headquarters, if possible.

"Of course, I'll have to see Thais Yulman's face there as well... but that's a small price to pay. Tsk."

Micalin might meet Hellem when he arrived, but he didn't recognize another robed mage who was deeply hooded and hiding her face. It seemed that Hellem had no desire to personally greet him.

"By the way, I heard that the western branch of the Cavalry is to be established here, is that true?"

"Yes, and we'd appreciate any support from the Western Mage Union."

"That's a given. The Cavalry has been a valuable research sponsor and an ally in many regards. With Baron Koelt, we'll have a much smoother relationship than with Willhem," Micalin assured, laughing heartily. Although he hadn't attended Willhem's party, he had swiftly stepped in to assist the Cavalry in the chaotic aftermath.

He'd reached out to noble contacts to suppress malicious rumors and subtly aided Baron Koelt as well. As a result, Yuder's impression of him had improved.

'He probably stepped in more eagerly to prevent Baron Willhem from returning... but he did act appropriately, and that helped us sort things out quickly.'

The resentment against Baron Willhem among the mages was profound. The Western Mage Union planned to testify about the various misdeeds he had committed against them over the years during his trial.

After expressing his lengthy wish that Willhem would receive a punishment that would prevent his return to Tainu, Micalin's face lit up as he turned toward Kishiar. Many had seen their fates change due to recent events, but Micalin Punt seemed to be one who had changed in the most favorable way.

Next to say their goodbyes to Yuder were Robel and Marty. Though their eyes looked tired, as if they'd spent many nights in deep thought, Marty appeared noticeably more cheerful.

"After talking it over with Robel, we've decided to accept the offer you made, your Grace," Marty said.

Listening to Marty's soft whisper, Robel wore a look that was both pained and in love.

"Adapting to the abilities is one thing, but I thought it would be better to stay for the sake of the villagers who haven't regained their memories yet. Especially after hearing that Emun, who helped us so much along with Priest Lusan, has taken charge of the western branch, I felt it would be disgraceful to leave just like this."

"You needn't feel indebted," came the reply.

Yuder looked at the two anxious faces awaiting his answer, let out a soft sigh, and then smiled.

"Everyone will be delighted to hear the news, Emun included. I am, of course, no exception. If anything happens, please contact us through the western branch."

Emun had been a frequent aide to Priest Lusan, along with Finn. No one knew better than Marty how tirelessly Emun had taken care of those who had lost their memories. Marty was filled with immense gratitude and a sense of indebtedness toward him.

Although the presence of these two might seem inconsequential now, Yuder thought they would be a key to shaping the atmosphere of the western branch according to Kishiar's wishes. Robel, who was a local and well-informed about the Star of Nagran, and Marty, who had an uncanny knack for situational judgment, would likely prove more useful than they even realized.

"Thank you, sincerely," they said.

Seeing Yuder's smile, the two wore perplexed expressions for a moment before suddenly breaking into relieved smiles and departing.

Not far away, the few who had regained their memories surrounded Lusan, shedding tears of gratefulness.

"Priest, please come again someday! Next time, we want to greet you in a better state."

"We will never forget this kindness, even in death."

"What have I done... Oh my, when did you all make these? How many times have I told you to rest..."

Receiving their handmade hats, gloves, and small carved gifts, Lusan blushed and appeared equally at a loss. Despite their multiple farewells, they couldn't bring themselves to let go, so steeped were they in gratefulness.

Elsewhere, Ever, holding a small cat, was happily chatting with Kanna. Yuder watched with a faint smile as he observed the comfortable demeanor of Nipollen Van Tain he hadn't seen in a while. Despite being separated from Pruelle, the well-behaved cat had spent most of its time quietly in Ever's room.

Kanna, who joined them late, was initially shocked to discover the cat's identity but quickly adapted and treated Nipollen very well. Nipollen also seemed to find Kanna very comfortable, as far as Yuder had heard.

The kitten, who appeared to have no concern for what had become of the father it had nearly forgotten, yawned widely. Its tiny but quite sharp canines flashed briefly before disappearing.

"Oh my God, what do I do? Even its yawn is too cute to handle!"

While Kanna shivered at the excessive cuteness, the cat suddenly pricked up its whiskers and ears, reacting to something. At the end of its gaze stood a young man with red hair wearing an awkward smile.

It was none other than Pruelle Van Tain who had entrusted Nipollen here, his elder brother.

As promised, he rushed here as soon as the process of approving the successor within the Tain Duchy had reached a conclusion. To those unaware of the situation, it seemed pointless for him to come only to see the Cavalry leave for the capital soon after. However, he had a duty to ensure his younger sibling's safety, so it was a non-issue for him.

However, with Kanna, whom he had just greeted, and the still unfamiliar Ever, he found it oddly difficult to approach them when they were together.

"Uh, hem-hem. Haa. Phew."

Yuder turned his head away again, watching Pruelle take several deep breaths with a resolute expression before approaching the ladies courteously.

While helping to maintain law and order, other members of the Cavalry had built friendships with the residents of the west. They greeted various people here and there, shaking hands or bumping shoulders. There were some who watched from a distance, clearly dissatisfied, but they dared not voice their criticisms openly.

Amid the sighs of regret, there were glimpses of hope and laughter for the future—a sight he had never seen in his past life. Yuder slowly moved towards a black carriage in the middle of the procession that was laden with baggage.

Surprisingly, the unremarkable-looking carriage had no baggage inside. In its empty space lay a lone member of the Star of Nagran, Hosanna, who would accompany the Cavalry to the capital.

'He still hasn't woken up...'

Though his external wounds had healed and his internal injuries were nearly recovered, Hosanna had not awoken by the day of departure.

If it was the first time he had overused his abilities, it might be understandable. But if days passed and he still did not wake, Yuder wondered if another method would have to be employed to rouse him.

Yuder carefully closed the carriage door to avoid drawing attention and sat down. He hadn't had much opportunity to observe Hosanna closely before, but the young man appeared so frail and thin that one might believe him to be a teenager. Yuder recalled the words Lusan had used to describe him.

'He never seemed to be a healthy person to begin with. His inability to properly use one leg likely worsened his condition. However, as a Teleporter, he shouldn't have had a problem with mobility...'

As Lusan had noted, one of Hosanna's legs bore a terrible scar. Lusan had said the wound was neither congenital nor old, but had been attempted to be treated many times. However, the failure to heal was attributed to his poor health and challenging circumstances.

'It's unfortunate, but it's too late; the leg has already hardened like this. If I keep pouring divine energy into it, it might improve somewhat... but fully restoring it will be difficult.'

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The vigilance towards Hosanna had naturally slackened a bit, as he remained unconscious for an extended period. Normally, there would've been a guard physically tied to his wrist, but today a long tether connected his wrist to a post outside the tent.

Yuder let out a soft breath, lightly placed his hand on Hosanna's body, and closed his eyes. Within his closed eyes, a golden light flickered as an invisible energy swirled.

Measuring the power of ordinary Awakeners had always been somewhat feasible, and it was much easier than it had been during Kishiar's time. There was no need to exert effort in delving into the

body's interior to sense the energy. Yuder quickly grasped the power that existed within Hosanna simply through his senses.

'As expected, he's still far from fully recovered.'

If this condition persisted, even waking up might not enable him to employ his previous level of abilities. There had been instances among the Awakeners who suffered severe injuries from exerting their powers. Like Ershi, a member of the captured Star of Nagran, for instance.

Ershi had been subdued by Ever before her power went berserk, fortunately sparing her life. However, upon waking up, her strength had deteriorated substantially compared to before. Unlike Hosanna, she had regained consciousness relatively quickly but refused treatment and even caused injuries to some of the members. Kanna had even narrowly avoided being fatally stabbed in the neck during the investigation.

Ershi didn't believe in the capture of Baron Willhem or that the secret auction had failed. She had disregarded news of Nahan's escape and the stories of surviving human trafficking victims, simply screaming that everyone was in cahoots while attempting to attack.

Ershi had only become subdued after encountering Ever again.

Originally cautious to avoid overstimulating Ershi, Ever had taken immediate action with a menacing look after Kanna's near miss. Whatever method Ever used remained unknown, but afterward, Ershi became significantly quieter. Only then could Kanna properly read her.

After meeting the newly awakened Marty, he had heard that Ershi had become even more subdued. The last time she met Kishiar, she was even sociable enough to dine alone.

'Is it finally time for death?'

Ershi, who had managed to step back from a madness that could have incinerated everything around her including herself, appeared far more composed than before. She seemed to naturally assume that she would be summarily executed, but Kishiar shook his head.

'No.'

'Why?'

'Let me ask you instead. Why should you die? Can you list a justifiable reason for your execution here?'

At his words, a fire lit up in Ershi's eyes. Only then did he realize that the fire he thought was extinguished was still alive.

'Should I list the names of those I've killed? Hypocrites who don't even know why I did it! What did you all do a year ago when countless people begged for help in the same place? I killed those who deserved to die! If you don't kill me here, you'll be next! I'll tear that smug face to shreds and stuff it into your guts!'

The moment Yuder frowned at the fierce outcry, Kishiar raised his hand to stop him. Even when met with unspeakable curses and insults, not a single ripple crossed Kishiar's smiling face.

Instead of responding that there had been no Cavalry a year ago, he threw an entirely different counter-question.

