

Turning 141

Chapter 141

"I had no idea... that you had such grand ambitions."

"Of course you didn't. It'd be problematic if everyone knew."

"Why then, are you telling me?"

"Do you think you're just anyone? We're on the same boat now, in every sense of the word."

From Kishiar's side, where a playful smirk had formed, Nathan Zuckerman returned carrying a tray loaded with cake, bite-sized sandwiches, and tea. He interjected with his usual stoic expression.

"You told him?"

"I thought it was time."

As if he expected it, Nathan set down the tray on the table and pulled out an ordinary-looking envelope from his pocket, handing it to Kishiar.

"This message just arrived. It seems you should check it right away."

Upon opening the envelope, Kishiar read the single piece of paper inside swiftly.

"They're moving as expected."

A mysterious smile appeared on his face moments later. Silently, he laid down the letter, which he'd carefully read and put back into the envelope, in front of Yuder, who was quietly eating his cake.

"Can you guess who sent this letter?"

"No."

"It's Aishes Shand Apeto, the current heir of the Apeto Duke family."

When Kishiar visited the Apeto family, Aishes wasn't there. He often stayed alone in a different mansion because of his bad relationship with his half-brother and second-in-line heir, Lenore, who was covetously eyeing the heir's position. This was well-known, so even when a scandal broke out in the Apeto family, there were hardly any direct accusations against Aishes.

Recalling information about Aishes, who died before Yuder could see him in his previous life, Yuder asked.

"Why would he send a letter to you, Commander? Even if he does nothing, his position as heir is becoming more secure."

"It's simple. He's not content with just securing his position as heir anymore. He wants to overthrow his father and become the Duke immediately. He says he's willing to help us. As payment, he considers handing over the research results of the Elder Priest Beltrail sufficient."

"...Can we trust him?"

"Of course we can't. But we have Revlin, don't we?"

Seemingly delighted that things were moving as expected, Kishiar looked quite pleased. Seeing Kishiar's smile, Yuder absentmindedly asked a question.

"You couldn't have planned everything, even the part about Prince Revlin, from the start, could you?"

"Of course not. I wasn't particularly interested in the Apeto side, but suddenly some good cards came in. We have to use them before the timing is missed. I believe in not letting go of any opportunities that come to my hand."

Would the Apeto family, probably having a major headache right now, ever have imagined that the disappearance of a single Cavalry member on vacation in Hartan would push them into such a situation?

Even Yuder himself, who had been working for Kishiar and the Cavalry all this time, never expected that the results of his actions would turn out like this.

Feeling his heart pound heavily, Yuder exhaled softly. It was only then that he truly felt that the beautiful man before his eyes was sincerely striving to achieve a grand goal.

"When did you start all of this? Was the Cavalry also part of your plan, Commander?"

"I've had the plan for quite some time. The establishment of the Cavalry was suddenly decided when I awakened... But, well. I would have created it even if I hadn't awakened. It's a place that must exist for the stability and peace of the Empire."

After saying so, Kishiar chuckled lowly, as if lost in thought.

"Initially, I didn't anticipate the Cavalry to stabilize so quickly. I thought it would take about five years just to get started, but on reflection, you've played a huge part."

Five years. Yuder was taken aback at the fact that this was the preparation time Kishiar had initially planned after deciding to cleanse the giant Orr Empire of its corrupt elements. After the surprise, came a bitter feeling.

The memory of his previous life where he had left the world approximately two years after the Cavalry was founded came to mind.

Yuder clenched his teeth lightly and lowered his head. He spotted the letter from Aishes Shand Apeto on the table. The request to not publish or pass on Beltrail's research findings to anywhere else, but to him, was particularly lengthy, written in handwriting that could not conceal its excitement.

"The knowledge that such unforgivable deeds were committed in relation to the Blood of Blessing that has been passed down through our family for generations must not be spread elsewhere. The reason I make this bold request to your Grace, the Duke of Peletta, is solely because of that, and there is no other intention...."

Blood of Blessing.

At that moment, Yuder suddenly remembered his conversation with Beltrail and Nahan, which he had momentarily forgotten.

'It was all for the children of noble families suffering because of the 'Blood of Blessing'! Is it a crime to have researched for the children who were born to die from birth?'

'Blood of Blessing, you say. More like 'cursed blood'. If it were truly a blessing, would garbage like you resist it so fiercely? Isn't it all the result of you endlessly coveting forbidden power?'

What was the last thing Nahan had said to Beltrail?

'You're not only coveting the power of God, but now you're trying to covet the power and lives of your brothers. In the grand scheme of things, it would be right to eliminate garbage like you...'

Blood of Blessing and the power of God. A strange feeling suddenly overwhelmed him when he remembered the two unfamiliar terms Nahan had mentioned at the same time.

'Come to think of it, who does 'you guys' refer to?'

Due to the ambiguity of the words, and the fact that Beltrail was almost frantic when confronting Nahan, he had forgotten the conversation, thinking it was not a proper conversation.

"What's wrong, Yuder? Is there something strange in that letter?"

"No, just this part..."

Yuder shook off a thought that seemed to be on the tip of his tongue and pointed to the part related to Beltrail.

"The words themselves are understandable, but I find it strange that there's a necessity for such a request."

"Ah. You mean this part."

For a moment, a cold, self-mocking smile flashed across Kishiar's face, then quickly disappeared. It was an expression so unfamiliar that Yuder almost doubted his eyes.

"Well... They're desperate, too."

"Pardon?"

"It means that Revlin isn't the only one born with the Blood of Blessing in the Apeto family. Aishes, Beltrail... they're all somewhat different, but they were famous for being frail and not in good health. Do you understand?"

Upon hearing that, Yuder finally understood why Aishes had insisted on discussing only Beltrail's research, avoiding any mention of the shame of his family.

"So you intend to repeat the same mistake, even knowing that the research did not yield any meaningful results."

"No one knows what Aishes will do once he gets his hands on it. Of course, that's why I don't intend to hand it over. We will destroy everything we obtained from there once this matter is settled."

The notes and documents Beltrail had taken from the annex basement were neatly piled in a corner of the headquarters. According to Gakane, who had brought them and had a quick glance, most of the documents were research reports, and the rest were data collected from various places. Gakane mentioned that there were also writings directly from Beltrail, but there wasn't enough time to examine them thoroughly.

'Even Aishes, who seemed relatively quiet among, is like this... There's no one to be taken lightly.'

He understood very well why Kishiar wanted to confront him using Revlin.

"Have all your questions been answered?"

Immersed in thought, Yuder was playfully asked by Kishiar. Only then did Yuder come to his senses and reply.

"I don't have any more immediate questions."

"We've got a long way to go. We don't need to solve everything right away. Now, let's eat again before the cake waiting for you melts."

The cake placed in front of them was a rich chocolate cake, with golden powder sprinkled on top and a sweet scent wafting from the white cream. Yuder clenched his lips towards the cake and reluctantly picked up his fork.

'He seems to be feeding me these things for some reason... He wouldn't be misunderstanding something, would he?'

Looking up, he saw Kishiar smiling as usual. In the end, Yuder stood up only after he had eaten all the cake that had filled the large plate.

"I'll be going down now..."

"Go ahead. Oh. Remember, the special award ceremony on the Day of Blessing is coming up in three days?"

Just as Yuder was about to turn, Kishiar suddenly brought up something. The special award ceremony was effectively the last event to wrap up the harvest festival, a schedule for the entire Cavalry to participate in. Of course, he remembered it.

"Yes."

Just responding to Kishiar's comment brought back the sweetness left in his mouth. Whether Yuder tried to cover his mouth with his sleeve, Kishiar continued with a cheerful face.

"The tailored suit for the day is arriving tomorrow. No matter how busy you are, don't miss it and try it on in advance. There might be parts that are not made correctly."

'A suit?'

At the unfamiliar term, Yuder tilted his head but soon recalled the conversation.

'Ah, right. They said they would give a suit made to fit the uniform size to all members for that occasion.'

In his previous life, he had always attended any occasion in his Commander's uniform, so he had never cared about things like suits. Considering it a waste of time, he even made a new rule after he became the Commander that the members of the Cavalry could wear uniforms on occasion instead of formal wear. He knew that the nobles laughed behind his back, but he didn't find it threatening, so it was fine.

Chapter 142

The notion that formal wear was a waste of time hadn't changed, but now was not the time to dwell on such personal opinions. Yuder silently nodded.

"Understood."

"As my Assistant, you'll have slightly different adornments than the others, the Deputy Commander of each Division is also the same. I selected them myself."

"Despite being busy."

Nathan Zuckerman casually chimed in from behind. Kishiar burst into laughter and agreed, "Exactly."

"I don't mean to brag, but I have quite the reputation in the capital's social circles and among fashion designers for having good taste. You can look forward to it."

Yuder had never looked forward to a party in his life, and the day he would revel in wearing formal wear probably wouldn't come, but what could he say in the face of Kishiar's jovial smile?

"...Yes."

Quietly responding, Yuder went down to his quarters. The small room, showing almost no sign of habitation except for a few uniforms and outfits hanging up, remained immaculately cleaned even in his absence.

As he took off his coat and lay on the bed, fatigue that had been lingering seemed to envelop his entire body. With a sigh, Yuder removed his right glove.

At first glance, his hand looked clean, but there was a small purplish spot on the back of his right hand. Despite receiving treatment, both the back and the inside of his hand still held a deep heat and throbbed irritatingly. He hadn't told Kishiar, but Yuder knew that its condition was slightly different from when the spot first appeared.

'Initially, after treatment, it would fully heal. But ever since it extended to my shoulder, even after treatment, some degree of pain and numbness remains like a residual mark.'

Of course, this lingering sensation would disappear over time, but the problem was that it seemed to last longer each time he had treatment. It felt as if an abscess was forming deep within, slowly accumulating, even though it looked perfectly fine on the outside.

'Since divine power alone couldn't heal it completely, it can't be helped.'

What more was needed to cure this strange spot? He felt he might have to see Enon again soon.

