

Turning 151

Turning

Chapter 151

"Don't you think everything happened too conveniently? The arrival and demise of Lenore Shand Apeto,"

"Are those the only events you think occurred at the right time? Such thoughts can be well reflected upon in the afterlife."

At Yuder's subtly bristling response, Kishiar turned his head. A different emotion briefly flickered across his red eyes.

"I see. Were you worried by any chance?"

"How could I dare to entertain such thoughts?"

"I didn't mean to worry you. I was merely lost in thought for a moment. Now, let's proceed downwards."

Laughing, Kishiar reached out and lightly tapped Yuder's shoulder.

Yuder, following the gracefully twirling back of Kishiar's formal wear, quickened his steps. He intended to follow obediently, but thinking of the guests who had turned their backs on Kishiar, a surge of cold emotion welled up in his heart once again.

Kishiar had proven his abilities enough. After Lenore's death, his demeanor was entirely befitting of the highest royal present. It would have been much more logical to leave everything in place, assess the situation, and then make a judgment if an incident occurred.

Yet, at the seemingly fine words of Prince Katchian, everyone easily turned a blind eye to Kishiar. The spectacle of people who were chatting and laughing just moments before, turning their bodies in

embarrassment so swiftly was beyond laughable. He may have had a reputation as an inept, pleasure-loving fop, but the rapid shift in attitude was too much to even find amusing.

'Well, they were always like that.'

Yuder saw many familiar faces from his past life in the crowd at today's party. Although they now bore younger and more refined faces, their gazes were exactly the same as they had been. The majority were self-serving individuals.

If he had not reversed time, Yuder Aile would have thought of the high and mighty's affairs as none of his concern, regardless of the absurd rumors and perceptions surrounding Kishiar. As long as Kishiar himself was not like that, he wouldn't have cared.

But now he knew. If Kishiar were to suddenly die one day, none of these nobles would mourn or remember him. All the things Kishiar had tried to change alone would be easily forgotten and ignored. Just like now.

He had returned through eleven years of time and thought he had changed quite a lot, but it was still not enough. Had he made some wrong choices? Should he have done more? A chilly wind blew through his troubled heart.

"I'm fine."

At that moment, as if reading his thoughts, Kishiar spoke, and the icy storm rising within Yuder suddenly lost its strength and crumbled. Turning his head, he saw Kishiar slowly continuing his speech as he descended the stairs with an unflustered stride.

"Being ignored isn't always a bad thing. The moment when no one is watching can be the best time to observe everyone else. Plus... I have no intention of obediently stepping down."

"..."

Yuder tried to open his mouth to say something, but ended up remaining silent. How could he speak so nonchalantly? Questions swirled in his mind.

Where had that seemingly infinite steadfastness in the man's heart come from?

Had he never once wished to reveal all his strength and make everyone kneel before him?

Had he ever felt anger or disappointment toward those who blocked his path?

Was the Kishiar of his past life, now almost completely faded from his memory due to the passage of time, such a person?

As these thoughts consumed him, a sudden surge of sensation woke his mind. Yuder realized he had been lost in thought without realizing it, and blinked. There was a rush of heat within his eyelids.

Despite deciding not to make unnecessary assumptions and to focus on the present, it was difficult to control.

But one thing was certain. Even if all the plans for the day had been upended, there wasn't a single scratch on Kishiar's solid wall. If he was untroubled, Yuder could not be anxious.

'My choice was right. Nothing has gone wrong yet.'

Walking a step behind Kishiar, Yuder suddenly remembered the moment he realized that he had somehow turned back time. At that time, many crossroads lay before him. But the thought suddenly came to him that perhaps he had chosen the Cavalry and Kishiar again to gain this very conviction at this very moment.

"If you're not going to back down as it is, what are you planning to do?"

Regaining his composure and asking the question, Kishiar responded as if he had been waiting for it.

"You probably didn't expect it either, did you? Who might be behind the unnatural death of Apeto's son?"

"Yes."

It was likely Prince Katchian's trick. Perhaps he even borrowed Diarca's hand. Yuder tightened his lips as he recalled the prince, who had always appeared with a seemingly benign and elegant face.

"Because his attempt to shake us during the festival failed, he must have invested in today's event. He must have wanted to influence the upcoming trial with today's event, but..."

Kishiar, who was speaking, paused and let out an ambiguous smile.

"He was too hasty, wasn't he?"

At that moment, Yuder also realized what Kishiar was thinking.

"That's right. If emotions come before thorough planning, there will certainly be gaps left."

"Even if the event is canceled, it's rare for anyone to leave right away. Her Majesty the Empress will also be here for about an hour. I plan to have a conversation with her and the others. Of course, His Highness the Crown Prince will be present as well."

There was not much distance left from the entrance to the first floor hall. Yuder glanced sideways and checked how many people were on guard. It seemed that he could easily escape without much effort, given the absence of a crisis.

"I will try to find evidence."

"Don't push yourself. If it's not this time, just aim for the next."

Kishiar said so, but Yuder's thoughts were slightly different. However, he obediently nodded and answered on the outside.

"Yes."

"Take this to Kanna."

Just before entering the first floor hall, Kishiar handed Yuder a piece of glass he had been secretly holding in his hand.

"It's a fragment of the poisoned cup that fell during the clean-up. If she does well, she might be able to read something from it."

"I will deliver it."

The bustling hall of the first floor was densely packed with people. Those who had been on the first floor were taken aback by the sudden influx of high-ranking guests from the second floor, and those who had been on the second floor were too busy chattering about the dreadful incident. Yuder briefly watched Kishiar, who was heading towards the highest place reserved for the imperial family, before he turned around.

"Kanna."

"Yuder. Where have you been?"

"I was accompanying the Commander. But before that, take this."

Kanna was with the other members of the Cavalry. He discreetly pulled her aside and handed her a piece of glass wrapped in a handkerchief. Her eyes flashed seriously.

"This... could it be a piece of the poisoned glass from earlier?"

"Yes."

Upon hearing that Kishiar had ordered her to read the shard, Kanna immediately cupped her hands around the fragment, concealing it and closing her eyes. Energy rippled in her trembling fingertips as she concentrated.

"Hmm..."

"Did you find out anything?"

"Yuder, you said the servant who served this earlier claimed he knew nothing, right?"

Kanna, having opened her eyes, asked an unexpected question.

"That's what he said."

"The last memory left in the glass seems to be a bit different. That servant directly poisoned the inside."

"Directly?"

"Yes. And this is even more surprising. It seems that his target wasn't the Crown Prince from the beginning, but the late Prince Lenore Shand Apeto."