'Then let me ask you this. Did you think that the servants of Graham Willhem also deserved to die? What about the ordinary people of Tainu who were merely doing their jobs, or the soldiers who were just patrolling? Do you even know who they were, what kind of people they were?'

Names flowed effortlessly from Kishiar's mouth. He had memorized the names of all those who had been hurt or killed in the events stirred up by the Star of Nagran.

As each ordinary name slipped out, the expressions of the surrounding members couldn't hide their surprise, and Ershi's face twisted more and more.

'So what are you trying to say? Just kill me here and now!'

'No, you won't die here,' Kishiar declared quietly.

'Even if you die, it won't change what has already happened. Just like how revenge didn't solve the real reason you did what you did.'

‘...’

‘So, I'll give you one more chance.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I will give you the opportunity to see clearly what you resent, who you should be seeking revenge against, and what consequences your actions have wrought. We'll revisit this conversation afterward.’

Ershi, and the few members who had followed Kishiar, said nothing. Yuder felt the same.

‘What exactly are you thinking?’

‘As soon as you and your comrades recover, you'll be doing various tasks here. If you don't want to, you could go to prison, but you'll have to atone in some way regardless. And after Tainu fully recovers and the trials conclude, I'd like to hear what you really wanted, what you hoped for from the Cavalry.’

Ershi's eyes oscillated between suspicion and caution. Kishiar was about to turn away from her when something seemed to occur to him.

‘Ah, and I won't forget the objective compliment you gave my face during this conversation. It was unexpectedly memorable.’

‘...’

Ershi's eyes changed meaning, this time wondering if this man who seemed so frivolous could really be an imperial family member and a duke, and if she'd been fooled this whole time.

Yuder, recalling Kishiar's laughter that had bewildered everyone, sighed and shook his head.

Even Yuder had thought for a moment that it was absurd, but he didn't think the words were meaningless.

Kishiar had never fully exercised his authority to manage and punish the Awakeners within the Cavalry. So this declaration signaled to all the members how he would steer the Cavalry going forward.

Some might call his approach lazy and lenient, but Yuder didn't see it that way. Knights had their rules, mages had theirs.

And Kishiar La Orr would write new rules for the Awakeners, in a direction previously uncharted.

"Yuder! There you are! We're about to set off!"

Just as he was about to leave after checking on Hosanna, Kanna burst through the door, her face flushed.

"I'll be in charge of this person right after departure, so don't worry and go back to your post."

"Understood."

If Kanna was taking care of Hosanna, there was nothing to worry about. Nodding, Yuder descended as Kanna climbed into the carriage in a switch. Their hands brushed for a moment as Kanna touched the carriage door. She flinched slightly, her shoulders trembling ever so slightly. Her quick, blinking eyes scanned Yuder's covered face and neck, and the tips of her fingers touching the carriage door, but Yuder remained unaware.

"Then, I'll be going now."

"Ah, wait. Yuder. By any chance, what did you do at the lodging yesterday?"

The voice that asked was unusually soft and cautious. Clearly, some kind of emotional shift had been detected. Yuder hesitated briefly before replying succinctly.

"I had a conversation with the Commander."

"Ah, yes. Of course, since you share the lodging with the Commander."

Kanna, who had been stating the obvious, suddenly mumbled even more softly than before, her lips tightening.

"So, um... has that problem you were worried about been resolved now?"

"Yes, thanks to that."

"I see. That's a relief... truly, a relief."

Her following words started to slow down, and ultimately, the tips of her ears turned a reddish hue. Her demeanor was notably peculiar compared to usual.

"Is there something you want to say?"

Gazing at Yuder's expressionless face, Kanna firmly closed her lips that had been parted in anticipation.

"No, no! Maybe it's because there are so many people here, but I keep picking up weird information. I'm feeling a bit disoriented. Even earlier, I almost—"

Yuder cut off her overly excited chatter.

"Be careful. If you're tired, I can just stay here."

"No need for that!"

Kanna, who had firmly shaken her head, retracted her hands after pushing Yuder's shoulder slightly.

"Go ahead. I'll see you later."

"...Alright."

As Yuder left, he decided he would suggest to Kishiar that they should pay more attention to Kanna's surroundings.

'Reading information against one's will must be draining. She's been enduring it well so far, and maybe I took that for granted.'

At that moment, he didn't know that Kanna's peculiar behavior would continue even after they returned to the capital.

...

Nahan jolted awake.

He blankly stared at the dark ceiling before rolling his undamaged eye to the side. The sound of a creaking wagon and a musty smell filled the air.

"Finally awake, are you?"

The voice beside him, devoid of any emotion, slowly pushed back the hat that had been covering his face. The individual had striking red skin, unmistakably a Southerner.

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"I planned to leave you for dead, but you miraculously started improving since yesterday. Lucky you."

"..."

"But regardless of that, I'd like you not to use your abilities. From what I've seen as we escaped through the gate, I already know well enough how dangerous your power is. If you disagree, you'll be dealt with right here."

Nahan slowly but firmly nodded his head. His cold ash-gray eyes surveyed the inside of the rattling carriage in a meticulous manner. Besides him and the Southerner who had removed his hat, there was one more person in the dilapidated wagon filled with an unpleasant smell. Dressed in a thick

robe, this third individual had an old, suspicious-looking sheath and a long sword beside him. His hand rested on the hilt, ready to draw at any moment. The intention was clear: any false move and Nahan would be killed.

"Do you remember why you're here?"

At the Southerner's question, Nahan cracked open his parched lips.

"...I encountered you. Underground."

"Good. It seems your head wasn't damaged, fortunately."

"Is there any water?"

"We've been riding non-stop for days, so we didn't have much time to resupply. All we have is this; can you drink it?"

Nahan looked at the filthy canteen the man offered, and then reluctantly opened his mouth. Since his shoulders and upper body were bound with cloth instead of bandages, he couldn't lift it himself.

Although the amount of water was woefully inadequate to quench his thirst, it did clear his mind and vision a little. Nahan took a deep breath and asked,

"Where are we going now?"

"We are currently moving along the Yohum trade route. If all goes as planned, we should arrive in Charloin shortly."

Charloin, the largest maritime trade city in the southern part of the Orr Empire. A few more details sporadically flashed across Nahan's dry mind before fading away.

"Thank you for keeping your promise, brother."

"Brother, huh? It was ridiculous the first time I heard it, and it's still ridiculous now."

The Southerner muttered with an utterly serious expression. As he gazed down at Nahan with inscrutable eyes, he opened his mouth once more.

"Because of you and the Cavalry, our plans have been thrown off track. Nevertheless, we brought you along because we wanted to escape from the same place. To be honest, killing you wouldn't be satisfying, but we've honored our promise because we owe you."

"..."

"But I've been curious why people with powers like yours so vehemently opposed the Orr Empire and the Emperor's Cavalry. What is the reason? Is this a shared goal among all of you? What are the identities of your group?"

Instead of responding, Nahan just looked at the man's face. As the man seemed to be contemplating using his power and furrowed his brow, he stepped back, allowing Nahan to speak.

"What changes if you know?"

"Depending on your answer, the assistance that we can offer each other may increase."

"Although I understand that you brothers are not merely the Tain Duke's puppets, it's difficult to answer without knowing anything."

"Are you saying you can't answer even with your life on the line?"

The Southerner's expression sharpened. Nahan didn't react, just locked eyes with him. Just when an ethereal energy seemed to emanate from the Southerner's body, the third man, who had been silently watching with his sword at the ready, finally spoke up.

"Such threats won't work on him, Onakwei. Stand down."

"But Lord Aton—"

"That man isn't the one who disrupted our plans. If we want genuine cooperation from our opponents, we too must offer something worthy. Don't forget what's important now."

The man called Onakwei ultimately retreated in silence. Only after confirming this did Aton lower his sword and remove his hat. Below the rich brown hair that could be mistaken for black, piercing indigo eyes were revealed.

In contrast to Onakwei, who seemed unremarkable and easily forgettable, Aton was a handsome man with fine and aristocratic features.

"Right now, the capital is buzzing with talks about the trials related to the Tain Duchy. Many believe the current Tain Duke will soon step down, and his trading business in the west is about to collapse. At the center of it all is the Cavalry. What do you think this means?"

"I don't care what happens among the high and mighty."

"Then what do you care about?"

"The freedom of my brothers and sisters. A world cleansed of unnecessary elements."

His voice was coarse but carried a peculiar madness, like crackling fire. Onakwei scrunched his nose, seemingly unable to understand the nonsense before him. However, Aton studied him intensely without blinking before finally speaking.

"I see. So for you, the unnecessary elements are those who are not Awakeners and those currently in power."

"..."

"Very well. Let's consider this conversation never happened. Keep your promise not to use your abilities against us until you arrive in the south."

Aton put his hat back on. Curious if the conversation was truly over, Onakwei glanced between the two. The other man, Nahan, had closed his eyes as if his strength was drained.

After some time had passed and Nahan was confirmed to have fainted again, Onakwei spoke softly in the southern tongue.

"Lord Aton, why did you do that?"

"Did you see his eyes?"

"Yes? I mean, I did, but—"

"He's someone words won't get through to, and additionally, he's dangerous. What he desires may align with ours, but they are incompatible. It's better to leave him be. No need to stir the pot."

"And then?"

"Follow him after he reaches the south. He must have other companions. Even if he won't talk, others will."

With conviction in his voice, Aton looked down at Nahan's face as he concluded his last words.