Yuder clenched and unclenched his fist a few times and then closed his eyes. Initially, he had planned to immediately go underground, meet the mages, and learn about the progress of their research, but his body felt so heavy that getting up was a struggle. It was probably due to the aftereffects of the treatment.

However, a sudden thought brushed through his mind, forcing his heavy eyelids to snap open.

'...Could this be a sign that my second gender manifestation is near?'

Lowering the hand that was covering his face, Yuder quickly sat up. He retrospectively scrutinized his body condition. The power that filled his body, the serene state of his mana pool, the lack of even a slight fever, there was nothing different from normal. There were no abnormalities.

Not yet.

Only after he reassured himself several times did the unpleasant sensations and memories that were whirling around his mind gradually disappear.

'Right. It's no surprise I'm being oversensitive after meeting so many alphas in heat.'

Yuder took another deep breath, releasing it slowly. He promised himself he must prepare for the second gender manifestation as quickly as possible. The desire to sleep vanished almost instantly, yet his body still felt heavy, suggesting it might be better to rest a little longer before heading out.

'I'm sorry.'

A heavy voice echoed in his mind.

'It's not your fault. After all, I was the one who created this situation, it's only fair to blame me.'

A memory that he had repeatedly reflected upon.

'I don't exactly know what has happened to us...'

A nightmare he had tried to suppress for a long time, only to repeatedly fail.

.

.

.

"Yuder! Didn't you hear me?"

Yuder shook the lingering voice from his mind and looked blankly downward. Kanna, who had her box of formal clothes tucked under her arm, was offering him another box, her face full of suspicion.

“This is yours.”

“Hmm. Thanks.”

Yuder awkwardly accepted the box Kanna held out. They were in the lounge to receive their formal clothes for the upcoming party. Everywhere, members of their group were busily unboxing and inspecting their formal attire, filling the room with noise and excitement. Seeing their laughter full of excitement, Yuder felt a moment of clarity.

“You’ve been absent-minded since this morning. Are you really not ill?”

“No, I’m not.”

“But you ate less than usual. I mean, you're the person who recently ate more than ten pieces of bread, but today you only had three. Couldn't sleep well?”

“No, that’s not it either.”

When had she started watching him eat? Yuder firmly shook his head, but Kanna's face remained a mix of worry and doubt.

“Even so....”

“Kanna! Did you find your clothes? We need to go try them on.”

Kanna, whose words had trailed off, saw Ever calling from afar. She patted Yuder’s back lightly and said her farewells.

“I should go now. I heard from those who checked earlier that there might be issues with the stitching on the sleeves, so make sure to inspect that part.”

“Alright.”

Her eyes, transparent as glass, took in Yuder's complexion for a brief yet definitive moment.

“You’re really alright?”

Yuder finally let out a long sigh, slightly lifting the corners of his mouth.

“I’m fine.”

“Alright. If you want to change your schedule for today's event, I can take over for you. Don’t hesitate to tell me.”

Seeing her eyes filled with the resolve to help Yuder, no matter what, made him feel somewhat guilty for his recent disarray. Yuder nodded and quietly watched her rush off to join her friends.

The noise around him and the happy atmosphere felt strangely distant, as if he was enveloped in an invisible barrier of air. This peculiar feeling had been dampening his mood since the morning.

‘The reason... must be the dream I had last night.’

Yuder had been tormented by nightmares the previous night. He remembered little, but one dream lingered, resurfacing whenever he tried to forget it, giving him a headache.

It was a dream related to the events that happened after the second gender manifestation in his previous life.

Perhaps it was the worry that had occupied his mind just before sleep that had brought on such a dream, but knowing the cause didn't make it any less bitter.

Every time Yuder remembered that era filled with chaos, he always felt an uncomfortable sensation, as if something was stuck in his throat.

It was a thing of the past, yet also an event that had yet to occur. Despite his unwavering belief that it should never be repeated, he couldn't understand why he felt so complicated, and it irritated him. Yuder lightly brushed his furrowed brow with his hand, gripping the box containing his ceremonial attire.

"Yuder!" "Yuder!"

The ones who stopped him as he was about to head to his quarters alone were Devran and Jimmy. The pair, who had become quite close since the Hartan incident and were often seen together, had already changed into their white ceremonial clothes instead of their usual black uniforms.

"Finally found you. Where were you heading?"

"Back to my quarters to check the ceremonial clothes."

"Why bother going all the way back? There's a changing room nearby."

Devran laughed and pointed to a small room connected to the lounge.

"He's right. You should just change here. I can check if anything's wrong with your attire. My mom used to work in costume design, I'm good at that stuff."

Given such a persuasive argument, Yuder found himself standing in front of the small room, unable to refuse. There were a few more rooms that the Cavalry members were using as changing rooms besides the one Yuder was standing in front of, but one was particularly crowded. Upon noticing Yuder's gaze, Devran and Jimmy shared a glance, grinning.

"Who's inside that room?"

"Just guess."

"Gakane."

"He's got the best face, doesn't he? They're all gawking because they want to get a look."

Yuder was unable to understand how Gakane's handsome appearance was relevant to the situation from that explanation alone. However, the moment Gakane, in his white ceremonial clothes, revealed his face from inside the room, the crowd erupted into cheers and laughter.

"He does look good!"

"You might not be on the Commander's level, but you won't kneel before them, that's for sure!"

"Great. Let's put this guy in the front and give the nobles a run for their money."

"..."

In the midst of the cheers surrounding him, Gakane gave a hollow laugh. Seeing this, Yuder felt a slight pang of sympathy, acknowledging that being handsome wasn't as easy as it seemed. He then stepped into an adjacent empty room. The ceremonial clothes he took out of the paper box were made of pearlescent white fabric, just like the other Cavalry members.

However, unlike the other members' clothes with silver buttons and light blue thread, his clothes were adorned with golden buttons from the sleeves to the chest and belly. Black threads were used generously on the sleeves and hem, making the outfit look heavier and more splendid.

He wondered how much budget Kishiar had spent to make these 300 plus ceremonial attires. He quickly put aside the dizzying thought about the money and took off his uniform, changing into the ceremonial clothes.

"He's out."

"You came out quickly...whoa."

Devran and Jimmy, who had been waiting for Yuder, Gakane, who seemed to have known where he was and joined them with a tired face, and a few Cavalry members who were waiting for their turn to change, all widened their eyes the moment they saw him.

"..."

"Yuder, your formal attire... its color is a bit different from ours?"

The first to break the silence was Devran. Yuder nodded as he adjusted the sleeves and the collar of his formal attire.

"The Commander said that he had made a different design for the Deputy Commanders and the assistant."

"Really? I saw Steiber in it earlier but somehow it felt different....."

"Yuder, when you wear that outfit, you completely look like... ah, a highly esteemed person, just like the Commander!"

While Devran murmured as if looking at a stranger, Jimmy, unable to close his gaping mouth, gasped and cried out. Yuder looked down at the clothes he was wearing and opened his mouth quietly.

"It seems that you're saying that simply because the color of this attire is similar to the Commander's uniform."

"No, it's true! It is so! You look like such a high-ranking noble! Very cool! You look handsome!"

"Hmm... thank you, Jimmy."

The surroundings burst into laughter at the sight of the boy shaking his hand high above his head and trying hard to express his feelings. At the same time, the previously frozen, quiet atmosphere slowly thawed.

"Yuder, have you ever worn formal attire like this before?"

"No, I haven't. Why?"

"You look quite comfortable, as if you've worn it a lot."

Gakane, who had approached, picked off a piece of thread from Yuder's back, which Yuder had not noticed, and smiled.

"You looked good in the black uniform, but you also really suit white. You look elegant."

"You too."

The best response to a casual comment is to always turn it back to the speaker. It was one of the most useful rhetoric tips Kishiar from his previous life had taught Yuder.

At Yuder's response, Gakane scratched his head.

"Haha. It's natural for me to look comfortable since I've worn it a lot. Although this splendid formal attire is my first time."

"You've worn it a lot? Why?"

Unthinkingly questioning, Yuder realized Gakane's background and stopped his hand that was examining his clothes.

"Ah, you must have had quite a few occasions to attend parties before."

"No, it's not just that."

In Gakane's eyes, looking down at his formal attire, a bitter but somewhat refreshing color surfaced.

"The occasions when I had to wear formal attire were more often for difficult times than for attending parties. Like, for example, duels....."

"Yuder. I've checked all the way down to the hem of your trousers, and everything's fine."

At that moment, Jimmy, who had been checking the clothes with him, interrupted, so Yuder couldn't hear the rest of Gakane's words.

"Thank you."

"Hey, Yuder. I heard that there's an animated armor knight created by Archmage Luma's magic in the hall of Deluma Palace, where the party is held. I'm really curious, do you think I'll be able to see it?"

"Is there something like that? That Archmage fellow must have had a lot of free time. There's already a lot named after that fellow throughout the capital, he seems to have made everything."

Devran's response was exactly the same as Yuder's thought when he saw the animated armor knight in Deluma Palace in his previous life, causing an unwitting faint smile to appear on his face.

"If you're lucky, you might be able to see it."

The fact that all the festival events had gone without a hitch was felt through Jimmy's bright face. There was still a mountain of work to be done in the future, but that in itself was truly fortunate.

"Good day, Mr. Yulman, Mr. Pelgin."

"Oh. You've come despite being busy."

After finishing his fitting for the formal attire, Yuder went straight down to the basement to meet with the mages. In the meantime, they had managed to cast more wards, and the atmosphere in the basement was not as heavy as before.

"How is it? Our 24-layered defense line. The pressure is completely gone now, isn't it?"

Thais Yulman, standing among the massive defensive magic circles shining in various colors from the high ceiling to the walls and the floor, smiled with a content face. His disciple, Alik Pelgin, standing next to him, was extremely gaunt in contrast to his master, but he didn't hide his pleasure at seeing Yuder.

"You've arrived. The magic stones and ingredients that the Duke of Peletta...no, the Commander sent were really helpful. I never dreamed that you would bring us a cart full of magic stones."

From the look of new furniture and living facilities around them that he hadn't seen before, it seemed Kishiar had taken quite a bit of care.