"The Second Prince of Apeto... How did he know that he would drink from the poisoned glass?"

"I'm not sure about that. But the person who took this glass seemed to be confident that, given the right moment, the prince would definitely pick up this glass and drink from it."

If the timing was right, definitely.

Yuder's mind began to whirl at these words.

'Come to think of it, even before his death, his condition wasn't particularly good.'

Lenore Shand Apeto had attempted to escape to the break room, blatantly avoiding Kishiar and the Cavalry when they appeared. Despite almost colliding with others several times, including Yuder, he had drunkenly drained his cup without even checking what it was. He had been terribly disoriented, as though he were drunk.

No matter how startled he was, he wondered if there might have been another reason for his staggering.

'...For example, he might have been previously affected by a poison that causes severe thirst.'

Yuder had encountered such a poison in his past life. It was a weak poison, not deadly, but potent enough to go unnoticed in beverages or alcohol.

And the person who enjoyed using that poison the most among those Yuder knew was the Emperor of Katchian.

'Indeed, considering that this is 11 years ago, Katchian was still unskilled.'

During his reign, Emperor Katchian would never have allowed such poison to be directly used in his presence. Everything had to be done when he was absent. Many people who had angered the Emperor by speaking ill during the first disaster, the earthquake, were secretly killed by drinking the second poison that induced a burning throat.

'That poison needs to be absorbed through the skin rather than ingested... I wonder where it was hidden to kill Lenore Shand Apeto.'

Turning

Chapter 152

To enter the party, one had to have their identification checked - a precautionary procedure. There were countless people Yuder might have bumped into during the party. Or, perhaps, something was planted in the carriage he had arrived in. Mulling over the potential factors, Yuder glared at the distant face of Prince Katchian, who was laughing away.

'Strangely, he kept saying we shouldn't leave the dead as a spectacle, that we should collect the corpse as soon as possible. Maybe he was trying to handle it before the poison could be detected.'

Yuder had made up his mind. He decided to investigate the individuals who collected Lenore's corpse, the servant who had been arrested for bringing the poisoned cup, and the carriage Lenore had arrived in. There was no time to inspect everything within an hour.

"Hmm. Seems like there's nothing else to read into. Is there anything else that could help?"

Yuder pushed back the hand that Kanna extended towards him, a shard wrapped in her handkerchief.

"Kanna, you keep that."

"Huh? Then what about Yuder?"

"I'm going to take a quick bathroom break."

Yuder calmly lied. Thankfully, Kanna did not seem to detect any peculiarities from him and nodded her head. He then naturally walked towards the hallway where the restroom was. The few guards standing watch quickly dismissed him as an ordinary guest after a brief glance.

But someone coming out from the restroom didn't.

"...What, what are you! You followed me again...Oh!"

Before Kiolle, who widened his eyes in surprise, could complete his sentence, Yuder covered his mouth and gripped the back of his head, swiftly propelling them both into the deserted hallway. He had been

planning to find Kiolle when he had a chance; it was a stroke of good luck for him and quite the opposite for Kiolle.

"Uh...uh...uh!"

"Quiet. I'll have you know I'm not stalking you. We just happened to run into each other. I have some questions. If you answer them, I'll let you go. If you understand, blink three times."

As Kiolle, a knight despite his circumstances, had considerable strength, it was a bit challenging for Yuder to subdue him with sheer force. So he pinned him to the floor and twisted his neck slightly, swiftly stating his intent. After a moment, Kiolle's struggling gradually ceased, and his dark, deep-set eyes blinked precisely three times in the dim light. Yuder slowly removed his hand that was pressing Kiolle down.

"Huff. You, you, a Cavalry, dare to...!"

Kiolle grumbled with a face that showed he was dying to curse but couldn't due to the vow he made.

"What do you want to ask me? I've taken an unfair vow with you, but I won't do anything that could harm my family! I have nothing to do with Lenore Shand Apeto's death! So, I don't know anything you're going to..."

"Hmm. I see. So, this incident is indeed Prince Katchian's doing. Thanks for telling me even before I asked."

"...How did you know?"

As usual, his stupidity remained intact, blurting out pertinent information before even being asked. Kiolle's mouth fell open in surprise as he received Yuder's words of gratitude.

"You knew that His Highness the Crown Prince was involved... Could it be that even Duke Peletta...?"

"You don't need to know that. Anyway, has the Diarca family only sent you today? Surely that can't be the case."

"Surely not? What do you mean by that?"

Kiolle, sharply counter-questioning while glaring at Yuder, soon gritted his teeth and turned his head away.

"...I came with my third older brother today."

The only Diarca family's offspring that Yuder remembered was Kironne da Diarca, who would later become the next Duke of Diarca. Yuder didn't know about Kiolle's existence in the past, so there was no way he could remember his third older brother.

'So they sent the third and Kiolle, not the successor... It seems to confirm that Diarca didn't anticipate this happening.'

It was rather significant that Crown Prince Katchian had carried out this operation on his own without the knowledge of Diarca, his backer. At least in his previous life, he had never contradicted Diarca or acted alone until he became Emperor.

What caused this sudden change? Was it influenced by the fact that they couldn't cause any significant damage to the Cavalry during the entire festival period, as Kishiar speculated? Yuder gazed down at Kiolle, deep in thought.

Perhaps it was his third brother who had informed Kiolle that the Crown Prince had meddled. After Lenore's death and during the short, chaotic time when everyone was heading to the first floor, it seemed necessary to find out what had happened between Diarca and Katchian.

"Diarca claimed to have no connection with this incident."

"That's right!"

"Then, I'd appreciate an explanation. What happened?"

"You... are treating me like a mere underling..."

"If it has nothing to do with the Diarca family, you can speak. If you tell me just this, I'll let you go."

Kiolle, his face distorted, glared at Yuder, gasping for breath for a long while. But in the end, as if realizing he was the weaker party in this situation, he gritted his teeth and began to speak.

"We didn't know the situation when that bastard Lenore had just died. After descending to the first floor, my third brother told me he had received a rebuke from the Crown Prince's attendant. He said it had something to do with the Crown Prince, and he would handle it and inform our father later, so for today, we should refrain from rash actions and go back."

"..."

"That's all there is to it. Let me go now! Get off me! You're too heavy!"

Kiolle, gasping for breath, managed to slightly lift his upper body after prying off Yuder's hand on his neck. That's when it happened.

"Hey, who's there!"

Someone shouted from not too far away, as if having heard Kiolle's voice.