"Simply discovering that there's an organization at the very bottom of the Empire, composed solely of those with power, is gain enough. The Great Chieftain will be pleased."

At the mention of the Great Chieftain, Onakwei's eyes shifted.

"...Understood."

"Don't forget. Follow him the moment he arrives. He's extremely dangerous, so pick those with matching abilities. It's best if Swin and you handle it personally."

"I will do so. But I must admit, I am a bit curious as to how someone with such abilities wound up in a place like the Empire with injuries like this."

To Onakwei's question, laden with curiosity towards his own people, Aton responded indifferently.

"Considering his very light skin tone, he's probably of mixed blood. You know well enough how those of mixed blood are treated, don't you? They are unwelcome everywhere."

"Fair enough."

"Even with his face in that condition, he doesn't bother to hide it at all. He's already far removed from ordinary humans. Even if he's in a state of being mentally unstable, don't let your guard down."

"Yes."

In the chilly atmosphere, Onakwei bowed his head. Just then, the carriage they were in jolted, causing the sack between them to sway.

Simultaneously, Onakwei sniffed an overpowering, foul smell that was impossible to ignore. Irritated, he muttered under his breath.

"Ugh... Whatever is wrong with that powder? It's increasingly emitting this strange odor. It's not wet, and I'm transporting it with utmost care... Could something have mixed with it during its journey from its origin?"

"..."

Although Aton didn't respond, he clenched his lips, seemingly sharing the same sentiment. Even Nahan, who had woken up from a coma with severe injuries, had detected that the overpowering stench was neither from an aging carriage nor from horse dung.

All the odors were emanating from the Calanesa powder that the southern merchants had painstakingly transported.

"Surely it hasn't rotted. There's no way to know if this is the original smell, and there's no one to ask. It's a dilemma."

"Ask the coachman to open the window and see if we can speed up a bit."

"Yes..."

If it hadn't been for those damned Cavalry members, there would have been no need to transport this in such dire circumstances. Everything was supposed to go smoothly, just by successfully distributing it under the patronage of a foolish Duke Tain. Cursing in various southern expletives, Onakwei opened the coachman's window while Aton quietly turned his head. Their hardships would continue for a while longer.

...

At the southern end of the Orr Empire lay vast deserts. Taking tens of days to cross, these deserts were more often remembered by their nickname, 'The Tomb of Stars,' rather than their original name.

Unless someone had a life-or-death reason to go to the south, no one ventured there willingly, not even tax collectors who usually frequented barren lands.

Few were aware that near these lands, a village existed where Awakeners from all over the country were hiding.

"New information has arrived from the west. It appears that everyone who had been staying there has likely been captured by the Cavalry," the informant reported.

## Chapter 455

The people gathered around the long table, carved from wood, stirred at the words.

"What on Earth has happened?"

"So, everyone who's been captured is going to die? Like the Gayle and Doyle brothers?"

"What happens to us then? Do we have to leave this place?"

"It's all clearly because of Nahan."

As a woman with thorns covering her arms loudly mentioned Nahan's name, all eyes instantly turned to her. Anyone else would have kept their mouth shut, overwhelmed by the tense atmosphere, but she confidently stated her opinion.

"How long has it been since he stirred up trouble in the capital, and now he's stayed in the West to help Ershi? If I had found him with a Cavalry, I would have captured him immediately. This was all foreseeable!"

"..."

Breaking the brief silence was a young man seated diagonally across from her.

"You're speaking nonsense. Have you forgotten that Nahan went there to help relocate the Western base?"

The man's words dripped with sarcasm, causing a timid-looking man seated next to him to shrink his shoulders, looking as though he regretted his choice of seat. However, the woman with thorns on her arms didn't back down and chuckled, holding her head high.

"If he went to help with the relocation, he should have come back as soon as the situation was resolved. I've heard that he plotted dangerous schemes there with others and ousted any colleague who opposed his opinions. And I'm not the only one who's heard it."

"Ousted? What I heard was completely different. Those brothers left that place on their own accord...!"

"Enough!"

Just as their bickering escalated into a full-fledged quarrel, a bespectacled man seated next to the head of the table pounded the surface, silencing both of them.

"Why are you so impatient when the Sage hasn't even spoken yet?"

Then, all eyes turned to one person seated at the very end of the table. The middle-aged man, who until now had maintained his silence with a kind expression, finally spoke with a sheepish smile.

"No, it's fine. Say whatever you want to say. Isn't that why we gathered?"

His voice exuded sincerity. Hearing this, the people who were at each other's throats just moments ago quickly calmed down, muttering apologies. The bespectacled man then asked the Sage.

"Sage, what should we do now?"

It was the question everyone had wanted to ask. The 'Sage,' receiving their desperate gaze, pushed up his worn glasses that had slipped down his nose and spoke.

"Well... the only news we've received so far is one uncertain piece of information that they 'might have been captured,' isn't it? But considering brother Hosanna is there, do you think our brothers and sisters would be so easily caught?"

"That is true, but..."

"All we know is that Nahan tried to help sister Ershi there. We don't know anything for sure. His actions likely came from a heart nobler than any, a true reflection of his character."

"..."

His was truly a soothing voice. As they listened to his cautious opinions, everyone in the room felt their anxieties gradually subside, even those who had been criticizing Nahan.

"To be honest, I'm the one who sent Nahan there. I should be the one to apologize to everyone."

"There's no need for such words, Sage."

Outcries erupted sporadically from all around. The sage waited until their voices had faded before opening his mouth again.

"...Therefore, we will wait a little longer for news from my brother Nahan. We have another brother stationed in the west; let's hope for more concrete information from that end."

"What should we do if everyone, including Nahan, is captured?"

Would they really have to move their base once again? Looking at the eyes of the crowd, filled with fear and anxiety, the sage quietly smiled. His warm grin was so soothing that those who saw it found themselves involuntarily exhaling a sigh of relief.

"Even if that were the case, we will not leave this place. We have already made preparations of our own, given our past experiences."

"Preparations?"

"For a few months now, we've had the fortune of being aided by some individuals. Thanks to their help, Nahan and his men were able to rescue many from the House of Apeto."

At the mention of the Apeto House, many exchanged surprised glances. They all knew that Nahan had ventured into the main residence of the Apeto House to rescue several Awakeners, but they hadn't known the backstory.

"A while back, through that connection, we were approached by someone quite special, who resides right at the heart of the capital. He is young, deeply troubled, and struggling—yet he has reached out to us for help."

The heart of the capital could only mean the imperial palace. Who among those in the palace was young and mysterious enough to seek aid?

There could only be one. The Crown Prince, destined to be the next sun, Katchian La Orr.

Those quick to connect the dots swallowed hard.

"Could it be..."

"I've considered it for a long time. But I've decided to accept this request."

A far greater wave of excitement spread throughout the room, even more so than when they first heard that Nahan and his comrades in the west might be captured. While most were daunted by the

current situation, some revealed a strong interest in the tale of a powerful figure in need of their abilities.

The sage looked at each of their faces, lost in their own thoughts, and concluded.

"It's not just about protecting all of us. If my abilities can help someone, anyone, I would gladly offer them. That's all there is to it. And if any of you wish to contribute to such a cause, feel free to approach me at any time."

The room fell silent. No one else spoke, and the meeting came to an end. As many left the meeting room with faces relaxed in relief, one man who had been timidly quiet the entire time paused.

As he looked back pensively at the meeting room he had just left, a passing Awakener spoke.

"Whoa, Daemon, you are relentless! Planning to go back to the sage again? Why, to volunteer once more?"

"Um, no, I—"

"I hate to say this, but maybe it's time to give up. It's impressive that you can copy others' abilities, but they manifest far weaker than the originals. What's the point of continuing this? Even when you copied Gayle and Doyle's abilities, in the end, their roles were taken by Mei. Isn't it okay to just live an ordinary life now? When they need your abilities, they'll surely call."

Daemon's face flushed. The Awakener patted his shoulder and walked away with a benign smile.

...

The return journey of the Cavalry proceeded as quickly as advancing flames.

Of course, the actual speed wasn't much different, but the mood made it seem so. With all tasks successfully completed, there was no burden on their minds, and the lack of burden made their steps infinitely lighter. Despite walking and running all day, the members felt no fatigue and laughed.

A few days after their departure, those who had started from the Great Sarain Forest joined the group. Greeting their colleagues whose skin had paled from lack of sunlight due to running through dense forests, the members of the Cavalry happily exchanged greetings.

Yuder also had a hectic reunion surrounded by Gakane, Jimmy, and other members responsible for the Great Sarain Forest.

"Yuder, you've fully recovered! I'm so happy to lock eyes with you again. I'm really relieved."

"Hey, Yuder! Can we have a duel tonight? Everyone says I've improved my abilities a lot. You'll be surprised if you see it!"

Though still bandaged from his injuries, Gakane's face was much brighter than before, and Jimmy, who had grown taller, eagerly talked on both sides, making it impossible for Yuder to concentrate.

Standing beside them, the Eldore siblings, reunited after a long time, held hands with relatively calm expressions.

"Let's test our abilities against each other as soon as we get back, Finn."

"I'll do better."

"What are you talking about? I'll do better."

## Chapter 456

The members eagerly placed bets as they watched two identically appearing individuals compete against each other for the first time since joining the ranks. The buoyant atmosphere persisted even after Kishiar made his appearance.