Due to receiving more magic stones than he expected, Alik prattled on about how he was able to enhance the defense line from the original 15 layers to 24, all while serving Yuder tea. It was the Pearl Tower's special research flower tea, which he had also drunk previously.

"Have some. I added something that's very good for waking up."

"How is the research progressing?"

When Yuder asked while sipping his tea, Alik smiled and pointed at the Red Stone located not far away. It was still in a transparent box. The only thing that had changed from before was a small white circle drawn around it.

"Do you see the circle over there?"

"Yes."

"That means the power of our defense line reaches up to there. The power of the Red Stone cannot radiate beyond that white circle. Even a weak mage like me can approach it that far."

"That's impressive."

"Isn't it? There aren't many mages who can cast a defense line of this level across the entire continent."

At Yuder's compliment, Alik looked proud. Following him, Thais Yulman also added his words.

"You shouldn't feed into his arrogance. Even though he's my disciple, he doesn't know modesty and that's a problem. If I had done it alone, I could have done it faster, but he drew the circle wrong three times..."

"Oh, Master. Didn't you see me working through several nights to complete that? It's a thankless job. Can't I be happy with this much praise?"

"Tsk, tsk. Go and prepare more materials. You look like you're still half-asleep."

At his master's words, Alik's face fell as he quickly drank his tea and got up from his seat. Thais clicked his tongue a few more times towards his dejected disciple's back as if to make him hear, then turned his head towards Yuder.

"We've also received all three medium materials we requested a few days ago, in addition to the magic stones. Although the quantity was very small because you had to find them quickly, I didn't expect you to send them so soon. Honestly, I was surprised."

"So, are you now making the medium?"

"No. First, I tested how compatible those are with the power of the Red Stone. The fairy dust was useless, but the ancient dragon's heart and Eucalractus seemed to have a decent compatibility. I need to test a bit more, but I think the dragon's heart might be better."

"I see. Then I will request the Commander to procure more of the dragon's heart."

"Indeed, one word leads to knowing two. Thank you."

Thais Yulman stroked his long beard and grinned.

"My apprentice is busily crafting a mold now that we have enough ingredients prepared. As soon as the medium is completed, I plan to conduct an experiment with you and Kanna to infuse it with the power of this stone. Can you help when the time comes?"

"Of course."

"That's reassuring."

After saying this, Thais seemed to remember something and said, "Speaking of which..."

"The festival period is ending soon, right? At the end, isn't there always a big party at the... Deluma Palace?"

"Yes."

"I should have been invited to attend, but I really don't want to go. Why would I leave such exciting research to attend a boring event? The thought of those Pearl Tower folks and other mages makes my head hurt. So, what I'm saying is... this time, can we just exclude me and make that apprentice of mine go with you?"

When Yuder maintained a momentary silence in response to the blunt request of the old mage, Thais snickered, covered his mouth, and lowered his voice.

"I'll feign illness suddenly, and the rest can be handled by that lad. Almost no one knows we're here anyway, so there's no need to worry. Moreover, wouldn't you need someone to guard this place from your side?"

"I'd have to speak with the Commander, but... I believe they will agree with your request."

"I thought so? Hehe."

The image of Alik's future, dragged to a bothersome party in place of his Master, brought out a twinge of sympathy in Yuder. But having someone to guard the basement while everyone was away was also necessary, so Thais's suggestion was welcome.

It seemed like Kishiar planned to station the Peletta Knights, led by Nathan Zuckerman, at the residence to guard Revlin, his lover Dandenion, the Awakeners from Apeto House, and the Red Stone in the basement, but Yuder felt that this alone was insufficient.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Swordmaster Nathan Zuckerman, but considering the Star of Nagran, home to an illusionist and a teleporter, he believed one could never be too vigilant.

Yuder expressed his concerns to Thais Yulman briefly.

"There were a few incidents recently, so the possibility of intruders is high. I would appreciate if you could be more cautious about security on that day."

"Don't worry. I can't use attribute magic like the others, but I have other methods. As long as I'm here, this place will be safe, no matter who comes! You can rest easy."

Thais Yulman chuckled and assured the safety of the basement. Yuder also cracked a small smile. With this, the fate of Thais's apprentice Alik Pelgin was also determined.

"I look forward to your cooperation in the future. If you need anything else while conducting your research, please don't hesitate to let me know."

"Ah. Speaking of things I need, something just came to mind."

Suddenly, Thais Yulman's eyes filled with curiosity as he leaned in closer.

Chapter 144

"I've heard that you've gathered evidence of the horrifying experiments carried out in the Duke of Apeto's mansion. Is that true?"

"Who did you hear that from?"

At Yuder's question, the elderly mage simply laughed.

"Hehe. I have ears too. If that's true, could you perhaps give me a chance to look at it?"

"That can't be. The experiment is..."

Interrupting the sentence, Thais Yulman raised both of his hands and whispered in an even quieter voice.

"I have no impure intentions. I'm not interested in the purpose or the results of the experiment. However, if there are parts recorded in your investigation of the Awakeners' power, I thought that I

might learn something more when examining the power of the Red Stone. That's all I want to verify. Is that too difficult?"

At the statement of wanting to find the correlation between the power of the Awakeners and the Red Stone, Yuder momentarily closed his mouth.

The fact that the Awakeners started to appear due to the aftermath of the power that burst out when the Red Stone fell was indisputable. So, he understood why he would say that.

'Of course, the Elder Priest Beltrail probably didn't conduct such a useful study...'

After the festival ended, the month that the Emperor had promised was nearing its end. Even if they couldn't discover everything about the Red Stone in that time, they had to find out at least some information about the power within it, in order to ask for more time, or perhaps to participate in the follow-up research.

Noticing Yuder's hesitation, the Elder Mage swiftly added a few more words.

"While my disciple was casting the protective circle, I wasn't just idling around. I have writings, albeit incomplete, that I've been recording while examining the correlation between magic and the power of the Red Stone. If necessary, I can give it to you now. Would you show it to the Duke? It might help when making a decision."

Sighing towards the Elder Mage who was eagerly awaiting an answer, he opened his mouth again.

"I don't think there will be anything you want among the things brought from Apeto. But... I'll bring it up to the Commander."

"Good, good. Now, take this."

Thais, with a grin, handed a few bundles of rolled up papers that were stacked near the table to Yuder. Yuder accepted them and stood up. Not long after he started to move, Alik ran after him and greeted him.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Yes. The tea was good."

"It's my pleasure. Seeing that you look much better than when you arrived here, I am glad."

"...Was my complexion that bad?"

Yuder asked, remembering Kanna who was worried about his complexion before he came down here. Then, Alik made a fuss as if he hadn't known.

"Oh, you didn't know? People who are sleep-deprived and tired usually have swollen eyes and a pale complexion. If left alone, it's likely to develop into a headache, so I intentionally put herbs that wake you up and clear your mind in the tea. It has a bit of an analgesic effect too."

Thinking about it, since waking up from a nightmare, his previously heavy head seemed to have lightened a bit. Yuder sincerely thanked him.

"Thank you. You seem to know quite a lot about this."

"Ha-ha. It's nothing, really. My Master dislikes visiting the shrine yet is quite a hypochondriac, so I've inevitably gained some knowledge in this area."

"Alik! Cut the pointless chatter."

Startled by Thais' sharp rebuke, Alik quickly closed his mouth. Yuder contemplated for a moment before addressing Alik with a question.

"Mr. Pelgin, may I ask you something?"

"There's no need to be so formal. Just call me casually. We'll be seeing each other regularly, and all the formality could get uncomfortable. In return, may I address you simply as Yuder?"

"Understood... Alik."

As Yuder called his name, Alik responded, "Great. What's your question?"

"Alik, you're a mage, so... if you happen to know someone who sells magic tools useful for defense, could you recommend them?"

"Defense tools? Does someone around need it?"

Alik seemed not to consider that Yuder himself might be the one in need of defensive magic tools. Since the reason for needing such tools—the manifestation of his second gender—was hard to explain to others, Yuder chose not to correct Alik's misunderstanding.

"Yes."

"Hmm. I do have a few single-use items..."

"Single-use?"

"Before I came here with my Master, I asked a friend to make them for me because I was worried. They're tools that create a shield and provide invisibility for a certain period. However, compared to regular items, their duration and power are somewhat limited."

"That sounds more than sufficient. Would you be willing to sell them to me?"

"Why would you want to buy it? I've received a lot of help from you, so I'll just give them to you."

Alik gave a straightforward response and ran off to where his belongings were. After a while, he returned with a small bracelet made of tiny black stones.

"The usage is simple. If you crush one of these strung stones, it activates a shield once. It should protect the wearer from moderate attacks for a few minutes."

The bracelet was very crudely made. It didn't look like a magical tool at all, but Yuder thought this made it even more suited to his purpose.

"So I can use it five times since there are five stones?"

"That's right. These are fragile, so they can break with just a little force. Be careful."

"Thank you."

Yuder gratefully thanked Alik, resolving to repay him for this favor whenever possible. Magic tools were incredibly expensive, and finding a proper maker was challenging. He had been anticipating a significant expense, so he was relieved at how things turned out.

'It's a blessing that the mages are staying here after all.'

Upon leaving the basement, Yuder immediately strapped the bracelet to the inside of his wrist. Hidden by his uniform sleeve, no one else would notice its presence.

That evening, Yuder finally went to meet the two Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, accompanied by Kanna. Even though they had been awake for several hours, their meeting was delayed because they had expressed their wish to meet the Cavalry's person in charge before Yuder sought them out.

Two Cavalry members, who had been stationed in front of the room where the Awakeners were staying, looked up as Yuder and Kanna approached. They quickly recognized them and offered a salute.

"Ah, have you finally arrived? Does this mean we don't need to guard anymore? We were so bored without anything to do."

"No, just stay a little longer until we leave."

Upon hearing Yuder's request, the guards agreed without a hint of displeasure and sat back down.

"How are the people inside? They didn't make any trouble, did they?"

"No, they've been quiet even during meals. They sleep so much that it's suspicious."