'Damn.'

There was no time to flee elsewhere. So, there was only one option left. Yuder suppressed Kiolle, who was struggling to get out from under him, and feigned calmness.

"...What are you doing here?"

Two soldiers, running with lanterns, looked at Kiolle, who was lying on the floor behind the statue, and Yuder, who was on top of him, with very odd expressions. Thanks to Kiolle's intense struggling, their formal attire was disheveled, which fortunately eliminated the need for any other pretenses. It was not unusual to find nobles entangled in a corner of a garden or a corner during a party due to the influence of alcohol and the atmosphere.

Taking full advantage of their misunderstanding, Yuder covered Kiolle's face, which looked as if he might scream at any moment, with his hand and opened his mouth to speak.

"There's no need for you to know. Judging by your esteemed faces, you shouldn't be here. Leave at once."

"A-ah, yes, understood. However, this is the imperial palace... please leave soon."

The soldiers, with a look of annoyance, retreated. Yuder only rose to his feet after their presence completely vanished. As he casually straightened his clothing, Kiolle, who had turned a mixture of red and blue, managed to stand with the help of a wall.

"You, this... this..."

"I did tell you to keep quiet."

"Are you blaming me?"

"Of course, it's your fault."

What an act of pretense. Upon receiving Yuder's cold gaze, Kiolle sharply drew in breaths, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Anyway, I've heard everything I need to, as promised. Now, I'm leaving."

"Where are you going?!"

Yuder didn't answer and turned away. He planned to head underground first. However, not long after he quickened his pace, he stopped. He felt the surprised halt of Kiolle, who had been following behind him.

"Stop following me, Kiolle da Diarca."

"Why should I? You kidnapped me, so I have to see what suspicious deeds you're up to in the imperial palace!"

Had this foolish boy already forgotten the trouble he faced in Hartan when he was dealing with Apeto's people? Yuder sighed and looked around. If he could find something small enough to just toss, he intended to knock Kiolle unconscious immediately.

However, he was unable to fulfill his intention again. Just as he was about to throw a button he had torn from his formal clothes at Kiolle, whose pupils were beginning to tremble as if he sensed something, footsteps were heard nearby. The moment he hid behind a pillar, several men in servant clothes appeared.

"We've taken care of the one who moved the cup as you ordered."

"It took longer than expected."

"He wasn't easy to kill. He was full of bluster, so it took some time to confirm and then deal with him."

"What a fool. He should've just followed orders instead of being anxious and greedy. That's why he ended up like this."

They had taken care of the one who moved the cup? Were they talking about the servant who was taken away? Yuder's senses were on high alert.

"Have you found Apeto's servant? Did he seem to know anything?"

"He almost collapsed when he heard his master had passed. It seems like Apeto did not tell anyone and came alone, as promised."

"Good. Now you go and report to His Highness."

"Yes."

As expected, they were servants following Crown Prince Katchian. Yuder watched one of the five servants quickly disappear in another direction, his breath held.

"Now then, where is the body of Apeto?"

"It's over here. Please follow me."

Since they had already killed the servant who moved the cup, one of the three things Yuder wanted to investigate was already gone. At least, they shouldn't be allowed to search Lenore Shand Apeto's body and destroy evidence first. Yuder imbued the button he had prepared to knock out Kiolle with wind power and forcefully threw it at the servants.

Turning

Chapter 153

"Eh? What's that noise... eek!"

"Argh!", "Cough!"

The fact that someone had stopped upon hearing the faint sound of a button brushing the wind made the job much easier. There could be nothing simpler than hitting a stationary target.

As the button, carried by the wind, released its concentrated force, it zigzagged across the foreheads of four men, each of whom promptly collapsed. Yuder grasped the button that had returned to his hand on the wind and looked back. Kiolle was standing there, mouth agape in surprise.

"Remember the third clause of the oath?"

"What? What?"

"Kiolle, it's your duty to assist me as far as possible. You haven't forgotten that, have you? You refused to leave when I told you to, so you have to help."

"Help? What am I supposed to do to help?"

Kiolle attempted to retreat, but it was no use. Yuder mercilessly dragged him along to help move the fallen men to a corner. Despite the simplicity of the task, Kiolle couldn't hide his terrified expression.

"Do you know who these men are? They are the Crown Prince's attendants. Knocking out the Crown Prince's attendants within the palace... The moment we are caught, we will be executed immediately!"

"If I'm caught, you'll be caught too. So, it doesn't matter."

Yuder showed no fear at the mention of execution. After all, he had already had his neck sliced once, what would he have to fear now?

"No, not me!"

Kiolle whimpered lowly.

"I was only coerced by you!"

"You're already an accomplice, Kiolle, just by carrying this and that for me."

"You..."

Kiolle, who had intended to intimidate Yuder, instead received a counterattack twice as strong. He gritted his teeth and abruptly turned his head, seemingly wanting to vent his anger by roughly moving the attendants of the prince. Yuder, whether he liked it or not, grabbed the arm of the last man to be moved and dragged him along.

That's when it happened. A sudden sharp pain shot from the inside of his right hand and pierced through his entire palm. Unconsciously wincing, Yuder looked down at his hand. His hand was covered with a white glove, so he couldn't see inside, but he had a guess about the cause of the pain.

'The spot is starting to spread from exerting just that little bit of strength...?'

"What are you doing? You were the one who said to move them quickly!"

If it weren't for Kiolle, he would have checked immediately, but he couldn't and he felt a bit frustrated. Anyway, Kiolle was not helpful. Yuder postponed his inspection, dragged the last attendant, and then started walking towards the underground stairs they were originally headed for.

There was always a place where no human footprints could be found, no matter where. Even if that place was inside the palace where hundreds of people were attending a party.

Yuder, with his previous life's experience, almost knew the structure of the palace. Kiolle, who was hesitantly following behind him stepping onto the stairs leading downstairs, looked around and opened his mouth.

"You seem to have not learned the basics of infiltration. What are you going to do if someone finds out? It's common sense to silence your footsteps when sneaking in!"

Infiltration basics? From Yuder's perspective, who had penetrated all sorts of places under Emperor Katchian's order, it was a laughable remark. It was clear that he was talking out of fear of the silence, so Yuder replied dismissively as if looking at a scared child.

"If you're just talking to avoid the silence, maybe you should turn back now."

"What, what? How audacious! I am a high-ranking Imperial Knight! I have no fear! How dare you treat me like...ugh."