"It's good to see everyone in good health."

"We're delighted to see you as well, Commander. Your eyesight seems to have improved remarkably."

A member of the Cavalry, known for his cheeky demeanor, raised his voice and saluted Kishiar. The others joined in, cheering and offering their own salutations. It was hard to believe that these were the same people who had been terrified at the sight of Kishiar during their induction ceremony.

They could do these things because they knew Kishiar was the kind of man who would take such jokes with a smile.

And then Kishiar, just as everyone had hoped, boosted the troops' morale with a smile more radiant than ever.

"Thank you, Joyce. However, it's too early to celebrate. A wonderful vacation and delicious meals await us when we return. Let's all give it a little more effort until the very end."

"Really? Thank you!"

Amid a sky-high round of applause and laughter, Yuder quietly observed Kishiar's face.

No one there could even suspect that Kishiar would soon be meeting a dying Emperor upon his return. Who could imagine what lay behind that smooth smile?

He was so adept at concealing all his emotions and smiling. For his Cavalry, which was rejoicing, and for his one and only brother, he would keep his feelings in check for as long as needed.

That was the kind of man Kishiar was.

There was a time when Yuder thought he knew nothing about him, and also a time when he felt that he knew him better than anyone else.

But now, in a different sense, Yuder felt as though he had come to understand something he didn't know about Kishiar.

A complex and somewhat bitter emotion filled him, making it hard to say he was pleased. Yuder lowered his eyes.

...

"Your Majesty, Duke Peletta has sent word. He plans to arrive in the capital as scheduled."

The Emperor, lying down, rose at the steward's low and formal voice. A rare expression of sincerity appeared over his pallid face.

"Good... He has arrived promptly. Is everything prepared for my departure?"

"Yes."

"And the Empress?"

"She has already arrived just outside the Sun Palace."

"I can't keep her waiting too long."

The Emperor nodded and stood up on his own. Although his movements lacked strength, he did not wobble, thanks to his slow pace.

The elderly steward silently assisted the Emperor with his clothing and preparations. It was far different from the light and simple attire the Emperor usually wore. Today, the Emperor was dressed in full formal robes, befitting the ruler of the Empire.

He wrapped a piece of blue cloth from his shoulder to his waist and threaded a cord of twisted gold through his cloak. Age-old jewels inherited through a millennium adorned him from head to toe. Finally, he put on white gloves embroidered with luminescent threads and donned the golden crown, the symbol of the Orr Empire.

The Emperor, now fully prepared, chuckled softly as he looked at his ample robe.

"I've lost so much weight... The robe is still too large. Or have I lost even more weight in the meantime?"

The steward bowed his head deeply in a gesture of regret.

"It's not your fault. Don't bow your head like that."

Standing before a mirror that reflected his entire figure, the Emperor felt as if he were crushed under the weight of his clothes. No amount of makeup could conceal his pallid complexion or cracked lips; his emaciated frame was beyond help. In fact, the golden crown and long cloak were only making him feel more suffocated and burdened.

He wanted to shed them at once, but he couldn't.

Turning his back to the mirror, the Emperor walked towards a door he had not used in a long time. As the steward led the way and knocked on the door, knights standing outside pulled the handle.

The moment the doors to the Second Palace opened for the first time in what seemed like ages, many felt a swirl of mixed emotions. The Emperor proceeded outside, passing knights who knelt in reverence. Numerous people, waiting in front of two twin-like carriages, bowed their heads in unison as a mark of respect. Simultaneously, the door of the carriage on the right swung open, and the Empress leapt out.

"Your Majesty."

Upon seeing the Emperor after such a long time, the eyes of the Empress reddened slightly. Biting her red lips, she struggled to find words for a moment before finally suppressing her sorrow and breaking into a smile.

"I am truly pleased to be with you on a day like this. Please, enter the carriage."

The Emperor stood next to the Empress in front of their respective carriages. Long ago, they always rode in a single carriage, but now they never did. The reason was something neither wished to speak of.

Before climbing into the carriage, the Emperor quietly opened his mouth, his back to the Empress.

"I feel the same."

"..."

The Empress hesitated for a moment. The Emperor entered the carriage without meeting her gaze.

"The Emperor departs!"

A knight announced in a deep and majestic voice, pulling the reins vigorously. The grand procession began to move.

As the parade passed the boundary separating Zone 1 and Zone 2, the guards holding the line swallowed nervously and knelt. Beyond the border stood a woman dressed in a long blue robe typical of a mage, and following her were other mages.

"All from the Imperial Mage Office greet Your Majesties," she courteously greeted, falling into step at the head of the parade. As they moved from Zone 2 to Zone 3, generals and soldiers with graying hair bowed their heads respectfully.

"Imperial General Gerald Mucker is here at Your Majesties' summons."

The crowd surrounding the carriages grew larger. All who saw the advancing procession couldn't hide their astonished expressions as they knelt.

As they neared Zone 7, the parade lengthened, and the streetscape became increasingly intricate and opulent. Trees towering over the main roads were adorned with a myriad of colorful flowers that fluttered in the wind, filling the air with their sweet fragrance.

Finally, when they reached the boundary between Zone 6 and Zone 7, the carriages halted once more.

Standing there were Imperial Knights dressed in gold-adorned armor and uniforms, along with Theorado Van Tain and a handful of Cavalry members who had stayed behind in the capital dressed in black uniforms, including Steiber Rendley.

"Imperial Knight Commander Theorado Van Tain greets Your Majesties."

"Cavalry Deputy Commander Steiber Rendley greets Your Majesties."

As the two stepped forward to greet them, the assembled crowd erupted into cheers.

"My God! The Emperor really has come!"

"The Emperor, here—!"

Some Imperial Knights frowned at the outburst but ultimately joined the front of the procession without a word.

The Emperor's procession finally came to a halt at a massive square near the South Gate, at the end of the 7th District. Everything was perfectly set up there, according to plan, to welcome someone.

Though reluctant, the Emperor could not resist his curiosity about the interior landscape of his carriage. He glanced at the many nobles in attendance, their eyes filled with a mix of apprehension and curiosity, and offered them a cold, icy smile.

However, his expression softened astonishingly when he saw the members of the Cavalry, dressed in black, begin to enter through the gate.

"Well, shall we go meet Kishiar now?"

...

"What on Earth is going on? What's with these flowers? Can someone please explain to me?"

"Do I look like I know?"

"Actually, weren't there other knight brigades supposed to have accomplished great deeds and returned today as well? That's the only thing I can think of!"

"I'm so scared right now that I want to go to the bathroom!"

Yuder faintly heard the mutterings of the Cavalry members, their voices a blend of bewilderment and fear, over the deafening cheers and internally agreed with them.

'I really have no idea what's going on.'

Until they arrived in the capital, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. No anomalies or significant changes were felt. The issue arose when they dismounted at the gate that screened entrants outside the South Gate of the capital. Yuder assumed they would be let right in as soon as their identity as Cavalry was known, but for some reason, approval took an unusually long time. Even more baffling were the massive crowds and tremendous cheers that began to rise as they approached the South Gate, not to mention the petals scattered all the way out beyond the gate.

If there were a welcome ceremony, Kishiar would have informed them in advance. However, Kishiar had not said anything about this situation. When Yuder's questioning eyes met his, Kishiar made a face as if he, too, was not completely without suspicions, and suggested that they simply go in and see.

And so, they found themselves in this situation.

The endless cheers had dulled their ears. Flowers showered over their carriage, almost covering the entire road.

'... Is this really a cheer for us?'

Yuder watched the spectacle and felt it was incredibly awkward and distant. If he had experienced something similar in his past life, perhaps he would understand, but even then, the Cavalry had never received such a reception for accomplishing any mission.

Even though they were treated with no shortage of respect, most of them were commoners who lived in the Emperor's shadow. They were not people who needed such an extravagant welcoming ceremony.

But what was this?

"... I think I'm getting the hang of it now."

It was then that Kishiar spoke. He was looking through the window of the carriage at something far off, smiling.

"It appears His Majesty wanted to give us a surprise gift, even keeping it a secret from me."

## Chapter 457

Kishiar's gaze landed on a square fully prepared for an elaborate welcome ceremony. Yuder's eyes widened at the sight of a raised platform towering above the neatly seated dignitaries and the two people sitting there.

For several years now, in events requiring the Emperor's presence, the Empress had typically represented him alongside Crown Prince Katchian. However, Katchian was nowhere to be seen on the highest platform of today's square. Instead, occupying the seat was none other than Emperor Keilusa, the person who rightfully should be at the highest position in the empire.

Clad in opulent ceremonial robes identical to the Empress's, the Emperor looked significantly thinner than when last seen. However, he didn't appear to be someone on the brink of death.

'...I thought he'd surely be in the imperial palace, considering he was said to have collapsed.'

Yuder wasn't the only one surprised; the Cavalry members, nobles, and everyone else couldn't take their eyes off the Emperor. Despite sensing the weight of those countless gazes, the Emperor quietly stared ahead, as if he were alone.

In a lowered voice, Yuder asked while alternately glancing at the two brothers,

"Is it alright for His Majesty the Emperor to make an appearance like this?"

"Of course not. If they had told me they'd arrange such an event, I would have somehow opposed it and interfered. They caught me off guard."

Although his tone sounded light, as if finding the situation absurd, his eyes didn't convey the same levity. Yuder couldn't even begin to guess the complex emotions Kishiar must be experiencing.