"I see. Please open the door."

While they waited for the door, locked from the outside with three padlocks, to open, Kanna took a small breath beside Yuder.

"Phew. So it begins."

"Kanna, if you're nervous..."

"No, I'm not nervous at all. Trust me, Yuder. I'll show you the result of all my hard training today."

Kanna was not scared at all, even when she heard she would be meeting with the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran and would be extracting information from them. On the contrary, she seemed exhilarated at the prospect of finally demonstrating to Yuder the fruits of her training.

"The door is open. You may enter."

The two of them stepped through the open door. The interior was not much different from the other soldiers' quarters. The two men, who had been sitting side by side on the bed, sprang to their feet in surprise when they saw Yuder.

"We told you to bring someone important... "

"And so I did."

At Yuder's curt reply, the two men exchanged a look.

"Are you the most important person here? We heard that the highest-ranking person is the Commander..."

"I'm the Commander's assistant."

"What's an assistant?"

"I don't know either."

"It means someone who works at the Commander's side like a right hand."

As Kanna explained to the two bewildered men, their gaze shifted to her.

"And you... who are you?"

"I am the Deputy Commander."

Strictly speaking, she was one of several Deputy Commanders, but there was no need to go into that detail. Thankfully, they seemed satisfied and sat back down.

"So why did you ask to see someone important?"

"Well... you guys captured us, right? But you haven't beaten or tortured us yet, even fed us... so we wanted to ask when you were planning to lock us up and start torturing us..."

He seemed uncertain even as he was speaking, but one of the men managed to finish his sentence.

'Did these guys never receive any training on what to do in situations like this?'

Yuder bit his lip as he looked at the faces of the men who were much more naive than expected. They had fought well, but without their weapons, they were no different from the naive young men one might encounter in a rural area.

Kanna also had a strange look on her face, perhaps sharing his thoughts.

"First of all, I didn't capture you guys."

"What, then?"

"After I knocked you two unconscious, your comrades came."

"Nahan and Hosanna?!"

"Yes, them. But they didn't try to rescue you and just disappeared, so we brought you in because it would be strange to just leave you there. So technically, we didn't capture you."

Chapter 145

It wasn't a lie. The fact that Nahan had indeed disappeared with Hosanna without even attempting to save the two men was undeniable.

The two men stared at each other, their faces reflecting a brief moment of shocked dismay. They seemed at a loss for words, as the response they received was entirely different from what they had anticipated. After a pause, one of the men managed to utter a few words. Unlike before, his tone was hushed and respectful.

"So, you mean to say... Nahan and Hosanna... really left us behind?"

"They did mention going back first and saving you later."

"Lies!"

Unable to contain his anger, the second man interjected loudly, stomping his foot. Yuder calmly responded to their outrage.

"Do you think I'm lying? If you want, I can recite the exact conversation we had back then."

"No way. That's impossible. Hosanna...!"

"Enough, Doyle. Calm down."

The man who had initially spoken in a respectful tone lightly tapped the shoulder of his enraged friend, murmuring quietly.

"We already knew it was hard to trust Nahan, being a tricky foreigner from the south. Even though Hosanna seems kind, he always bows down to his words."

"So, Gayle, are you saying that you believe this stranger's words?"

"You're angry because you believe it too."

As Doyle shut his mouth with a slightly shocked expression, the man referred to as Gayle let out a deep sigh.

"What can we do? We lost and got captured. Since we've been fed, we might as well accept it."

"..."

"Excuse me, are you two brothers?"

The one naturally striking up a conversation with the disheartened men was Kanna.

"Gayle and Doyle. Your names are similar, and you look alike. Where are you from? Judging by your accent, the West, correct?"

In truth, Kanna had already obtained preliminary information from the weapons that Gayle and Doyle had been carrying before she arrived here. Although the information was scant, as the weapons seemed to have been given to them not too long ago, she was able to discern their names, place of origin, and their relationship.

'Impressive how she can so calmly ask about information she already knows. Her experience is certainly showing.'

While Yuder internally admired her, Gayle and Doyle, oblivious to Kanna's prior knowledge, responded to her question.

"Correct. We're brothers. I'm the elder, Gayle, and Doyle's my younger brother. We did live in the West, indeed..."

"Yuder mentioned you both possess the same ability? That's quite rare. When did you awaken it? How have you been training?"

"Um... Is it really that uncommon...? We're not sure... we've awakened less than a year ago..."

Among the barrage of rapid-fire questions, not a single one directly mentioned the Star of Nagran. Seemingly under the impression that it was fine to answer these personal questions, the stunned brothers slowly began to reply.

From a step back, Yuder observed as Kanna skillfully altered the atmosphere, blending the information she already knew with the newly learned facts, encouraging the brothers to naturally provide the needed details.

Gayle and Doyle, originally shepherd brothers from a rural area in the West, had been orphans. One day, they had bravely rushed to protect their flock from a beast with nothing but their staffs, and in doing so, they awakened the same ability simultaneously.

Afterward, they recounted how they were driven from their community because they possessed dangerous abilities. Starving and wandering aimlessly, they chanced upon a village where many Awakeners resided. It seemed this place was where the Star of Nagran gathered.

Kanna delicately shifted the conversation when the brothers did not wish to reveal the exact location of the village and who resided there.

"Earlier you mentioned Nahan and Hosanna, what's their relationship?"

"We don't really know. They were there before us. But since Hosanna always addresses Nahan as 'young master', we assume Hosanna used to be Nahan's servant."

Gayle's response was followed by Doyle's grumble.

"I've heard that Nahan was a young noble in the South, but he had a near-death experience and came all the way here... I'm not sure if it's true. Anyway, I don't like Nahan. He's not just scary because of his scar, but his eyes are frightening."

"Right. Hosanna is so kind. Honestly, if it wasn't for his request, we wouldn't have come. Nahan never brings any food, yet always expects us to feed him."

"I bet Hosanna wanted to save us. But that guy must have said just let's go. Typical."

Despite their fondness for Hosanna, Gayle and Doyle didn't hold back in criticizing Nahan. Even though they hadn't witnessed the events themselves, Yuder surmised from their deductions that Nahan was severely lacking in credibility.

"Could someone else not have come? Why did Hosanna only ask you two?"

"Well, we're pretty strong. And the followers who are loyal to Nahan are still learning from 'him'..."

"Him?"

"..."

A look of sudden regret crossed the brothers' faces, who until then had been answering fluently.

"Ah, well, this is all lies. We didn't say anything!"

'Seeing them react like that, it seems that any matter related to 'him' is top secret?'

Yuder wanted to probe further, but Kanna judged it wasn't the right time to dig deeper and smoothly redirected the conversation with a smile.

"Understood. Then..."

It took considerably longer for the information extraction disguised as conversation to end. They still didn't know the objective of the Star of Nagran, or who 'he' was, but they had gained quite a lot of auxiliary information.

"The Star of Nagran seems to be a unique organization. Just from what the brothers said, it seems like a peaceful village created by the oppressed Awakeners, but it's not just that when it comes to Nahan. What do you think, Yuder?"

Kanna, having gathered clothes for them to change into, even collecting the garments worn by the brothers Gayle and Doyle, stepped outside and asked with a serious face.

"There's a high possibility that the organization is divided into two factions internally."

"Thought so? So Gayle and Doyle would be considered the moderate faction, and Nahan, the hardliner. Their relationship seems worse than expected. And from their conversation, it seems there are quite a few from the Southern region in the organization....."

The ability to quickly extract this much information from a disjointed conversation was something only Kanna could achieve. Yuder looked at Kanna, lost in thought with a slight frown, and sincerely thanked her.

"I'm so grateful you came with me."

"Isn't it? I told you to trust only me. Though the information I gleaned from the sword was limited, it was useful for our conversation."

With a confident pat on her shoulder, Kanna's expression quickly turned serious as she looked down at the worn clothes in her hand.

"But we haven't found out the most important thing yet, so next time we'll definitely figure it out. Until then, I have to hope that these clothes provide more readable information than the sword."

Upon hearing this, Kanna shared how she had continuously trained with the Sun God's scriptures, awake or asleep, and her ability to selectively read information had improved remarkably.

"My ability to read objects that have left my hand is still developing slowly, but being able to read the information in the scriptures much more carefully has made my senses much sharper when conversing with others."

"Your senses have sharpened?"

"Yes. How should I put it? I can feel others' emotions, or vaguely what they're thinking, through my skin."

Kanna smiled sheepishly, admitting that she hadn't told the others for fear of making them uncomfortable with her, but it was a relief to be able to tell Yuder. Yuder nodded, thinking that her recent concern for him was likely due to her power's development.

"Development is good, but if your ability affects your mind too much, it could harm your health. If you ever struggle or find it difficult related to your ability, come to me immediately."

"Of course. Don't worry about me and take better care of yourself, Yuder. You can't show up to the upcoming party looking as pale as you did this morning."

With an unwavering reply, Kanna then disappeared in the direction of her quarters.

'This morning... that reminds me of the dream I had last night.'

Yuder exhaled a small sigh, his brow furrowed. His mood had dipped slightly as the voice he'd finally pushed to the back of his memory resurfaced.

At last, the day that would conclude the harvest festival season had arrived.

The Cavalry, persistent till the end, defended their location from a variety of intricate incidents that happened upon them by chance and grasped a reputation incomparably larger than before. Though still not at the level of the prestigious Imperial Knights or Imperial Mages, the Cavalry's feats had left quite an impression on envoys from all over the continent, marking a successful start.

Dressed in a white formal suit, Yuder passed by the team members gathered in groups here and there, unable to hide their excitement, and ascended the upper floor stairs. Wearing the soft white suit, which wrapped his arms and legs too gently compared to his familiar and comfortable black uniform, gave him an odd sensation.

'I hope my attendance at such noisy parties ends this year.'

"Commander, it's Yuder Aile. I'm coming in."

Upon reaching the top floor, Yuder knocked on the door, counted to three silently, then pulled the handle.

"Oh, you're here."