Having been struck in a sensitive spot, Kiolle, who had been angrily spouting off, suddenly staggered and hit his head on the wall. At the same time, heat rose from the seal of the oath inscribed on Yuder's hand. It seemed that the power of the oath had activated lightly due to Kiolle's verbal outburst. Yuder watched with a slight tongue click as Kiolle, in his efforts to stand straight, repeatedly hit his head against the wall.

"Did you fall asleep?"

"As, asleep, my, foot!"

He had planned to leave him be if he fell asleep due to breaking the contract, but luckily or unluckily, it didn't seem to be that severe.

'Maybe it would have been better to knock him out with the servants before descending.'

Kiolle growled as if he knew exactly what Yuder was thinking, tightly gripping the hem of his uniform.

"If I had fallen asleep, you would've left me or killed me right away. That will never happen. You monster. I'll watch you closely with my own eyes....!"

"Even if you watch, you won't be able to tell anyone, so why bother?"

Despite having sworn to help and knowing he couldn't act against it, he wondered why he was so furious and insistent on following.

He hadn't even thought of acknowledging the favor he'd received so far, but being treated like a monster for going above and beyond was rather fresh. Yuder even forgot about the heat and pain rising from the hand with the seal of the contract, and let out a brief laugh.

"Did you just laugh?!"

"Quiet down. Even though everyone's in the hall now, we never know when they could return."

At Yuder's response, Kiolle was taken aback and shut his mouth. From the way he frantically looked around, he didn't exhibit any of the dignity befitting an Imperial Knight.

For a while after that, he followed Yuder in silence, but eventually, he couldn't bear the quiet and spoke again.

"Hey."

"..."

"Cavalry. Not going to respond?"

"Why bother."

Facing Yuder, who was clearly annoyed, Kiolle swallowed his anger and spoke again after a moment.

"You're here because of His Grace, Duke Peletta, aren't you?"

"..."

"I've been watching him since we were young, so I know him well. He is inscrutable, whimsical, and indulges in all sorts of debauchery. He's currently immersed in being a Commander, but he'll soon tire of it. He always does."

So, that was what he was trying to say.

Finding it wasteful to lend an ear to Kiolle's words, Yuder quickened his pace. Behind him, he could feel Kiolle hustling to keep up.

"While a commoner might be dazzled by his outward appearance, he's not worth dedicating your life to. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. So?"

"There's no need to do something so risky that would lead to execution if caught! Why not devote your powers to our Diarca family instead. My father would recognize your abilities and put them to good use. I guarantee it."

He had been so dismissive of Yuder, yet now he was acknowledging his power - the irony was not lost on Yuder. He didn't bother looking back as he moved, casually dismissing Kiolle's proposition.

"No need."

"Frustrating. The Diarca family is renowned for its perfection and greatness. It's far closer to the Sun God, and far more balanced than the likes of the worthless Apeto rabble or the soon-to-be-extinct Duke Peletta. The reason His Highness, the Crown Prince, ascended to that position is precisely because his lineage was recognized."

Kiolle's words, full of pride, bore the signs of the teachings he must have long been subject to.

'To think they can so casually claim their lineage is superior to the imperial family; it tells me how overconfident they've become.'

He had a rough idea of their plan. With the death of Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar, the current imperial lineage would end. To prevent this, they adopted a child from one of the four duke families that split from the first emperor, the closest relative. That child was Katchian, which meant the future imperial lineage was set to be the Diarca family.

In a few years, the era of the Diarca would begin, and they would take the imperial family's place. It was understandable why Yuder, who followed Kishiar, might appear laughable to them.

'Sure, if it had been like before, things would've turned out just as you wanted.'

But this time was different. Even if Emperor Keilusa died prematurely as in his previous life, Yuder had no intention of letting Katchian La Orr ascend to the throne easily. That was precisely why he was here now.

"Hey, are you listening?"

"I heard. You want me to join the Diarca family."

"That's right. You must have changed your mind after hearing me, right? What do you say? As soon as we get back, I'll speak to my father..."

"I refuse."

"What?"

Yuder stopped in his tracks and looked back. Kiolle blinked rapidly, taken aback by his sudden focus.

"Do you really think that, given my capabilities, I've never been offered other opportunities? Of all the offers I've received, yours is the least appealing."

Countless people had reached out to Yuder in his past life, however short or long it may have been. Wherever Yuder went, there were always whispers tempting him to join them, promising better conditions than being tied to the position of a Cavalry Commander who wasn't properly acknowledged.

Even when he was imprisoned and facing execution, an emissary from a foreign country who had secretly visited the prison had promised to help him escape immediately if he would just agree to join them.

But Yuder had turned down all their offers. No sweet words had ever moved his heart.

"The choice is mine to make. And the one I chose is my Commander. That won't change."

Leaving only those words behind, Yuder turned around again. Fortunately, Kiolle seemed at a loss for words, so he didn't bother him further.

'They should have left it around here... Just as I thought.'

As Yuder had predicted, Lenore's corpse was hidden in a seldom-visited underground liquor cellar. Yuder approached the body, which was crudely wrapped in white cloth on a cold table, without any hesitation. He grabbed the edge of the cloth and pulled it down. The horribly bloodied corpse, eyes bulging in a deathly blue pallor, was revealed. It was a ghastly sight, but Yuder inspected the body without batting an eye.

'If he really did use a poison that burns the throat... I'll have to use fire to find it.'

Turning

Chapter 154

Most often, the poison was applied as a powder or a liquid, for it needed to be absorbed through the skin. At room or lower temperatures, the poison smeared on the body was invisible, but under a hot fire, it melted and emitted a special, momentary sparkle.

Yuder conjured a small flame in his hand. With a whooshing sound, a red flame appeared, and his right hand stung again.

'... I tried to conjure it as small as possible.'

Was his condition off today? Yuder, with a furrowed brow, checked his body. He hadn't felt anything wrong until the morning, and even now, it didn't feel difficult to use his abilities, but somehow his body felt slightly heavy.

'Let's check first.'

Ignoring his mildly stinging right hand, he was about to bring the flame to the body when Kiolle, who arrived a little late, choked at the sight and covered his mouth.

"What are you doing? Don't tell me you're going to burn the body..."

"I'm just trying to check if there's any poison."

Upon clarifying to prevent any misunderstanding, Kiolle reluctantly moved a bit closer.

"Poison? The bastard already drank the poison and vomited it out with his blood before he died. What else is there to check... ugh."

Kiolle's bold approach ended in front of the dead man's bulging eyes, which appeared more horrific under the flame's glow. He backed away, covering his mouth as if he was about to vomit.

"You're not asking me to help with this, are you?"