Having spent ten years as a Cavalry Commander, Yuder thought he was fairly adept at dealing with people. Yet, now he was at a loss for words. Noticing Yuder's unusual silence, Kishiar blinked several times before cracking a smooth smile.

"Are you worried about me right now?"

"..."

"It's fine. What's done is done. This event is a rare opportunity His Majesty has provided for the Cavalry. Our job now is to not waste it."

"...Yes."

"If His Majesty knew me, I also know his temperament. If there were even the slightest possibility he could collapse here, he wouldn't have made such a bold choice, given the circumstances. That's the kind of man he is."

'If you say so, then it must be so,' Yuder responded with a small nod.

"Understood. However, I will remain vigilant and keep an eye on our surroundings just in case."

"It feels like I've gained the most reliable barrier in the world. Thank you."

Kishiar burst into a broad smile. His hair was a mess, ruffled as he ran his fingers through his bangs as if trying to contain himself, but Yuder said nothing.

The horse-drawn carriages carrying the Cavalry members reached the square, naturally following the wave of cheers. Stepping down from his carriage, Kishiar looked around and waved his hand, exuding an air of calm as if he had known about this all along. The cheers from the crowd grew exponentially louder at the sight of the dazzlingly handsome Duke of Peletta. Soldiers blocking the street suddenly became more active, thanks to people trying to get closer to Kishiar.

Seeing Kishiar move forward with unshakable confidence, the members also quickly shed their anxiety and followed him with visibly brightened expressions. Without a single word of explanation, everything proceeded as if it had all been perfectly planned from the beginning.

Yuder followed just a step behind Kishiar, quickly scanning his surroundings. Directly below the platform where the Emperor sat, stood the Cavalry members in the capital, including Steiber, whom he hadn't seen in a while. They must have already known about today's welcoming ceremony.

"Even so, not a word reached us. Emperor Keilusa sure prepared this meticulously," Yuder thought.

In the VIP seats filling the square were not only nobles but also mages draped in courtly robes, Imperial Knights, and high-ranking officers within the Imperial Army. Yuder picked out familiar faces among them and paused momentarily when his eyes landed on a particular spot.

'It's been a while since I've seen him, Apeto's First Son, Aishes... I wonder if Revlin is here too.'

Aishes, who had been focusing almost entirely on external activities since the Apeto incident, curbing his father the Duke's influence, attended as the representative of his family today as well. Though he was only a step away from a dukedom, his complexion seemed much worse than before.

'Well, he died not long ago in his previous life. It's understandable, but today's Aishes looks particularly sharp and gloomy,' Yuder thought.

Revlin sat at a distance that made it hard to consider him part of Aishes' family, alongside his lover. He sat closest to the Cavalry's capital unit, laughing and jesting, a face filled with both pride and envy.

'It seems he regrets not being able to formally attend today's ceremony as he's still a temporary member,' Yuder pondered. 'We'll be accepting new members soon, so he should be able to join us next time.'

While thinking about when would be the best time to share this good news with Revlin, Yuder suddenly turned his head, sensing a hostile aura prickling his skin. Not a significant threat, but when he looked, it was none other than Kiolle da Diarca, sitting beside Duke Diarca, glaring at him ineffectively.

'Even from such a distance, he managed to find me among the members,' Yuder thought, noticing Kiolle's lips moving as if muttering something. It seemed Kiolle was very unhappy that Yuder had returned alive and well. However, given that no oath magic was triggered, it seemed he had improved his harmful language habits somewhat.

Just as Yuder was about to dismiss him as unworthy of further attention, he noticed a new emblem on the chest plate of Kiolle's armor and narrowed his eyes.

'Isn't that... the symbol for the Crown Prince's escort knights?'

Though distant, he was sure of it. Ever since one of his eyes had opened to the Eye of Magic, Yuder had realized that he occasionally saw things more clearly than before. It was an ability he had discovered unknowingly in Tainu, allowing him to read expressions remarkably well even in the dark, and to see distant landmarks that others could barely confirm.

The emblem on Kiolle's armor was unmistakably that of the Crown Prince's escort knights.

"Did the Diarca family decide to attach Kiolle to Katchian?"

Whether it rained or shined, the person who should be by Katchian's side was here alone. Normally this would be unthinkable, but it probably didn't matter since they likely didn't expect Kiolle to perform his escort duties adequately anyway.

Deciding to investigate this new development further, Yuder completely shifted his focus. Just then, all members of the Cavalry lined up neatly behind Kishiar as the Emperor and Empress rose from their seats.

The Emperor broke his years-long silence, speaking before the crowd of citizens who were gazing at him intently.

"Today, I stand before you to express my gratitude to the heroes who have bravely confronted the threats to our Empire and returned without the help of anyone else."

His voice, amplified through magic, resounded high and far, silencing the crowd. Even under the weight of hundreds, thousands of eyes focused solely on him, the Emperor continued to speak without faltering.

He talked about the enormous crisis caused by the sudden outbreak of monsters in the western regions this year, citing the massive damage suffered by neighboring nations. He also subtly

touched upon the illegal trade that was taking place in the west, tacitly approved by the nobles who were supposed to be protecting the area.

The Emperor's ability to praise the Cavalry's deeds while skillfully reprimanding the wrongdoers was undoubtedly in Kishiar's bloodline.

At first, the citizens were merely intrigued by the fact that the Emperor had spoken. But as they listened, they became increasingly engrossed. The atmosphere improved even more as Kishiar cleverly redirected the Cavalry's accomplishments towards the Emperor and the Empire. Eventually, cheers and applause filled the square at the end of each of the Emperor's sentences. Several nobles, including Duke Diarca, wore stone-faced expressions upon seeing the crowd's reaction.

As the speech neared its end, the air in the square palpably simmered with excitement.

"...And so, I will bestow appropriate rewards to Commander Kishiar La Orr and the 330 members of the Cavalry, along with everyone who assisted in this endeavor. A party has been arranged in the imperial palace to celebrate; do not decline but enjoy. I sincerely thank you for your efforts in saving the West."

With the conclusion of the Emperor's words, the square erupted into the loudest cheer yet.

As a bouquet of flowers tossed by someone brushed against his hair and fell to the ground, Yuder momentarily forgot all the serious thoughts he'd been harboring and looked up at the sky.

Bright flower petals floated endlessly under the crystal-clear blue sky.

The spectacle was remarkably similar to the day when he had felt breathless, yet what lay before his eyes was entirely different.

Yuder felt a shiver run down his spine as he looked at Kishiar, who stood confidently before him, smiling with ease.

The Cavalry's first welcome ceremony ended flawlessly, without any issues.

...

Returning to the Cavalry headquarters after a long time, everything remained unchanged.

Still charged with excitement, the members listened as Kishiar briefly announced a week-long vacation and a bonus multiple times their monthly salary, encouraging them to enjoy their time off before heading upstairs.

Half of the members immediately left to drink, while the rest headed to their quarters for some much-needed rest. Yuder was, of course, among the latter. Although many comrades wanted to detain him, his close friends deterred them by mentioning his possible lingering injuries, allowing him to quickly leave.

Carrying his bag and walking toward his room, Yuder remembered a somewhat enigmatic gesture that Kishiar had left him with before heading upstairs.

'...He definitely winked at me, but I can't figure out why.'

It could simply be that he was in a good mood, but the expression seemed to hold a deeper meaning. The problem was that Yuder couldn't guess what it could be.

After setting down his luggage and washing up, Yuder thought he would head to his room.

Standing in front of his room, a sight he hadn't seen for quite some time, Yuder took a deep breath before grasping the doorknob. Opening the door without giving it much thought, he saw the inside and promptly shut it again.

'What the...?'

Doubting his eyes, he cautiously opened the door once more. But the view inside remained unchanged. After staring at the bewildering sight for a good while, he finally stepped in and closed the door behind him.

'What on earth is this...'

Yuder's small room, which was suitable for a single person to live in, was originally clean enough to be emptied at any moment if he packed up his clothes and belongings. But now, the room he saw was covered in countless flowers, as if the entire square he had just left had been transplanted into it.

No matter how many times he closed and opened his eyes, the view did not change.

Who could have possibly brought so many flowers here, and why? The identity of the culprit was beyond doubt.

Yuder recalled a paper flower Kishiar had left for him during a night in the Great Sarain Forest.

"Celebrating your recovery. The real thing will come later."

That flower, with those words written on it, was still hidden deep in Yuder's luggage where no one would find it.

Could this be the "real thing"?

So absurd that it made him laugh, Yuder carefully tried not to step on the flowers that reached up to his ankles, but eventually gave up and tossed his bag onto the flower-covered bed.

The thrown petals stuck to Yuder's clothes and skin as they landed with a rustling sound. A fragrant and subtle aroma strongly penetrated his nostrils and seeped into his chest.

Closing his eyes momentarily against the almost dizzying fragrance, Yuder found himself already outside his room, running up the stairs to the top floor.

Without bothering to knock, he opened the door that revealed itself in the blink of an eye. The man standing behind the desk near the window of the Commander's room turned his head, flipping his hair back.

Just as the man started to form a playful smile, opening his mouth to say something, Yuder leapt toward him.

The scent transformed into heat in an instant.

"Yuder is truly amazing!"

Jimmy, who had climbed into a cart covered in dirt, exclaimed with exhilarated enthusiasm.