Kishiar, standing by the sunlit window, turned his head with a smiling face. Like Yuder, he was also properly dressed in a formal suit for the party today.

However, unlike the team members' formal attire made entirely of white fabric, from outerwear to pants, his outfit was rather striking. His underclothes and trousers were white, but his overcoat bore a striking red color resembling his irises, and a traditional gold cape draped over his shoulders gave off an overwhelmingly powerful impression without a gap.

The man, who was conspicuous even when only wearing his usual white commander's uniform, had deliberately dressed in multiple layers of formal attire with gems, and it was to the extent that even the word 'splendid' lost its shine in front of him.

Chapter 146

"Will you just keep standing there?"

It was only after hearing Kishiar's voice that Yuder realized he was still standing in the same spot, the door yet to be closed.

"Ah, yes. I apologize."

"There's no need for apologies. Those who see this useless opulence for the first time often react similarly."

Kishiar smiled, adjusting his diamond-encrusted belt and pulling the end of his gloves to straighten his outfit. His expression was as relaxed as ever, but Yuder could feel a keen, predatory tension from the tips of his fingers.

"Given that you call it 'useless opulence,' it seems you're not fond of the formal attire."

"I don't like it."

"Why not?"

"Do you see this?"

With that, Kishiar held up a gloved hand, displaying it for emphasis. The back of the glove was studded with jewel fragments carved into ancient symbols representing eternal blessings.

"This glove alone is valuable enough to feed a small region in the frontier for a few months. But the truth is, it doesn't need to be this expensive. It doesn't have any special features, and the jewels used aren't particularly valuable."

He lowered his gaze toward Yuder, who was staring at the glove.

"Then why is this glove so expensive? Want to guess?"

"...I heard that items used by the imperial family are only made in designated places..."

"Exactly. The only reason it's so expensive is because it came from a family of glove makers favored by the fifth Emperor."

Kishiar waved his gloved hand as if to emphasize his point, then dropped it.

"At the time, it started from a very good intention. Until then, the Emperor had proclaimed that he would begin buying items made by the people instead of those made directly in the imperial palace. But now, even that has become another tradition, and the initial purpose of supporting poor but skilled individuals has completely disappeared."

The family of glove makers chosen by the fifth Emperor's favor grew wealthy. In order to retain the wealth and prestige gained from making items for the imperial family, they began to exert their efforts.

The original intent vanished. Those who questioned why only they could provide gloves for the imperial attire gradually disappeared. As the tradition of buying gloves only from the designated place solidified, the makers began to put an even higher price tag on the gloves sent to the palace.

In comparison to the total budget used in the palace, the price was not that substantial. The palace administrators simply saw it as a normal tradition, gladly accepting the sweet bribes and letters sent by the makers. Thus, the transaction continued from generation to generation, leading to the present situation.

Yuder listened attentively to Kishiar, who was speaking casually about things he hadn't known before.

"The gloves aren't the only issue. It's the same from head to toe. Once you attach the tag of 'tradition,' no matter what problems arise, they become unchangeable, leading to no change or progress. It's a sickness of the Empire."

"Is it possible to change it now?"

At Yuder's cautious question, Kishiar softly lit up his eyes and smiled.

"Of course, it will be changed. In fact, His Majesty the Emperor had always wished to change this aspect, but it was impossible this time. However, next time..."

The rest of the sentence, omitted with a smile, was not heard but could be guessed. Yuder recalled the face of Emperor Keilusa, who had cleverly and indirectly shown support every time Kishiar and the Cavalry were about to stir something up.

The scholarly Emperor, who had been working alone in a small palace located in the remotest corner, leaving many other palaces empty, held such thoughts. It was surprisingly astonishing.

'I died too early in my previous life, so I knew nothing... Both brothers had great dreams.'

"That aside."

With a change in his expression, Kishiar, shifting his gaze, opened his mouth while glancing at the formal attire Yuder was wearing. A mischievous mood rose above his red eyes.

"As expected, it suits you well."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your formal attire. It's a good example that it can look more valuable than anything else if the hanger is good, even if it's made without excessive luxury."

Yuder looked down at the formal attire he was wearing. He had never thought about whether the attire he was wearing before he came here was luxurious or not, but standing in front of Kishiar, the difference was clearly visible. The formal attire he was wearing used good-looking fabric and had gold buttons, but no jewels were used, and the shape was much simpler.

'Looking back, the formal attire of the nobles who attended the parties in my previous life... it seems like there were no clothes without jewels.'

"Did you purposely make it like this?"

"Actually, legally, that's more correct. The law forbids excessive luxury of those leading the Empire. It's a mere formality now, though."

After saying that, Kishiar tilted his head and chuckled.

"...And actually, it also suits my taste."

"Excuse me?"

"I told you. I have a certain taste in these things. Since the result came out quite to my liking, I expect a new trend in formal attire to spread across the continent after today."

Kishiar, who nodded his head in satisfaction, came closer, stretched out his hand to the end of the belt around Yuder's waist.

"You seem to do everything well, but this is a bit clumsy. If you tie it like this, the knot will soon come undone."

"I'll tie it again."

"No need. Watch how I tie it so it won't come loose."

The duke was serving as a valet, attending to another man's clothes. It would have caused a stir if someone had seen, but it was only Kishiar and Yuder here.

Yuder felt slightly dizzy watching Kishiar, who bent his waist in front of him and started to pull and tie the strap. He thought he knew better than anyone that Kishiar was a man whose actions were hard to predict, but watching him tie his waistband in flashy formal attire was a different issue.

Even though he was wearing thick formal attire, the sensation of fingers touching too closely was felt through his waist, and it was difficult to maintain his usual calmness. The scent of the perfume emanating from Kishiar's golden hair was too strong, and above all...

'Anyway, this position is...'

"Are you watching? Turn this part around like this and tie the knot, then it won't come loose."

"I get it. I'll do it now... Ugh."

Yuder, who was trying to hastily step back, let out an involuntary choked sound due to the pressure he felt as the knot was tightly pulled.

"Ah, my apologies. Why are you moving about? You should stay still when I'm tying your belt."

He was the cause of this situation and yet he was making such a remark. Unable to contain his irritation, Yuder finally retorted.

"Commander, I am not a child."

"Of course you're not. You think I don't know your age?"

"I mean, I am capable of tying my own belt."

"It's not just about tying it, is it? There, all done."

Kishiar, who stepped back after tying the last knot, stroked his chin with a satisfied look, as if admiring his work.

"As expected. The previous one was tied too loosely, it lacked the proper tension."

To Yuder, it felt no different, yet Kishiar kept lavishing praise on his own work, as if he had made a significant change. Realizing that any further protest would probably fall on deaf ears, Yuder decided to give up quickly.

"Now, before we leave, about the security of the building..."

"Ah, before that, just one more thing. I remembered something I had forgotten, so wait."

Upon hearing this, Kishiar suddenly seemed to remember something and vanished down the hallway towards the bedrooms. Yuder was left standing blankly where Kishiar had disappeared. A moment later, Kishiar returned and handed Yuder a pair of white gloves that were long enough to cover up to his elbows.

"I got these a while ago. They were enchanted for convenience. Here, take them."

"This is..."

Yuder involuntarily hardened his expression.

He had seen those gloves before. They were one of the gloves that Kishiar, in his past life, often wore especially when he was about to retire from his position as Commander. The memory of him wearing very similar long white gloves on the day he died suddenly made Yuder feel cold.

"I'm fine. The ones I'm wearing now are enough."

"They match your current formal wear better than black ones. Besides, I originally got them for you."

Despite the incredibly soft voice, it felt like a thorn pricking his heart. Why was that? He had experienced a similar feeling before, but now the pain was more intense than ever.

In his past life, Yudrain Aile, following the orders of the Katchian Emperor, assassinated Kishiar La Orr without any remorse.

However, since his return, every time he confronted this sensation, he had this strange feeling as if something he never knew existed within him was being violently beaten. To avert his gaze from this unbearable feeling, Yuder lowered his eyes to the ground. As he slowly regained control of his breathing, his fingers cramped up from his tightly clenched fist.

"Of course, it shouldn't happen like last time when the spots spread a lot, but if such a thing happens, these will help to conceal it or prevent it from spreading. They're made from threads and fabric drawn from a sacred tree grown with blessings."

Kishiar, who was explaining, paused as if he sensed something was off.

Chapter 147

"...Does it not suit your liking?"

Yuder hesitated, barely managing to raise his head again. He couldn't let Kishiar notice his unease.

"It's... too generous."

"It's not too much. After everything you've done, you're more than deserving of such an honor at the end of the festival. Or would you like to swap it with mine?"

"Weren't you the one who said yours was more expensive? That's absolutely out of the question."

Kishiar had started to raise his hand to remove his glove, but Yuder quickly stopped him.

"I understand. Since the Commander has given it to me, I will gratefully accept."

Yuder removed his black glove and put on the white one in front of him. He rolled up the sleeves of his ceremonial dress to his elbows and finished putting on the gloves. A complex wave of emotions briefly surged in his chest, but soon settled.

"You seem to be fully prepared."

At that moment, Nathan Zuckerman entered the commander's office, speaking as he did. Contrary to his usual attire, he wore an armor embossed with the emblem of the Peletta Knights. The southern man who approached without even a blink at Kishiar's splendor paused and blinked when he saw Yuder standing beside him.

"The ceremonial attire suits you well, Mr. Aile."

"...Thank you for your compliment, Mr. Zuckerman."

"Please take it cheerfully. Nathan doesn't give such compliments to just anyone."

In response to Kishiar's confident smile, Yuder said nothing. Nathan Zuckerman also paid no attention to his lord's jest, moving swiftly onto his business.

"I've come to report that all 30 Peletta Knights summoned by the Duke have arrived and are currently in position. From the moment you leave to the moment you return, they will be guarding this entire building and various points within the Imperial Knight's grounds."

"Good. What about Thais Yulman?"

Kishiar nodded and asked about the mage Thais Yulman. Receiving a report from Yuder and a bundle of papers sent by Thais, he had granted permission for the stubborn old mage to stay here as he wished. This was shocking news for his apprentice Alik Pelgin, who was dragged into the party without his Master, but no one was there to comfort him.