"I hadn't thought of it, but I'm questioning how you became a senior knight."

As Yuder mumbled this while illuminating Lenore's cheek and body with the fire, Kiolle gritted his teeth in rebuttal.

"The Imperial Knights are formed to protect the capital and the palace, not to dig around in dead bodies!"

His words were reasonable. But if he only wanted to stay clean and distant, what could he possibly protect?

Yuder decided to concentrate on his task instead of replying and started inspecting the body more closely with the flame. Kiolle seemed to be ignored, as he grumbled under his breath, venting his complaints.

"You are such a cheeky and weird guy."

"..."

"You think the proposal of the Peletta duke is better than that of the Diarca family? Ha. You will definitely regret this. If it weren't for the oath, I would have reported this right away. It's frustrating not to be able to do so."

"..."

"The mere thought of the hardships I've been through lately due to that oath keeps me awake at night. I have no idea what you're planning to do here...!"

"I found it."

"What?"

Regardless of what Kiolle was saying, Yuder had found the evidence he was seeking. Under the flame's glow, traces that looked like white powder sparkled on the cheek and chest of the body.

'That's the glow emitted by the thirst-inducing poison. Confirmed.'

A faint shudder ran through him at the confirmation of his suspicion. He moved the flame over to the body's palm, and a faint light shone from there too a moment later.

"There's a strange light... what's that?"

"I told you, I'm checking for poison."

"Poison? But I've never heard of a poison that glows when lit up."

Seeing Kiolle's suspicious gaze, Yuder inwardly thought that Kiolle was not entirely dumb after all.

"Indeed. It's a poison not well known."

'Still,' he thought.

In his past life, after Emperor Katchian took the throne, he and a few nobles began to frequently use this poison, starting a trend of mixing weak and strong poisons for assassinations. The fact that there were trends in assassination methods was indeed comical, but that's how it was.

'Come to think of it, wasn't Emperor Katchian one of the first to use this poison?'

How could someone confined within the imperial palace know of this poison's existence? A question he had not thought of in the past suddenly surfaced.

'I heard the main ingredient of this poison is a mushroom... I should look into it.'

With this thought, he examined the body thoroughly. Then he brought his hand close to the brightest part of the body, the chest. As he lifted the edge of the blood-soaked formal robe and rummaged through the inner pocket, two items fell into his hand.

One was an identification badge made from carved gemstones and metal, and the other was a blood-stained letter.

'A letter?'

As if to better see in the firelight, Yuder subtly slid the letter inside his clothing while feigning a closer look into the inner pocket. On the carefully inspected identification badge, there was significantly more poison shimmering than what had been on the clothing or the face.

'As expected, it's likely the poison was applied when the identification badge was checked. So far, everything's as expected... But what about this letter?'

His heart pounded with an unexpected yield.

He put the examined identification badge back into the pocket of the formal robe and straightened up. Kiolle, who had been watching Yuder's actions, made a face.

"To touch the part where the poison is smeared so casually, even with gloves on... Don't ever come near me."

"The poison is not that strong. Even if you're poisoned, it will only cause severe thirst."

"Is that the only symptom? Then why did that guy... Ah."

Kiolle blinked his eyes and turned his head towards Lenore's body. Yuder quickly headed for the door before Kiolle could say more. He had one more place to go and didn't want to waste time.

"Is it all done now?"

"No. Not yet."

"What? Where else are you going?"

He was about to say it's none of your business, but Yuder quickly shut his mouth due to the sudden sense of someone nearby, pushing Kiolle inside the corridor.

Immediately after, men with unusual expressions quickly descended the stairs leading to the ground floor.

"Is there anyone?"

"They might be hiding inside. Let's go and look."

The men, who had barely reached the spot, looked at each other and exchanged words. They quickly made a decision and opened the door to the warehouse where Lenore's body lay.

Yuder waited until they all entered before cautiously moving towards the stairs. He had bought some time, so he planned to get as far away as possible in the meantime.

'Let's go!'

Kiolle, who had been hiding with Yuder, whispered with a determined look in his eyes and closely followed behind.

'I didn't expect him to follow so soon. What am I supposed to do now?'

'What to do, indeed.'

Among the men who had descended, there was none from the entourage of the Katchian Emperor, whom he had knocked unconscious earlier. If they were waiting for him when he ascended, he could once again launch a forbidden blow and give them a taste of defeat.

No sooner had this thought crossed his mind than the dormant pain in his hand began to intensify to a noticeable level. Yuder gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the growing pain.

But the pain, which he could have easily dismissed on any other day, oddly enough, didn't subside but grew progressively worse. It felt as if a flame had been ignited on dry firewood, spreading throughout his body at a terrifying speed with each step he took. Yuder, feeling this sensation spreading, hastily drew breath.

'What is this?'

He thought it was pain originating from the spot but wasn't sure. This sensation, although somewhat familiar, was strangely different from the usual pain he was accustomed to. However, before he could fully comprehend what was happening, this sensation had already turned into a fire consuming his whole body, from his head to his toes.

It made his body tremble, just like a human witnessing a massive wave approaching in the blink of an eye. Realization hit him like lightning.

—Thump.

He swallowed his breath. The impact hitting his heart rattled his ears, chest, and the inside of his brain.

Then, another thump. Yet another thump.

In that moment, Yuder finally understood, instinctively, the identity of this vast and terrifying sensation he was experiencing.

It was a sign of manifestation.

Like a storm, a massive whirlpool was rapidly expanding its territory within his body. Just like before. Just like in his previous life!

'Why, why now of all times?'

But the storm that had already started didn't allow Yuder even a moment to think properly.

The shock hit his head again, and his vision turned black momentarily. When his vision barely returned, he found himself suddenly dropping to his knees mid-climb up the stairs. Yuder gasped for breath like a drowning man and managed to lean against the wall.

"What, what is this? Is it poison? Did you get poisoned? Touching everything even with gloves on was a stupid move...!"

"Go, back. Kiolle."

Hearing Kiolle's voice filled with anxiety circling around him was quite an unfortunate event for his recovering ears. Yuder, suppressing the gut-wrenching sensation, barely managed to speak.

"Go straight up, pretend to be lost, and turn back."

"What? You are."

"Just go. I'll manage. Go."

"So, it's not poison?"

'Why does he keep talking when he should just go?' Yuder, trying hard to suppress the sensation emerging from deep within him, shook his head.

"No, it's not. Just go back!...Ugh."