The boy had finally managed to engage in a brief duel with Yuder Aile. During their evening relaxation time after dinner, the members who had spent the day traveling by cart and horse all gathered to watch the duel.

Jimmy unleashed all the abilities he had developed over time. His strength had indeed increased significantly. However, he ultimately couldn't so much as nick the hem of Yuder Aile's clothing. Yuder, who had shown immense strength against the monsters of the Great Sarain Forest, effortlessly dodged or swung at thin air in front of Jimmy's outreached hand.

After a few rounds of attack and defense, Yuder effortlessly disarmed Jimmy with fluid movements, wielding the weapon far more skillfully than its original owner. In a single stroke, he defeated his opponent and had a blade at his throat, forcing a surrender. Even without using any significant abilities, the skill gap between them was so overwhelming that the onlookers were utterly deflated.

But Jimmy didn't feel bad at all. Every time he lost to Yuder, his eyes sparkled with immense joy. It was only after repeating the same act five times and hearing from Commander Kishiar that it was time to move on that the young boy finally stepped back. Still unable to contain his excitement, he eagerly shared his thoughts with Gakane and the Eldore siblings, who were in the same carriage.

"You see, just because my power has increased a bit doesn't mean I'm suddenly all that. I can see where the tip of his sword is going, so I've been told to practice my basic swordsmanship five more times a day. Starting tomorrow, I'm going to add ten more!"

"Haha, Jimmy. You can roll around like that and not get tired?"

Gakane asked, his eyes a mix of admiration and pride.

"Not at all! Actually, I wanted to ask the Commander if he would spar with me too, but alas, I couldn't."

Finn Eldore shook his head at the audacious comment from the exuberant twelve-year-old.

"A one-on-one duel with the Commander? Ugh, no thanks."

"Me neither."

Hinn Eldore echoed her brother's sentiment, making the same face.

"Why not?"

"Do you really not know? The Commander never lets anything end easily."

"Yeah, I've never seen him end a duel quickly, even when his opponents are completely exhausted!"

As the twins exchanged nods of silent agreement, Jimmy, who had been tilting his head, cautiously spoke up.

"Um... what about Yuder then? Is it not so great to spar with him?"

"Yuder's fine. He's quick to the point."

"What about you, Gakane?"

"Me? Well... If you're asking who I'd choose for a one-on-one training session, I think I'd go with Yuder."

"Huh. I thought Gakane, who is so eager to train, would choose the Commander. Why Yuder?"

Faced with Hinn's question, Gakane smiled awkwardly and cautiously added his reason.

"Well, Yuder would probably move on to the next person if I passed out, but the Commander... he'd likely keep watching until I woke up again..."

"Ugh, I can imagine it! That face as he watches, smiling!"

"Gakane, don't tell me you've experienced it?"

The noise from the Eldore siblings died down, and Jimmy changed the subject.

"So, who do you think would win in a duel between the Commander and Yuder?"

"Hmm?"

Jimmy scratched his head, gauging the looks from the three.

"Honestly... I'm curious. Am I the only one?"

Comparing someone from humble origins, who joined the Cavalry around the same time as them, to the sky-high, noble Commander was normally unimaginable and quite risky. But they were the Cavalry.

After a moment of silence, Finn, who had been rubbing his chin thoughtfully, finally spoke, looking at his twin sister.

"Uh... this is tough."

"Seriously. I've never faced such a difficult question before. Do you think Uncle Macky felt this way when we pranked him to tell us apart?"

"What pranks have you guys been playing?"

"Not telling."

Although Gakane asked in a trembling voice, the twins just laughed and didn't answer.

Afterward, the four engaged in a rather serious debate about 'The duel between Yuder Aile and Commander: who would be the winner?' It was an engrossing topic that helped pass the time, given that they had to be stuck in a carriage heading towards the capital all day.

"No, Yuder single-handedly decapitated that massive monster. Using Earth abilities to bind its legs and Wind abilities for offense, it had nowhere to run. Wouldn't anyone with that much skill be unbeatable?"

"Well, we've hardly ever seen the Commander exert full effort. I've never seen him struggle against anyone. He's never been injured like Yuder either. So wouldn't that make him stronger?"

"But Yuder is—"

"No, if the Commander back then—"

"Ugh! We're getting nowhere!"

After a fervent debate, Hinn finally raised both hands and shouted, cutting everyone off.

"What's the point of arguing about something that hasn't even happened yet? Boring! Let's make a bet instead!"

"What kind of bet?"

Finn immediately perked up and responded.

"Just bet on who will win! We'll find out the answer eventually!"

"Sounds fun for a change! But what are we wagering?"

"Money is probably the best, right?"

"True. I heard we're getting a bonus after the mission wraps up, so we could take a little from there. Sounds good to me!"

"Oh, I want in on this. Count me in."

"Wait a minute, everyone, calm down! Betting money is essentially gambling."

"What are you talking about, Gakane? You're from the South and you think this is gambling? Grow a spine!"

Gakane looked as if he wanted to ask what being from the South had to do with anything, but he was overwhelmed by the group's enthusiasm and said nothing. Not content with merely drawing Gakane into the bet, Hinn dreamed bigger.

"Wouldn't it be more fun if more people were involved? I think we should hear other people's opinions as well."

"Hinn... aren't you blowing this out of proportion?"

"Don't worry, it's fine. First, let's ask people what they think about the question Jimmy is curious about. If they show interest, then and only then will I gently ask them if they'd like to participate! Absolutely won't force anyone who's not interested!"

"But there might not be anyone like that."

The twins exchanged glances, smiling devilishly as they clasped hands. Gakane tried a few more times to dissuade them but eventually gave up.

And so, unbeknownst to the Commander and his assistant, an oddly suspicious survey and pool of bettors began to form within the Cavalry.

Chapter 458

"Did you see the flowers?"

After a long kiss, Kishiar pulled back slightly, their foreheads still touching, and asked the question.

"Yes, I did. They were everywhere; hard to miss."

"Hahaha."

Kishiar burst into laughter. Leaning against the window, the man's eyes sparkled mischievously as he hugged Yuder's waist. Instead of verbalizing the myriad emotions he had felt while avoiding stepping on the flowers to get to the room, Yuder responded by gripping the hem of his clothes tightly.

"To be honest, I thought you'd be more likely to find them after a few drinks with others. Didn't expect you to rush over so quickly."

"Perhaps I wouldn't have if you hadn't signaled me with your eyes earlier."

"Well, calling it a 'signal' makes it sound awfully formal, don't you think?"

Kishiar playfully teased, as if the wink laden with personal sentiment had been exchanged like a secret mission order. Yuder didn't bat an eye, finding Kishiar's expression much more relaxed than when they had met at the square.

"Indeed, there were many, but thank you nonetheless."

"So? How many should I give next time to hit the sweet spot? Do tell, I'll prepare accordingly."

His ability to smoothly and cheekily suggest he'd give flowers again was quite impressive. Yuder sighed a laugh, almost involuntarily, and bowed his head.

"You don't have to give any. My thanks for the abundance of flowers doesn't mean I want more."

The reason he rushed here was not because of the flowers laid out. If it had been anything other than flowers, if he realized it was sent by Kishiar, his actions would have been the same.

As he lifted his head, Yuder was met with an expression he had not anticipated, and he was slightly taken aback.

"Right, that was a foolish question."

Kishiar's face was full of deep and candid emotions as he relaxed his eyebrows and smiled.

"So... would it be alright if we kissed again?"

The pupils reflecting only Yuder seemed so full of joy and yearning.

And so Yuder closed his eyes and turned his face first.

Because there seemed to be no way out of these enchanting emotions unless he did so.

"...Commander."

"Yuder."

When their lips finally parted after another long contact, their voices rang out almost simultaneously. Yuder blinked before opening his mouth again.

"You go first."

"No, it's fine. You go."

His voice was noticeably softer and lower than usual, caressing his slightly swollen lips.

"I'd like to use the key you gave me before, now."

That was one of the thoughts he'd had even before seeing the flowers.

Kishiar had already laid his heart bare. He had promised not to suppress himself once they returned to the capital, and holding onto a key that could alter their relationship no longer held any meaning.

The moments of hesitation, wondering if he could handle the changes that turning the key would bring, had long since become a thing of the past.

Kishiar had let him experience, one by one, all the things he'd been worried about post-change, all while wearing the mask of playful pretense.

Social status, the words and gazes of others, and even a past life that he had believed would remain an eternal secret—once all these barriers were shattered by Kishiar, he found their significance surprisingly negligible. Acknowledging this truth lightened the weight of the key that had been subtly pressing on a corner of his heart.

"As for me, my heart..."

Yuder mumbled slowly, recalling words that Kishiar had once spoken to him in the past.

"Everything about me is already here. As for a way to recover it... I'm not sure anymore."

"..."

"That's all I have to say. Now, please share what you were going to say, Commander."

My God. A barely audible sigh seemed to escape.

Yuder felt Kishiar's arm, which was wrapped around his waist, tighten. The sensation was slightly constricting, but seeing the rare blush on Kishiar's cheeks made everything feel okay.

"What I was going to say is... before we left the square, His Majesty the Emperor said something."

Much later, without loosening his grip, Kishiar continued to speak about a discreet conversation that had briefly taken place between Emperor Keilusa and him, after the Cavalry's welcome ceremony had ended.