"He was confirmed to be alone in the basement when I last checked. He said he didn't want anyone else entering the basement, so we have stationed a single Knight near the entrance."

"I heard his apprentice was wandering around yesterday. What was the reason for that?"

"He said we would know when the time came... I suspect he was setting traps or defensive circles to protect this building."

"It's probably both."

Yuder finally found his chance to speak up. In fact, what he had intended to say to Kishiar was about that very matter, but he had not had the chance to say it yet.

"I met Alik yesterday and he told me that Thais Yulman had ordered him to do various things to protect the basement and the building."

"He must have really hated the idea of going to the party. It's fortunate we've got extra protection thanks to him."

After a short nod and expressing his evaluation, Kishiar looked back at Yuder and Nathan.

"I am likely to stay at the imperial palace today. Last night, His Majesty sent me a letter suggesting a spontaneous family meal. I believe he couldn't refuse Her Majesty's request."

"In that case, what should we do with the Cavalry?"

"You and a few others will stay by my side, while the rest shall return once the party is over. Until then, Nathan, you are to guard this place."

"I will fulfill the responsibility you've entrusted to me."

Observing Nathan, who held the hilt of his sword lightly and bowed his head, a sharp, well-honed smile appeared in Kishiar's eyes.

"Let's make today the best day for us all, and for the Cavalry. Now, shall we get going?"

Kishiar began to walk, leading the way with his cloak billowing. Nathan and Yuder followed, their shoulders aligned. Every time they descended the stairs, the assembled Cavalry members and the Knights of Peletta, their eyes wide with admiration, offered enthusiastic greetings.

"Greetings, Commander!"

"We're glad to see you in good health after so long, my lord."

"I'm happy to see you too, Ticker. I look forward to your work today."

"Of course, my lord!"

Kishiar continued his descent, raising his hand in return to those greeting him or occasionally tossing a light-hearted remark. As they reached the ground floor, they saw a line of carriages in front of the Cavalry barracks. The members gazed in awe at the spectacle of countless carriages gathered together.

"It's incredible. All these carriages are for us..."

"Commander! You're here."

The Deputy Commanders, who had been loading the members and checking their numbers, noticed Kishiar's arrival and hurried over.

Looking at Steiber, who pushed his hair back, softening his usual stern demeanor, Ever, who twisted her long hair up, and Kanna, who pinned her short hair behind her ears, Yuder understood Kishiar's comment about making formal wear beautiful without jewels.

They too could not hide their surprise at seeing Kishiar's formal attire, but their eyes widened even more upon seeing Yuder beside him.

"Wow, Commander. You look truly... radiant in formal wear."

"Haha, Steiber. Your compliment is quite something. Thank you."

"Yuder, your outfit is a different color from ours. It suits you!"

Kanna offered a small voice of greeting from behind Steiber.

"You too."

Although it was a curt reply, Kanna didn't seem to mind. She winked playfully and gave a quick thumbs-up. Yuder offered a faint smile in response.

"So, how many have boarded so far?"

Steiber stepped forward to answer Kishiar's question, looking around before speaking.

"Currently... well, about half have boarded. The carriage for you, Commander, is at the very front. Please feel free to board first."

"You've worked hard."

"This is nothing compared to collaborating on event security. It's not tough at all."

Ever saluted with a confident smile.

Yuder followed Kishiar to the front of the carriage line. Standing before the beautiful carriage, marked with the imperial crest and decorated with the emblem of the Duke of Peletta, was the coachman, along with Alik Pelgin.

"Good day, Your Grace. I'm grateful for the privilege of accompanying you to the palace."

It was an impeccable greeting, yet Yuder saw an unmistakable gloom and deep fatigue veiled over the face of the young mage. Alone without Thais Yulman, the thought of accompanying Kishiar, a notoriously challenging figure, seemed quite despairing.

"No worries. It's only natural for me, as the Commander, to accompany our Cavalry's honored guest. I'd appreciate hearing a lot about your research during the journey."

"Y-yes..."

The coachman, standing beside the sighing Alik Pelgin, bowed politely and opened the door. Before Kishiar boarded the carriage, Nathan Zuckerman saluted and approached, lowering his voice.

"Your schedule has suddenly changed, please take extra care of yourself."

"There's no need to be overly cautious about a family meal and a night."

"I recall you mentioning not much time was left for the... cycle..."

"Right."

Kishiar replied briefly, patting the loyal adjutant's shoulder with a smile.

"Even if something goes wrong, the one who gets hurt now won't be me. So put aside your excessive worries, Nathan."

Nathan Zuckerman retreated with a small sigh. After everyone boarded, the carriage door was closed. Alik Pelgin bowed his head, looking like he would rather be in a lavatory. His desire for Kishiar not to speak to him was almost visible, but that sort of luck did not happen.

"We will depart shortly."

Soon after all the members had boarded the carriages, the coachman opened a small window and announced they were about to depart. The carriages started moving one by one, the sound of hooves and the vibration underneath could be felt.

"Well, we still have quite a bit of time before we arrive, let's share some stories."

Sitting next to Yuder, Kishiar turned to Alik with a smile.

"I've been so busy that I couldn't personally visit the basement, and I'm very curious. I'd love to hear a lot about the Pearl Tower I've only heard stories of."

"A-ah, yes."

"Why are you sweating so much? If you need a handkerchief, let me know."

"No, I have one, thank you..."

Alik, who had been moving around within the Cavalry acting as the eyes and ears of his Master, now saw a different side of Kishiar La Orr. He was not the good-for-nothing Duke he was often called.

Like Thais Yulman had said, he was like a cunning beast, lying low, waiting for the right opportunity, hiding his claws. Being able to observe such a terrifying entity up close was considered a fascinating and wonderful opportunity by his Master, but the faint-hearted Alik did not wish to be too close to such a fearful entity.

'Look at him now. He claimed he wanted to discuss research and the Pearl Tower, but was that all?'

'Knowing that, you send me here alone... Master, this is too much!'

But what could he do? Now that things had come to this, all that was left was to comply as meekly as possible. Alik, hoping that Yuder Aile, sitting next to Duke Peletta, would serve as his backup, began to hesitantly engage in conversation with Kishiar.

As the Cavalry carriages sped towards the imperial palace in a long line, another carriage escaped from the quiet, closed-off grounds of the Apeto dukedom.

"Second Prince, are you really thinking of leaving like this? If the Duke finds out about this..."

"Silence. Since when have you been so bold as to challenge my words? You too believe I'm forever estranged from my heirship, don't you? Do you wish to die here?"

The occupants of the carriage were the Second Prince, Lenore Shand Apeto, and his servant. Lenore, after the unsavory incident a few days ago, was confined under house arrest by order of the Duke of Apeto. However, his servants dared not stop him as he decided to leave the mansion. The memories of his relentless violence still cast a shadow over the entire mansion.

The servant, forced to accompany him, was just as afraid of Lenore. He had mustered enough courage to speak, fearful of the backlash from the Duke of Apeto who would learn later of Lenore's disobedience. But his determination was swiftly extinguished in the face of Lenore's anger.

"M-, My Lord, how could I dare think such a disgraceful thought? This foolish man misspoke out of concern for you!"

The servant hurriedly prostrated himself on the carriage floor and apologized, but Lenore, unable to suppress his anger, kicked him hard.

"Ugh!"

"Fool. I should have brought someone else! I picked just anyone because I was short on time, and you dare to insult me?"

"Pl-, please spare me, my Lord. I'm sorry... mercy..."

Lenore finally managed to quell his anger a little, kicking the servant until the toe of his boot was stained red.

"Know that my not killing you here is mercy. You got filthy blood on it; clean it at once."

"Y-, yes, thank you..."

The servant stifled his whimpering and bowed his head. As he began to clean Lenore's boot, blood seeping from his forehead, he thought about lashing out once more as the man's feeble movement displeased him. But if he did, and the servant couldn't stand, he wouldn't be able to enter the imperial palace, so Lenore held himself back. Crossing his arms, he closed his eyes and focused on calming his rage.

'The letter. Think about the letter. I'm heading towards a second chance. I can't ruin this from the get-go by losing my temper.'

The thought was effective. Lenore traced the outline of a small letter hidden in the pocket of his formal attire with his hand tucked inside his crossed arms. That letter was the reason why Lenore abruptly broke the Duke of Apeto's command and fled from the mansion.

Two days ago, Lenore received a small note while confined to his room. Hidden skillfully within a tray of snacks brought by a maid, the note bore a name that he never would have imagined.

'The Crown Prince Katchian La Orr... wants me?'

The handwriting on the note was elegant, and the message, succinct. It said that he could offer Lenore a second chance.

After hearing the news that Aishes Shand Apeto sent a letter to the Cavalry, I decided to reach out to you immediately. That's all there is to it. The choice is yours. If you feel inclined to send a response, do so in the same manner.

Aishes, who must be overjoyed by now, having heard that Lenore, who has fallen out of favor with the Duke of Apeto, had sent a letter to the Cavalry. The meaning was clear. Aishes had thrown a gambit to topple Lenore without giving him even a single chance to climb back up.

Lenore shivered at the fact that he was unaware of this, and then paced nervously around the room. In the past, he had controlled a significant number of Apeto family's secret informants at his will, but now he could only glean a little of the outside world's affairs from the Crown Prince's letters.

The realization that all the power he thought he possessed actually belonged to the Duke of Apeto sent him into a state of fear and confusion for the first time in her life.

'Is father really intending to discard me as I am? Me, his only intact child?'

He wanted to believe it wasn't so, but the letter had shaken her. Being the child most like the Duke of Apeto in temperament, he knew his ruthlessness better than anyone. He was not the type to forgive those who had smeared his face without gaining anything in return.

'Yes, it might be better to find a third way rather than being miserably driven away while obeying a father who has no intention of trusting me to the end.'

The vast lineage of Apeto was like a massive iron fortress. Regardless of who took over the fortress, and how many died in the process, the family never collapsed and was not likely to in the future.