As he raised his voice slightly, a jolting shock hit him from within his stomach, spreading throughout his body. Yuder, with a twisted face, lowered his head. Seeing Yuder trembling and scratching the wall, Kiolle stepped back a few paces. Fear and confusion were vivid in his eyes.

"Wha, what suddenly..."

Yuder mustered his strength and stood up abruptly. If this fever was indeed the start of the manifestation, based on his memories from his previous life, soon he'd lose his consciousness and experience sensations as if his whole body was being disassembled and reassembled. He had to escape this place before reaching that stage.

Turning

Chapter 155

Passing the frozen figure of Kiolle, he stumbled upward. The corner of the hallway where he had rendered unconscious the servants of Katchian before descending was now empty. Fortunately, it seemed unlikely that he would have to throw the button again.

With each step, a dizzying pain surged up from his toes, as if they were burning. But compared to the urgency to reach a safe place as quickly as possible, it was nothing. Urging his consciousness, which seemed ready to black out at any moment, he managed to keep walking by leaning on the wall. Suddenly, something caught his foot. The one who helped him, when he almost tripped, was Kiolle, who still hadn't left.

"Why haven't you left yet? I told you to go..."

"Something's strange. If it's not a poison, then what on earth is it?"

Yuder clenched his teeth so hard against the inner side of his mouth that it was a miracle his vision didn't go blurry. The sharp pain managed to clear his mind a little.

"It doesn't concern you. Go back before it gets noisy."

"No. I am bound by an oath to help you forcibly because of you. How can I calmly follow along? If you suddenly die, do I have any guarantee that I won't end up in trouble for breaking the oath? You should clearly explain what is what!"

"Who's there!"

Damn. As Yuder swallowed a curse, Kiolle grabbed his arm and hastily hid him behind a large suit of armor nearby. His vision was spinning, and his body was so shaky that he couldn't even resist such a clumsy movement.

As soon as he hid, Yuder, gasping for breath and nearly collapsing, looked up at Kiolle, who was speaking non-stop without hiding his helplessness.

"Such a pain... I can't even swear because of you! How... how to do it. You, it would be hard to throw the button now, right? My weapon... ah, I surrendered it before entry. Those guys, somehow I have a bad feeling, they don't seem like soldiers guarding this place..."

"Just shut up."

Yuder managed to utter that one sentence with shallow breaths and then roughly pushed Kiolle's face away with his arm.

"Ouch!"

Since all weapons had to be surrendered before entering the party, Yuder was also unarmed. Yet, he wasn't worried because he could easily manifest his ability as long as he had something to throw, like the button. However, he hadn't expected a sudden manifestation under such dizzying conditions. Even though he had prepared for it in his own way, the timing couldn't have been worse.

'I could use it if I wanted to.'

But if he used his power and it hastened the impending manifestation, and he lost consciousness, the situation would get even trickier.

What should he do? As he toyed with the button in his hand and gasped for breath, Yuder suddenly remembered a precaution he had taken before coming here.

'Ah, right. The magic tool. The bracelet.'

Hearing the sound of hurried footsteps from the other side of the corridor, he quickly rolled up his sleeve. As soon as he found the thin bracelet that he had worn inconspicuously over his white glove before coming here, he immediately crushed one of the black stones strung on the string.

With a crackling sound, the stone crumbled like a salt crystal, and at the same time, an invisible force wrapped around Yuder and Kiolle like a shield. It happened at the same time the rushing soldiers pointed their weapons at the suit of armor where they were hiding.

"Over here! I heard a noise from... huh?"

"There's nothing here!"

"I'm certain I heard something! It was a human voice...."

The magic tool bracelet that Alik, the disciple of the mage Thais Yulman, had given them was proving its worth, despite its rough appearance. The soldiers didn't realize that there were two people hiding behind the transparent shield.

However, the shield would only buy them a few minutes at most, so they could only hope that the soldiers would dismiss their suspicions and retreat in the meantime.

"We should still thoroughly search the area just in case..."

"Wait, step back!"

One of the soldiers, who were debating amongst themselves, suddenly yelled out. At the same moment, the armor that was blocking the path of Yuder and Kiolle made a strange clanging sound, as though two pieces of metal were colliding, and began to move its limp body and limbs.

"It's the Armor Knight of Luma!"

Yuder, who was suppressing a sensation that seemed ready to burst out of his body from behind the small shield, turned his head with difficulty upon hearing the strange sound.

In the Deluma Palace, named after the Archmage Luma, there was an armor knight who had been enchanted and had moved about freely for nearly a thousand years. The mysterious entity that Jimmy had once said he wanted to see was apparently here today. The empty armor, brandishing its sword noisily, caused the soldiers to curse and retreat.

"Why did that thing have to be here. Why was it pretending to be a normal armor? Damn it."

"Such a fool. Mistaking the noise made by the armor knight for a human voice? Can't you make a proper judgement? We need to find those rats as soon as possible! Step back!"

Even after the soldiers had vanished behind the armor, Yuder did not move. The giant armor, casting red light from its eye sockets, looked around clumsily, then walked away in the opposite direction of the soldiers, its movements echoing metallically. The shield that had been surrounding the two also lost its power and disappeared.

"...Huff."

Finally, Kiolle let out his held breath and slumped.

"To think I'd see the Armor Knight of Deluma Palace here... I've never seen it before despite searching so much when I was young... Hey, you saw it too, right? But what was that bracelet from before? A magic artifact? You're a strange one. Why did you hide that?"

Yuder didn't have the mental capacity to respond to Kiolle's chattering. He felt as if something might burst through his skin at any moment. Every time his consciousness flickered, his instincts screamed danger.

"Uh, haah. Uh..."

Instead of replying, Yuder suppressed his pain by scratching the ground, causing Kiolle to finally realize there was no time to indulge in his sentiments and quickly helped him up. Even the slight contact brought a pain so severe, it felt like his bones were shattering and his body trembled violently.

"Let go..."

"If you die, I might die too, so I can't leave you. I'll take you to the party, after that, you're on your own! There are your companions there, they'll figure something out."

That wouldn't do. There were too many people at the party. Yuder didn't even think he would be able to handle it properly until Kiolle was gone. In a hurry, Yuder pushed him away and, nearly collapsing, leaned against a wall, taking deep breaths.

"Huff, gasp."

A door appeared in front of his eyes, blurred by intense pain. Dragging his legs, he walked towards it and, upon opening it, revealed a small room, seemingly used for storing cleaning tools and utensils within the palace.

'This could work.'