At that time, Kishiar, as the Commander of the Cavalry and Duke of Peletta, had held the hands of both the Emperor and Empress, escorting them to their carriage. The brothers exchanged a few

quiet words, so soft that not even Yuder, with his keen senses, could catch them. However, he guessed that it wasn't bad news, given that Kishiar let out a short chuckle as the conversation ended.

"His Majesty declared that while the Cavalry is on break, I should take a break as well. He said if he hears that I've worked or visited the palace during the week-long vacation leading up to the next palace party, he will reprimand me severely."

What a ridiculous command. Kishiar laughed as he spoke, and only then did Yuder understand why he had laughed earlier. After all, even the Emperor had slapped him on the back, metaphorically speaking.

"Well, I have my own ways, so I won't comply entirely, but I suppose I should at least pretend to take a break, shouldn't I?"

"Mmm... I suppose so."

"And luckily, I have an attractive partner right in front of me, who just exchanged heartfelt confessions with me."

"..."

Even though he had said something similar himself, hearing it from Kishiar made it extraordinarily difficult to bear. It seemed that even with all barriers shattered, Kishiar La Orr's innate disposition wasn't going to change.

"So, what do you think I should do?"

Yuder stared at the mischievous smile. For some reason, it seemed that the heat rising on Kishiar's face was more intense than before.

'Could it be? Is it not just my imagination?'

Yuder examined Kishiar's face closely before asking,

"Commander, do you have a fever by any chance?"

"Ah, you noticed?"

Shockingly, Kishiar's response was straightforward. He lightly rubbed his own face and answered,

"In fact, ever since we returned to the capital, I've felt like I had a fever, so I sent Nathan to the palace as a precaution. It doesn't seem serious, but better to get a proper diagnosis."

Come to think of it, it hadn't even been an hour since their return, and Nathan Zuckerman was nowhere to be seen. So he had been running an errand to the palace!

'And here I was, completely unaware... Damn it.'

It seemed that he had truly been out of his mind. Even without considering Kishiar's unique physical condition, he had seen enough people fall ill suddenly after completing a significant mission and letting their guard down in his previous life. He should have at least considered the possibility.

Perhaps Emperor Keilusa's strict vacation proposal was also a foresight of this situation. Yuder looked at Kishiar with a mix of astonishment and a hint of self-reproach.

Oblivious to Yuder's feelings, or pretending to be so, the man cheerfully responded.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not so critically ill. I think it's more like the reins I've been holding back have loosened a bit, causing some minor turmoil. If my assumptions are correct, a bit of rest and medication will sort it out. Though, of course, my assistant might enjoy a solo vacation until I get up."

Yuder quickly grasped the implication of his words.

What other reason could there be for loosening the reins as soon as he returned to the capital?

Other than the matter they had promised in the West.

Yuder remained silent for a long time before covering his eyes.

"One thing is certain."

"What is it?"

"The first thing we should do during this vacation is look after your health."

"I don't need nursing, but we do have to continue some tests that we couldn't finish earlier. And?"

Yuder lowered his hand and looked squarely into Kishiar's eyes.

His heart skipped a beat between the gaze they shared.

"...I have no intention of enjoying the vacation alone."

"Does that mean I can interpret your words the way I want to?"

The arm around his waist tightened its grip a bit more. Now, most of his body was in contact with the 'spear,' with his weight fully placed on it. Yuder felt a soft touch climbing up his back over his clothes and nodded his head.

"Yes."

## Chapter 459

Though it may be expected or surprising, Kishiar did not immediately begin his work. The reason being, it was only a short time before Nathan Zuckerman would return.

Kishiar asked Yuder whether he would prepare for their vacation together while he and his adjutant were checking on his health conditions, or if Yuder needed separate time for preparation. Thinking of his room still covered in flowers, Yuder replied that he would simply change his clothes and come up.

The path back to his quarters, following the central staircase leading from the Commander's room, felt unusually light and peaceful. Windows carefully placed between the floors were wide open, letting in the last rays of sunlight before the onset of full-blown winter.

Usually, the sound of members sweating and grunting in the training ground below would be heard, but today the place was deserted, making it eerily quiet.

Entering his room, Yuder was struck by a mixture of fresh and complicated emotions upon seeing his bags still thrown aside in neglect.

The question Kishiar had asked just before leaving the dressing room resurfaced in his mind.

‘Time for preparation.’

Oddly enough, the first time he'd been with Kishiar in his previous life, they had also spent about a week together, and this time around their vacation was also a week long. However, in his previous life, there had been no opportunity for any kind of preparation. It had been an accident, and like most accidents, it had been abrupt from beginning to end.

‘Almost all the time I spent with Kishiar felt that way, too.’

Every subsequent intimate encounter with Kishiar had also been rushed and unsettling. Neither the beginning nor the end could be adjusted by his will.

But today, he had the opportunity to prepare. According to Yuder Aile's will, freely and without restriction. The newfound freedom felt strangely uncomfortable. It was even bizarre to him.

‘I did say I'd just change clothes and come up, but... should I prepare something more?’

Although he had no interest in sexual matters, he knew from tales in his previous life that various preparations could be quite necessary before two people became intimate. Yet, a rebellious voice inside him also questioned the necessity of such preparations, asserting that whatever was going to happen would happen regardless.

When Kishiar was in sight, everything seemed perfectly fine, but the moment he was out of view, Yuder felt awkward, like a clumsy kid. He sighed softly.

‘I’m not a child, not at this age. I should stop doing foolish things.’

To clear his thoughts, he made a sweeping gesture with his hand, summoning a gust of wind. It neatly gathered the flowers that covered the floor, leaving the furniture and other items untouched. Moments later, they floated into beautiful arrangements.

The bouquet, large enough to be a challenge for an adult man to hold, was carefully divided into vases and cups that Kanna had left, or that Ever had once gifted him. However, even after stuffing all available places with flowers, an excessive pile remained, creating small mountains on the table and chairs.

"I'll have to think more about what to do with the leftovers."

Once the room was clean, it finally felt like he had truly returned to his own quarters. Yuder took off his outer garment and gloves, and pulled out fresh clothes hanging cleanly washed in his closet. Just as he was about to change, his motion hesitated for a moment over the gloves he had set aside.

Just before leaving the dressing room, a memory suddenly surfaced: Kishiar's lips had lightly touched the tip of Yuder's gloved finger, as if to say he would miss him.

Yuder hesitated for a moment, then slowly lifted his black glove. He pressed his lips to the second knuckle of the finger Kishiar had kissed and inhaled deeply.

Though he had told Kishiar not to restrain himself, ironically, Yuder had been holding back an intense heat that now surged from his fingertips and flowed unabated throughout his body.

His downcast eyes went quiet, gazing into an unknowable distance.

There was a polite double knock on the Commander's room door. It was a sound that let you know right away who the person was knocking on without any introduction. Before the calm and poised knock could sound again—a knock so much like its owner—Kishiar opened the door and pulled Yuder inside.

As Yuder's lips parted as if to call out to him, Kishiar quickly drew him into a kiss. For a moment, his body hesitated, but soon it began to respond slowly. Though they had only been apart briefly while Yuder stepped out to his quarters, the thirst for touch felt incredibly overdue.

As Yuder's head nearly touched the door, Kishiar pulled away, swallowing his regret. He looked up at Yuder, his intense eyes momentarily flickering faintly. It was an astonishingly heart-stirring sight.

"Even though you said you were just changing clothes, you've taken a bath as well. Your hair is still wet."

He decided not to mention that this sight, although frequently seen in the West, felt somewhat more special here.

"...The same could be said for you, Commander."

"I actually prepared my bathroom for you to use. I had a small hope you might indulge me."

"That's..."

Usually talkative, Yuder's lips stayed shut. Kishiar quietly observed this moment, when Yuder's pale lips twisted and their color drained away, as fascinating and precious as a mirage. It was unclear whether Yuder knew how much Kishiar enjoyed these fleeting reactions when he felt flustered.

Now, what will your response be?

"...Isn't there more than just this opportunity to use it?"

His expression seemed ignorant of how to make promises for the future, yet his words clearly implied an awareness of how they would be spending the next week.

Indeed, it was worth the expectation.

"That's true."

Smiling, Kishiar took Yuder's hand and led him down the hallway deeper into the office. The realization that this was the first time he was entering this usually solitary path with someone else struck him anew.

As they walked, as casually as if he were dancing, Kishiar lifted a slender glass from a decorative table at waist height. Twisting slightly, he placed it in Yuder's opposite hand, receiving an inscrutable look in return.

"Don't worry, it's not alcohol. I also just showered and felt thirsty, so I prepared this drink."

The beverage, a blend of tart and sweet fruit syrup mixed with cold water and adorned with a flower, shimmered in a faint golden light. Kishiar clinked his own identical glass against Yuder's and took a sip. Following suit, Yuder took a small drink and finally spoke.

"Did you manage to check on your condition with Zuckerman?"

"I did. It's not clear that the heat period has already returned. The fever is still present but hasn't escalated compared to before, and I have taken some antipyretic medicine."

"It's fortunate," Yuder had momentarily suspected that the heat of the heat period, which had vanished before his touch, might have returned. Judging by the fact that the overwhelming warmth hadn't come back yet, it seemed that wasn't the case. However, he was indeed responding faster than usual to the one next to him.

Normally, Kishiar would have suppressed his body heat with willpower at this point, but given their prior agreement, it was difficult. Kishiar changed the subject.