After pondering how many times parents and children had killed and been killed over power in the long history of the dukedom, Lenore made his decision. He calmly sat down and wrote his reply on the back of the Crown Prince's letter.

'The real master behind this letter is probably Duke Diarca. It would be quite nauseating if this matter puts me at a disadvantage with Diarca... but as long as I can become the Duke of Apeto, that's all that matters. I can cover it all.'

The subtle sense of superiority the Diarca duchy projected to other families after placing the Prince of Katchian on the throne, the future de facto imperial family, had stirred considerable resentment. Lenore was one of them.

However, her survival was now the priority.

The second letter from the Crown Prince of Katchian arrived the very next morning. Tucked inside a tray of food as before, the letter accepted Lenore's cooperation gladly and contained a postscript.

Return the letter, and hand over your next reply directly, so I can believe in you as clearly as the rising sun.

'Damn Diarca bastards.' Cursing the Duke of Diarca, who would be laughing behind the Crown Prince's letter, Lenore crumpled the note. The phrase asking for faith as clear as the rising sun was from a famous play, a line used metaphorically to demand faith even at the cost of a great sacrifice.

There was only one way for Lenore to hand over his response directly to the Crown Prince. He had to attend the party on the last day of the harvest festival, which he would have had to attend under normal circumstances.

‘When I break my seclusion and go there, I won't be able to return to my past life. He knows this, hence his request.’

Once embarked on a path of no return, there was no pulling back midway. If he didn't accept this proposition, the Crown Prince and the Diarca family would undoubtedly seek out someone else, someone they deemed predictable, to make the same offer.

‘Perhaps... someone like Revlin. That fool, so blinded by the honey in front of him, would likely not comprehend the gravity of such a proposal!’

Remembering the day Beltrail had gone mad, and Revlin, his younger brother, had left their home, following Duke Peletta with a gleeful expression while he, Lenore, fell from grace. His teeth ground together at the recollection. Lenore surmised his judgment to be correct, his anger boiling over as he hastily wrote his response.

With the break of dawn, he slipped out of his mansion and was on his way.

"We'll be arriving soon. You can see the checkpoint, prepare yourself, my Lord."

Lenore opened his eyes at the cautious words of the coachman. The stiffened servant caught the harsh gaze of his master, gulped in surprise, but didn't dare meet his eyes.

Lenore extracted two sealed letters from his pocket. One was the formal reply to the Crown Prince, but the other wasn't. The latter was the original of the second letter he had received from the Crown Prince.

‘As desperate as I am, driven into a corner, I can't trust them completely.’

In case the Crown Prince and Duke Diarca didn't keep their promise, Lenore kept the original letter and returned a replica hidden in the tray. He doubted they would meticulously examine the returned

letter, and even if they did discover the deception, he could simply explain it away after the meeting with the Crown Prince.

He swiftly noted down the series of events that had befallen him on the back of the Crown Prince's original letter and signed it. If his meeting with the Crown Prince resulted in a favorable outcome, this second letter would never see the light of day.

However, if the opposite were to occur...

"You. Hold on to this while I am in the palace."

"Eh? Yes! Understood."

After thoughtful consideration, Lenore handed the second letter to the servant. The servant, with due respect, received it without daring to glimpse at it.

"Keep it with you while waiting with the other servants. If I return, hand it back to me. If I send word that I can't collect it personally... Hmm. Right. Deliver that letter to Revlin."

Mentioning Revlin was a purely impulsive decision. Even though they had a strained relationship at the moment, the most naive and least suspicious person in the Apeto family was undoubtedly Revlin.

"The... The Revlin who is said to have joined the Cavalry? Is that alright?"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

The servant quickly bowed his head and apologized in response to Lenore's stern warning.

'If that idiot doesn't lose the letter, it'll be a miracle. Tsk.'

A moment later, the carriage halted. The front of Deluma Palace, the largest building inside the city's second wall, was a constant flow of arriving and departing carriages, almost forming a mountain. The special award ceremony party, held to appreciate all those who had worked throughout the year, always had a participation of at least 500 people. But this year, the entire Cavalry was invited, making the crowd even more overwhelming.

Lenore, intending to stay inconspicuous, donned a traditional formal attire, keeping his head low as he swiftly entered the palace. With so many people around, no one paid much attention to those brushing past them. He was relieved.

As he approached one of the ten servants frantically checking the attendees, gave his name, and presented his identification badge, the man stiffened, lifted his head, and stared at Lenore. After a pause, he handed back the badge and politely gestured towards the interior with a bow.

"Please, enter."

The party at Deluma Palace had areas restricted to entry based on the attendee's status and importance. Those of relatively lower status stayed on the first floor, but the 'truly' important individuals were granted the right to directly enter the second floor. The powerful nobles, renowned knights, mages, and the envoys from foreign countries visiting the empire to celebrate this harvest festival were the protagonists here.

Lenore headed straight for the second floor. There were many people, but the few chairs placed at the most visible part of the vast hall were all empty. These were reserved for the Emperor, the Empress, the Crown Prince, and the Duke of Peletta, among other imperial family members.

However, the Emperor had been absent from these parties for a few years now, citing poor health and delegating his duties to the Empress, so those in attendance naturally assumed the same for this year.

'It seems the Crown Prince has not arrived yet.'

He covertly scanned the attendees. Despite the significant incident at Apeto House, the second floor of Deluma Hall was calm as if nothing had happened. With the Cavalry yet to arrive, the largest crowd had gathered around the most famous foreign dignitary, the second prince of the Kingdom of Nellarn.

Lenore felt a strange anger and bitterness as he watched the chattering attendees exchange elegant smiles. Clenching his fists did not make these feelings disappear.

"No way, it really is Young Master Lenore."

Then, someone recognized Lenore and started a conversation. Startled, Lenore turned to find a few young nobles with familiar faces, and his brow furrowed. Only then did the gazes from all around concentrate on him.

"How did you come? I heard that Apeto House is not attending this time. Has the Duke changed his mind?"

"Well, you could say that."

Despite lying as easily as eating, his mouth went dry, perhaps due to the imminent moment that would change the direction of his life.

"I knew it. I believed that Apeto wouldn't even flinch at a trial that Duke Peletta is preparing. Now that you've arrived, I can proudly say that I was right."

Lenore's heart pounded at the words of the grinning noble.

Before receiving the letter from the Crown Prince, he had thought the same. He believed that no matter how much the Cavalry tried to shake Apeto, it would be useless. That all blame lay with the insane Beltrail, and once his father calmed his anger, he could be freed.

However, Crown Prince Katchian had poured cold water on his hopes and informed him of the harsh reality. If Aishes had deliberately passed information related to Lenore's transgression to the Cavalry, he, who was out of favor and had lost his relatives, would be unable to respond.

Ignoring the chatter and interest-filled gazes of the nobles, Lenore felt that his decision to accept the meeting with Crown Prince Katchian was indeed the best choice.

"Yes. For the future, I'll have to endure situations like this."

"Why are you all swarming and blocking the entrance so distastefully? Please step aside."

Then, someone who had just entered directed a sharp complaint at the nobles surrounding Lenore. They turned their heads in anger at the direct insult to their dignity, but upon seeing his face, they quickly dispersed. Lenore, watching the person coming through the dispersing crowd, quickly understood why they had scattered.

"Kiolle da Diarca."

Not many people liked him, notorious for his recklessness. However, the family name behind Kiolle was not one to be disregarded.

Lenore braced himself, wondering what Kiolle might say to him, but to his surprise, Kiolle only glanced at him once and walked past. It was as if he hadn't even noticed Lenore.

"That arrogant kid."

Lenore ground his teeth, glaring at Kiolle.

"He ignores me like that because he knows why I'm here today. Sure, today he may feel as if the Duke of Diarca's influence is his, but it won't be like that in the future."

"The Cavalry has all arrived, they say. They'll be coming up soon."

"Let's see how high and mighty the Duke of Peletta appears."

A short while later, the area became noisy again. Turning his head, Lenore blinked in surprise as he felt an unfamiliar wind blow from the large golden entrance door.

The previously languid air inside the hall changed in an instant with the wind. As if by agreement, everyone turned their eyes in the same direction. The tall man who entered, surrounded by a cold wind that captivated everyone, had such handsome features that one wouldn't forget them after seeing them just once.

"It's the Duke of Peletta."

"Duke Kishiar La Orr of Peletta."

At the appearance of Duke Kishiar La Orr of Peletta, the people stirred like a wave. Some felt as though the chandelier light, unnoticed until a moment ago, was shining solely on him. Whether seeing Kishiar in this setting for the first time, or not, there was no doubt that they were overwhelmed by him for that brief moment.

But what surprised the people didn't stop there. As those following Kishiar in a four-row line entered in turn, the atmosphere of the hall changed once more.

"So, they are the Cavalry. They seem powerful."

"I heard most of them are commoners, but they don't seem any different from any traditional knight orders!"

Some murmured in admiration at the dignity and decorum of the Cavalry.

"Is it thanks to them that there were no major accidents throughout the festival?"

"When we go back to our country, I suggest we gather people like them and entrust them with some work."

Some were recounting tales of the knightly Cavalry members that had made a name for themselves throughout the festival and the future that was to be reshaped by their actions. The sight of every person gathered as if their existence was for the sake of the Cavalry and the Duke of Peletta left Lenore feeling dizzy.

'Why isn't anyone talking about what they've done to me, to Apeto?'

Lenore couldn't shake the nearly terrifying image of Kishiar playing loosely with his words while hiding Revlin behind him, taking on both the Duke of Apeto and Lenore himself. Just the sight of Duke Peletta, resplendent in his formal attire, giggling with inexplicable joy made him nauseous. It wasn't a metaphor, he truly felt ill.

'Damn it. Why hasn't the Crown Prince of Katchian arrived yet? Does he remember our promise?'

As he saw the Cavalry members, clad in white formal attire, dispersing throughout the party hall, Lenore slowly began to step back. Among them, there were definitely members who had come to the house of Apeto with Kishiar and seen his face, and he didn't want to bump into them.