Gradually, making a proper judgement became more difficult, but this place seemed sufficient to hide for a while. Yuder gritted his teeth and looked back at Kiolle. He might have been better off being discovered by the prince's servants than asking for help from such a fool, but given the circumstances, he had to try as much as possible.

"If you really want to help, there's only one thing you can do. I'll stay here, and as I said before, pretend you got lost and return to report to the Commander."

"What?"

"Manifestation. Just tell him a manifestation has occurred, he'll understand... but also tell him he shouldn't come."

"What? What does that mean? How can I..."

"Go."

Before Kiolle could object any further, Yuder closed the door. If Kiolle tried to come back in, Yuder was prepared to launch the button, regardless of the consequences for his body. Fortunately, it was quiet outside the door.

Although Yuder had almost no hope that Kiolle would successfully deliver the message, even if he failed, if an hour passed and he didn't return, Kishiar would start looking for Yuder. That was the only part he could trust.

Finally, the strength drained out of his barely standing legs. Like a wounded animal, Yuder crawled on the ground, moving towards the most secluded corner.

'I still have work to do...'

He had to find the carriage that the deceased Lenore had ridden in. The Crown Prince's servants had claimed that the servant Lenore brought didn't seem to know anything, but if he looked again, he might find something different. How much of the hour Kishiar had given him was left?

As he gently bit his lip, a deep throb echoed within his body again.

"Ugh..."

Yuder swallowed his groan, wrapping his arms around his body.

'Of all times...'

He had anticipated the manifestation was approaching. He had prepared in his own way. But this was definitely earlier than the time he had predicted based on memories from his previous life. Was it due to the spot? Or was it because he had encountered Alphas in heat?

'No... what's the use of speculating. It's already started.'

There was no point trying to predict an incident after it had already occurred. This was a fact he had come to understand from a similar experience in his past life.

Struggling, Yuder got up and leaned against a corner that wasn't easily noticeable between the walls, sitting down with his knees up. In this position, even if his strength disappeared and his sanity fled, he should be able to activate the magic tool quickly.

Listening to his rapid breathing in the pitch black room where no light penetrated, his mind started to go blank. His body, which had been chillingly cold due to pain just moments ago, was now radiating heat and dripping cold sweat. From his fingertips to his toes, his entire body writhed in pain as if his bones were being squeezed in a vice, and he groaned.

'The full manifestation will start soon.'

Turning

Chapter 156

Yuder had never regarded minor pain as actual suffering, but this sensation was entirely different. Despite his mind casually dismissing it, his instincts were helpless and terrified in the face of the impending upheaval. Who could possibly comprehend this horrifying sensation?

Being an Awakener did not necessarily mean one would undergo second gender manifestation. Furthermore, those who did experience the second gender manifestation didn't all manifest in the same way.

Typically, signs of upcoming changes would manifest as persistent low-grade fevers or pain over a few days, followed by a slow transformation while being sick for nearly a week. However, there were individuals who unpredictably spewed out all the pain in a single moment, undergoing a sudden change. Yuder was one such unfortunate case.

The onset of the first in-heat period after manifestation varied as well. Some would not experience their first in-heat period for a long time after the second gender manifestation, while others would enter their in-heat period immediately after.

The cause of this variance remained unknown despite research from previous lives. The only known fact was that those who awakened their power and experienced second gender manifestation simultaneously underwent the transformation with the least amount of pain.

The body that he was familiar with, and had been living in, spewed out heat in an instant, contorting and changing fundamentally. Though the exterior appeared the same as before, inside it had become an entirely new body. That was all Yuder knew about the second gender manifestation.

'I was better prepared this time around.... But why does the manifestation always begin at these unpredictable moments, before and now?'

If possible, he would prefer not to experience the manifestation this time. Ever since his second gender manifestation, he hadn't been able to find a single good thing that had come from it.

'Will I emerge as an Omega again this time?'

He could guess that he probably would, but it was unknowable. Having returned to the past, many things had changed, including his body which had become entirely unpredictable. It felt like it would have been easier to face endless enemies or giant monsters alone.

Yuder buried his heavy head in his knees. Even the soft touch of the ceremonial robe that draped his body began to feel like prickly thorns, but he had to endure somehow.

His gradually numbing consciousness began to drift in an ocean of unrecognizable memories within the endless moment of patience.

At that moment, Gakane Bolunwald was walking in a garden with a tired face, leaving the party hall, a spectacle of extravagant carriages lined up in clear view.

Even before the party had properly begun, the second son of Apeto had died, so he had to deal with fewer people than he had prepared for. However, there were still countless nobles who threw veiled insults at him.

Despite being indifferent to anyone's death, he felt disgusted having to smile and fend off those who boldly and oppressively showed interest in the handsome young man.

'You really are handsome. A Cavalry, you say? Wouldn't it be better for you to join our family rather than staying there?'

'If you're interested, contact me. I'll help you so you don't feel lonely.'

'Bolunwald, isn't it? Ah. I know. A famous old family from the south, isn't it? You must have had a hard time coming here. Isn't it tough to deal with commoners?'

It was somehow tolerable when they were openly interested in his youth or appearance. However, those who drained Gakane the most were those who knew of his family's downfall and mocked him subtly.

After Lenore's death, he expected Kishiar to depart immediately, but for some reason, he kept the Cavalry lingering in the party hall. Unable to bear it any longer, Gakane stepped outside, yet thinking about returning made his shoulders feel heavy.

'Where could Yuder have gone? He's been out of sight for a while now...'

Perhaps it was harder without Yuder, who, by his mere presence, used to be a solid wall providing a breather for the members. As he walked, lost in his thoughts, Gakane noticed a man wandering around restlessly not far away.

'Judging by the emblem on his clothes, he seems to be from the Apeto family?'

"Hey, why are you wandering around like this?"

"Heeek."

Approaching the man with a skeptical mind, the man jumped back in surprise as if startled. His gaze scanned over Gakane's white formal attire, and the emblem signifying his membership in the Cavalry.

"Ca, Ca, Cavalry?"

"That's right."

Upon responding with a suspicious expression, the man abruptly stood up, gripping Gakane's arm. His eyes, reddened and soaked with sweat, glimpsed a desperate frenzy.

"Cavalry! Please, save me! Isn't the third prince there right now? Please, take me to meet him! I beg you."

"What are you doing... Who are you to act this way?"

"I am a servant of the second prince, Lenore!"

It was only then that the servant, who had been nervously looking around, revealed his identity.

'A servant of the dead second prince?'

Gakane felt an odd premonition and decided to listen to the man's story.

"It would be difficult to assist you if you do not explain why you want to meet Prince Revlin. Please, tell me first."