"Nathan will be assisting Hellem in the capital for the next week. There's a lot to prepare."

Upon hearing the detailed explanation, Yuder nodded seriously, a gesture so endearing that it involuntarily brought a smile to Kishiar's face. He had selectively erased from his memory what kind of look Nathan Zuckerman had given him when following his orders.

From the moment he mentioned that he would be spending the next week together with his assistant, the faithful knight seemed to have guessed most of it without needing further explanation. The uncertain expression he wore as he left was conspicuous.

Ever since he met Yuder a long time ago, Nathan had consistently been cautious of him. Even now, although Nathan clearly recognized that Yuder Aile was a trustworthy individual, that last iota of caution never disappeared.

Kishiar wasn't aware that Yuder himself had encouraged this caution. However, he did know that Yuder, while aware of this, had tacitly approved. Yet, that was just a tiny part of the many enigmatic facets of his assistant.

Something Kishiar had not yet figured out.

At the end of the corridor was a small space where multiple doors could be seen all at once. The bedroom used by the Commander was the furthest inside.

Almost simultaneously, the two crossed the boundary that Yuder Aile had once retreated from without encountering Kishiar beyond the door.

A sudden electric charge seemed to spark between their interlocked hands. Looking down, Yuder appeared to feel the same sensation, his eyes focused on the same spot.

How could they know this without uttering a single word?

It was a strange and mystical moment, experienced multiple times.

Their eyes met, almost simultaneously lifting to do so.

The corners of Yuder's eyes trembled as if he were angry. As soon as they stepped into the room and set down their glasses, he pulled Kishiar toward him.

Every time he felt the incredible passion emanating from his seemingly parched body, Kishiar experienced emotions so ecstatic they felt lethal.

Without a clear initiator, their lips collided. Kishiar held Yuder's waist to ensure he didn't crash into the furniture, subtly guiding him toward the bed as he shifted their direction.

Finally, their entwined bodies collapsed onto the bed, sinking into the sheets. Brushing back the disheveled black hair from his forehead and over the white sheets with his fingers, Kishiar surrendered his entire being to the one who had taken it all.

## Chapter 460

Discerning the sexual desire directed toward him had been such a frequent experience for Kishiar that it was difficult to keep count. Many nobles had looked down upon him as a foolish and dissolute scion of a soon-to-be-extinct imperial family. They treated him as if he were a perishable fruit that must be consumed before it rots away.

Of course, Kishiar was well aware that the world didn't only consist of such sticky desires, and that there was no need to be overly concerned about them. But knowing and feeling are two different things.

Therefore, it was only natural that he felt a shiver in front of the pure, gentle blaze of desire that was now directed at him.

"Ah..."

Unable to overcome the sensation building in his chest, Yuder took a ragged breath, teeth clenched. He opened his eyes, and warmth flooded the corners, as if he'd shed tears. It felt like staring at a blaze, and he couldn't help but smile.

His gaze might have looked fierce, almost angry, but it was merely because the intensity of his emotions left no room for tenderness. Kishiar sensed within those eyes a desire directed at him, unburdened by any residue or reservation.

How wondrous and lovely it was that one person could desire all of another, and that the other could reciprocate that feeling?

The young man who had flung himself into Kishiar's arms was braver than ever. He embraced Kishiar without holding back, as if shedding all previous silences and barriers, and didn't suppress the sensations surging within him.

In his joy, Kishiar indulged in the moment far longer than he had initially planned, but Yuder did not push him away. Though occasionally he'd furrow his brow in apparent confusion or hesitate and flutter his hand, afterward, he would invariably pull Kishiar close and return the embrace.

It felt like a representation of the relationship that had always existed between Yuder Aile and Kishiar La Orr.

The man who had claimed all of Kishiar was sometimes clumsy in his responses. Unlike others who were awkward because they didn't know, Yuder seemed awkward precisely because he did know.

Even now, despite appearing to understand what would happen next and how bodies would unite, he couldn't hide his discomfort and hesitation when their faces were close, engaged in intimate exchange.

When he first kissed and sucked the tip of the breast, and as he moved downward to lick the slender belly and navel, the reaction was so intense that for a moment he thought Yuder might not like it.

If Yuder hadn't immediately wrapped his arms and legs around him to pull him close, he might have actually paused for a moment.

Kishiar had suspected this before, but Yuder Aile was incredibly sensitive. For someone who could navigate life without sight by relying on other senses, it was perhaps natural that his sense of touch was also heightened. Watching Yuder gasp and press his lips against even the places he touched without sexual intent made it impossible for any thoughts to string together in his mind.

To know that beneath that seemingly pallid and emotionless face lay such a torrent of intricate and intense sensations—known to him alone—was both heartrending and endearing.

While Kishiar licked Yuder's chest to soothe his nerves, Yuder, initially hesitant, gradually grew bold and pressed his teeth into Kishiar's chest as well. When he licked Kishiar's lean, sinewy wrist, Kishiar reciprocated by running his hand down Yuder's arm. If one kissed the other's stomach, the other would also press his lips to the stomach in return.

It was no exaggeration to say that they caressed nearly every part of each other's bodies, except for the back. If Kishiar took the lead in showing something, Yuder didn't stop at merely receiving; he returned the gesture with the same, or even greater, boldness. Kishiar laughed, slightly dazed by the heat of the moment.

Could there be a more certain moment to feel that the one entangled with him was Yuder? He felt overwhelmingly alive. Every breath Yuder exhaled, every sound he held back and released, felt fresh and beautiful. The sensuality Yuder displayed evoked thoughts of nature as it must have existed in the beginning.

Before all this, Kishiar became but a small human, worshipping it.

Moving like two free animals entwined, after satiating their long-held desires for each other, Kishiar briefly lifted his head.

"Sigh..."

Brushing aside the disheveled bangs that were in his way, he looked down to find Yuder staring back at him, his face flushed but his gaze unyielding. Despite the dampness on both their skins and the sheets, he realized anew through Yuder's eyes that their desire hadn't diminished in the slightest.

Those eyes were dark like a comforting shadow, illuminating nothing but Kishiar.

When Kishiar curled his lips into a small smile, Yuder slightly twitched his eyes and parted his wet lips. Just as Kishiar was captivated by Yuder, the latter was utterly vulnerable before Kishiar's smile.

Kishiar moistened his hand with the fragrant oil placed beside the bed. Rubbing his warm, heated hand against himself, what had already been standing painfully erect became even more rigid.

Should he try pulling out and reattempting due to its size? The fleeting thought passed, and as if reading it, Yuder pulled his hand to touch his equally erect spear between his legs.

"..."

At the moment their hand and legs met, his lean body quivered. Despite the rapid, almost anguished breaths in the silence, Yuder did not let go of Kishiar's hand.

In that silence, Yuder opened his mouth, and though no sound came out, the command was clear.

'Continue.'

Don't stop.

More.

Before the words even concluded, Kishiar's finger slipped inside, disappearing between Yuder's legs. Kishiar closed his eyes, feeling the sensation of a part of his body overlapping with that of his partner's. His eyelashes trembled, fully revealing the enormous heat his body felt.

"Uh..."

"Does it hurt?"

"No... it doesn't hurt. It's just..."

The latter words were left unsaid, but their meaning was not hard to grasp. Kishiar exhaled deeply, focusing his strength on his stomach, and gently probed inside with his oil-soaked finger. He was well aware that his hands were much larger and longer than those of ordinary people. Even just a single finger could evoke sensations beyond imagination. Particularly for someone as sensitive as Yuder.

As Kishiar's finger twisted somewhere inside, Yuder closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Sigh..."

Kishiar had patiently tamed the inside, waiting for Yuder to get used to the sensation of a single finger. When Yuder's tensed knee started to relax, Kishiar inserted a second finger.

"Hmm..."

Getting used to one was one thing, but two was another challenge. However, Yuder had only frowned slightly and endured it, biting his lip. The two fingers, pressed together, had moved apart slightly and began to probe and poke inside more quickly and intensely.

A wet, squelching sound was heard between the slippery legs. It seemed Yuder had heard it too, as he opened his eyes and looked down between his legs. His mouth was slightly open, panting, and his tongue seemed to be craving something. Kishiar leaned down and kissed him again.

"Mmm... Ah... Huh, uh..."

As they began to kiss, Yuder's body had become much softer than before. As he relaxed more quickly, the fingers could also probe more boldly.

Kishiar had deliberately synchronized the movement of his tongue, which was delving into Yuder's mouth, with the movement of his fingers. At first, the sensations from above and below felt different, but as they continued, the two sensations began to merge, reducing the discomfort.

Pain and pleasure were all about perception. Kishiar hadn't wanted to cause any pain to the one he desired more than anything in the world.

Every time his tongue delved in, his fingers did the same, and when he sucked and pulled out, the fingers also gently withdrew. As they continued this rhythm, the tension in Yuder's eyes had almost disappeared. The playful movement of their tongues, taking and giving, made Kishiar happy every time it brushed against a sensitive spot.

Even when three fingers were inserted, the inside had only momentarily tightened to check the intruders but didn't push them out or become rigid.

Even though Yuder was an Omega, he fundamentally had a male body, so penetration would have been incredibly challenging. Whispering softly that he should speak up if he felt uncomfortable, Yuder had smiled faintly. A sigh had escaped him, his expression a mix of pleasure and pain.

"...I'm fine."