Rubbing his face nervously, he headed towards a corner of the hall. With his heart pounding uncomfortably fast, he thought it might be better to step into the rest area for a while.

As Lenore, catching his breath from the brisk walk, bumped into someone again.

"Oops."

If it had been a guest he knew, he would have apologized, but the person was a noblewoman he was meeting for the first time. He tried to ignore her and continue walking, but another person who helped the stumbling woman, who was about to fall after he stepped on her hem, grabbed his hand, preventing him from doing so.

"Excuse me, shouldn't you apologize first?"

When Lenore turned his gaze, he was choked to realize that the rude and arrogant man was a member of the Cavalry he remembered.

'This guy is definitely...'

With hair and eyes that seemed to hold a sinister darkness, and a spooky face devoid of any humane emotions, there was no doubt.

'Isn't he the one who dragged the unconscious Beltrail like a sack and dumped him in front of us that day!'

"Let, let go."

Lenore, momentarily paralyzed in his senses, shook his arm furiously, forgetting even his dignity, to shake off the man's hand. He then turned and started to walk briskly in the opposite direction, only to halt as he was about to bump into someone else. This time, his would-be collision was with a waiter carrying several golden goblets on a tray. Feeling that he had finally found someone he could rightfully be angry with, Lenore raised his voice, all the pent-up anger pouring out.

"You idiot. Where are your eyes?"

"I apologize. If you're feeling unwell, please let me know. Immediate measures will be..."

"For... forget it!"

As he opened his mouth to speak, his throat was parched and his voice cracked. Lenore, realizing the intense thirst within him, reached out roughly for a goblet the waiter was carrying while panting for breath.

"Give me a drink."

"Please wait a moment. That drink is..."

"Shut up. Can't you just get another drink!"

Before the waiter could object, he gulped down the drink hastily, feeling the burning sensation as it traveled down his throat. Lenore, patting his momentarily refreshed throat, sighed quietly.

'Phew.'

However, the relief was short-lived. The next moment, he experienced a pain so great in his stomach that it couldn't be compared to before, shooting straight up to his throat.

"Ku...ack?"

Swallowing his breath at the same time as the goblet fell and shattered on the floor, Lenore fell to the ground, clutching his throat.

Chapter 150

"Ah! Ah! Ah!"

He screamed in a kind of agony he had never experienced in his life, but no sound came out. His stomach, throat, and head all felt as if they were being consumed by fire. His vision was shrouded in darkness. No sounds reached him. He scratched at the ground and writhed, but the horrific pain did not subside in the slightest.

"Help...!"

His desperately outstretched hand grabbed onto someone's hem. However, before he could finish his plea for help, that person harshly pulled away.

How dare they! Even in his agony, Lenore felt a sense of disgrace and shame, his hand grasping at the air.

'Someone, is there no one? Call my servant. No. Call the priest, the priest. Anyone will do, quickly save me...!'

Unfortunately, his thoughts never came to completion. He let out his dying breath, as black blood gushed from his eyes, nose, and mouth.

"Aaargh!"

A sharp scream echoed throughout the entire second floor of Deluma Palace, which had been peaceful. Numerous gazes were drawn to one spot.

"What on earth is happening?"

"Lord Lenore of the Apeto family has collapsed! It's the second son of the Apeto!"

"Oh dear God, is he dead?"

A few delicate nobles fainted at the sight of the black blood spreading across the beautifully tiled floor and were carried out to the lounge. Those who did not want to be involved in the incident hurriedly exited the scene. Among them were many young and noble aristocrats who represented the name of their family.

Nevertheless, many people, unable to curb their curiosity, gathered around Lenore's corpse. The servants struggled to push the people back, but to no avail.

Just then, a man pushed his way through the crowd. It was Duke Kishiar of Peletta.

"What is happening?"

Only when he appeared did the crowd finally calm down and make way.

"Your Highness, Lord Lenore Apeto collapsed, vomited blood, and has passed away."

One of the three servants who had been closely examining the situation bowed and informed Kishiar. With an impassive face, Kishiar approached and briefly looked at Lenore, who lay sprawled out and bloodied. He stopped in front of a partially shattered wine glass that lay amidst the carnage. His gaze slowly fell upon the liquid that had spilled from the glass.

"Is it poison?"

"We don't know. But it is certain that he collapsed right after taking a sip."

"Lenore Apeto shouldn't have been able to attend here today. What happened?"

"We are still confirming that, but it appears that the Lord came from the Duke's house alone."

If he came alone, the chances were high that he had defied the Apeto Duke's orders. It was an unusual occurrence.

"Very well. Then, who gave him this glass?"

"That person is here."

As soon as Lenore had collapsed, a bewildered servant was apprehended by other servants and brought to Kishiar, forced to kneel. His expression was filled with undeniable confusion and fear.

"Your, Your Highness. I didn't do anything. Really."

"Explain what happened first. Why did the son of Apeto suddenly drink your wine and die?"

"I was merely following orders to deliver the glasses of alcohol. On my way, that person almost ran into me and I expressed concern that he might have been hurt... but he dismissed the need for help, took a glass of alcohol, and drank it. And then this happened..."

The server cast a terrified glance toward Lenore's body and bowed his head.

"I had no idea who this person was. I swear, I did not."

"..."

Listening to the server's words, Kishiar's expression remained unchanged and unreadable. He looked back and forth between Lenore and the server with eyes lost in thought. After a moment, he finally spoke.

"So, where are the other glasses you were supposed to deliver?"

The other glasses the server was carrying were placed on a nearby table. Kishiar had them brought to him, then personally took a spoon to stir one of the drinks. The silver spoon, engraved with a common charm for detecting several types of poison, turned black in an instant, causing terrified gasps to ripple through those nearby.

"Really, it's poison!"

"An assassin?"

Amidst the clamor, Kishiar turned to the ashen-faced server.

"Tell me, who gave you that glass, and where were you taking it?"

"I've been thinking since it happened. But I've been serving so many trays that I can't recall who gave it to me... And where I was supposed to deliver that glass..."

The server dropped to his knees, unable to utter the words himself. Kishiar waited patiently until he managed to respond in a barely audible voice.

"It... it was for the Crown Prince's table."

God, the Crown Prince. Who could have... The murmur of anxiety swelled when a voice from the entrance called out.

"The Empress and the Crown Prince have arrived."

Upon seeing the two individuals who had arrived at such a delicate moment, some in the crowd expressed disappointment or relief that Emperor Keilusa had yet again failed to attend this year. However, most eyes were instinctively drawn toward Crown Prince Katchian.

The young Crown Prince, who would have received the poisoned glass had he arrived just a bit sooner, looked as calm as usual. Upon entering, the Empress received an account of the incident from the server, her face turning deathly pale but managing not to faint. She waved off everyone trying to greet her and immediately addressed Kishiar.

"Is it true what I've heard? An assassination attempt?"

"So far, all we know is that someone used the server to cleverly attempt to place three poisoned glasses on His Highness the Crown Prince's table."

"So you're saying we still don't know who that person is, Duke Peletta?"

As soon as Kishiar finished, it was the Crown Prince who threw back the pointed question. Before anyone could stop him, he walked straight over to Kishiar and looked around. His gaze settled on Lenore's body. For a moment, a cruel smile flickered in his eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it appeared, unnoticed by anyone.

"...So it seems. They cannot recall."

"Then I suppose we ought to jog their memory, but wouldn't our priority here be to first have the knights detain the server and promptly rescue that poor man's body, returning it to his family? A man has died, can we just let him lay there as if he's some spectacle? I believe we won't be late even if we pursue the culprit after managing the immediate situation."

Despite knowing that there was a high probability that it was an assassination attempt targeting him, the young Crown Prince remained calm. His sage response, despite his tender years, heightened the tension in the room.

"I had some doubts because he is an adoptive child who doesn't properly continue the imperial lineage... But, he is truly impressive. Such composure at that age."

"He's indeed different from those without any substance."

The audacious foreign envoy, who mumbled a blunt metaphor, became startled by the cold stares of the Cavalry members surrounding him from all sides and hastily closed his mouth, disappearing. However, no matter how many Cavalry members were present, the atmosphere had long since shifted.

Many people felt embarrassed, unable to understand why they were so overwhelmed by simply looking at Kishiar's outward appearance as if they'd woken up from a dream. Kishiar, despite his strikingly beautiful appearance akin to a divine apparition, was a shabby noble of low rank. It was inexplicable why they momentarily forgot that fact.

Crown Prince Katchian, straightening his shoulders, stepped forward and ordered his servants to take care of Lenore's body and to detain the arrested servant. As the Crown Prince's accompanying servants began to act efficiently to follow the orders, the confusion among the people gradually subsided. Taking this opportunity, the empress, having regained her composure, issued orders in place of the emperor as the ruler of the empire present.

"Given the unfortunate events that have transpired, it seems difficult to continue with today's schedule here. The award ceremony will be held again at a later date. Everyone may return for now. If attendees wish, they may rest a bit longer on the first floor..."

"This can't be... Is everything abruptly ending like this?"

"What should we do? Should we go down to the first floor?"

"Shouldn't we?"

Yuder, who had been observing the situation from a bit of a distance, involuntarily turned his head at the voice of a Cavalry member nearby. The Cavalry members who were quite cheerful when they arrived here now wore dark expressions.

He glanced at the Cavalry members' faces, then turned his body, moving against the crowd that began to slowly head toward the first floor. At the end, he saw Kishiar standing alone, watching the servants carrying away the hastily managed body of Lenore. Despite being adorned with sparkling jewels and beautiful formal attire, his figure seemed unbearably lonely.

"Commander."

"Hmm? You haven't gone down to the first floor and came here instead?"

Kishiar's voice, standing alone like a large tree, was bright and cheerful enough to erase all of the sentimental feelings Yuder had just experienced. Yuder felt a sinking feeling as he looked at his smiling face.

"Instead, why are you, Commander, still here without going down? Are you okay?"

"Of course, I'm okay. I'm neither hurt nor dead."

"Then why..."

"It just feels strange, that's all."

Kishiar lowered his voice, mumbling with a smile.