"Our prince... he came here today to meet someone. He had a message for me before coming here, saying that if he cannot return, I should deliver a letter to the third prince. I didn't think much of it then, but now that things have turned out this way..."

The servant thought that perhaps Lenore had foreseen this situation after hearing the news of his death from poison. Of course, Lenore himself might not have imagined that he could end up like this; he was merely preparing for the worst-case scenario after his meeting with the Crown Prince. But the dead could not provide answers.

There was only flogging and death waiting for a servant returning to the main house after the death of his master. The only way left for him to live was to find Revlin and deliver Lenore's letter, but with just a servant's body, how could he find Revlin hidden deep within the Cavalry? His mind went blank, unable to maintain calm.

Upon hearing the explanation from the man who had appeared before him, Gakane, who had run out of the party hall and was aimlessly wandering around, opened his mouth and blinked his eyes in surprise.

'This is... an unexpected turn of events.'

"Do you know who Prince Lenore came to meet?"

"I... I don't know. I'm just... when the attendants came and asked a similar question earlier, I gave them the same answer."

"Attendants? Whose attendants are you talking about?"

"Well, it was those with red belts around their waists..."

For a moment, the image of Prince Katchian's attendants, each wearing red belts around their waists, flashed through Gakane's mind like lightning.

'The Crown Prince's attendants sought out the servant to ask him... No, it may be true that the poison that Lenore drank was originally intended for the Crown Prince. That's possible, but still... a bit...'

It was strange. Lenore only accidentally took the poison, so was there any need to send the Crown Prince's direct attendants to question Lenore's servant? Even if they were curious, they could have asked the palace guards who had already begun their investigation.

Gakane opened his mouth, feeling a strange premonition that a key to resolving this matter might be right in front of him now.

"Did you also tell them about the letter?"

"No, nobody asked about it and I didn't think to mention it either..."

"You did well."

"Pardon?"

Gakane extended his hand toward the confused servant.

"Hand me the letter now. I will take responsibility and tell the Commander right away that I will send you and the letter safely to the Cavalry headquarters."

Looking at the handsome young man's face, full of integrity and confidence, unlike his master who always scowled, the servant seemed momentarily lost for words. If he couldn't trust such a person, then who could he trust?

"Ah, understood..."

Taking full advantage of his appearance which he admittedly dislike, Gakane easily acquired Lenore's letter. He sent the servant on his way to the Cavalry carriage and told him to hide there, then immediately made his way toward the banquet hall.

At the entrance of the banquet hall, there was a man seemingly out of breath, as if he had just rushed there, presenting his identification.

"I told you, I got lost! Why do you always have to check these things!"

The man's sharp voice and face seemed familiar to Gakane. It was Kiolle da Diarca, the son of Duke Diarca, who had previously gotten into numerous quarrels with Yuder and had been promptly thrown out.

Gakane frowned and quickly turned his body towards another entrance, hoping to avoid Kiolle's attention.

However, as he passed by at a distance, Gakane abruptly halted, having caught a whiff of an odd scent.

'...A scent?'

Could you call it a scent? It was something similar, but so potent it made his skin tingle - an invisible something was emanating from Kiolle.

And Gakane had smelled something similar before.

From the in-heat Awakeners of the Apeto family that was recently rescued by the Cavalry, in Jimmy's quarters after he had manifested his second gender and had been bedridden for several days, and from many of his colleagues in the Cavalry who had passed him by in a state nearing heat.

'...But he's definitely not an Awakener, right?'

While watching Kiolle, who was now entering the banquet hall, Gakane caught sight of a man who had turned his head exactly in his direction from where the imperial family was gathered.

Kishiar La Orr stood up, asking for the people around him to excuse him. For the first time, Gakane saw the ever-smiling Commander's face turn serious, the smile fading away.

Upon seeing his face, Gakane felt a chill run down his spine for no apparent reason. It wasn't just him; he noticed several Cavalry members holding their breath and staring at the same spot. It didn't take long for Gakane to realize they had all manifested their second gender.

Turning

Chapter 157

The majority of the partygoers, most of whom were ordinary people, were busy laughing and chattering, seemingly oblivious to this peculiar situation. However, only those who had manifested their second gender were unable to breathe properly, feeling the massive energy that Kishiar exuded throughout their bodies.

How could such a strong presence emanate from one person? They thought they had grown somewhat accustomed to the intense energy that Kishiar carried around, having observed him up close for a while, but the sensation they felt now was different, in a different dimension.

Just when Gakane almost leaned against the wall due to the overwhelming pressure, Kishiar suddenly withdrew his energy. Gakane, who should have quickly entered the hall alone to deliver the letter handed over by Lenore's servant to him, gasped hurriedly to endure the suddenly vanished pressure, having completely forgotten his mission.

"It's been a while, Kiolle da Diarca. I thought you had left, not seeing you around. It seems you've been rushing around somewhere."

Kishiar, who casually took a glass filled with a beverage from a passing servant's tray, opened his mouth naturally towards Kiolle, whose breath hadn't fully returned yet.

"Ah, ... yes."

Even Kiolle, famously known for his unpleasant demeanor, strangely wilted in front of Kishiar. It was fortunate that Kishiar approached first since he came to meet him, but to be honest, Kishiar was not someone he wanted to meet one-on-one.

'Did he notice something already and approach?'

Kiolle hadn't thought that any particular energy, which only the ones who had manifested their second gender could feel, was emanating from his body. However, he was sensitive enough to notice the gazes glancing at him and Kishiar from all around. Among them was, of course, Crown Prince Katchian.

Given that the insufferable Duke of Peletta had approached Kiolle first, it was understandable for Crown Prince Katchian to be apprehensive. From afar, his third elder brother, who came with him, bulged his eyes and signaled him to come over.

Everyone seemed to be pretending not to watch, but they were all highly alert to what the two would say to each other.

'If it were a normal situation, I would have quickly left the Duke of Peletta's presence before arousing any suspicion....'

Unfortunately, he couldn't do that now. Kiolle thought of the man with black hair he left behind. That insolent and annoying man who only spoke without knowing the hierarchy due to his chubby face. He who had dared to threaten to put him, who didn't even know the status of the Diarca family, into eternal sleep if he didn't help, had forced Kiolle to make a spine-chilling vow. That man was currently enduring an inexplicable pain in a small room.

'Why on earth did I follow him and come here to do this?'

Kiolle had regretted following him countless times on his way back here. He even thought it might be better if the Duke of Peletta and the Cavalry members were gone by the time he returned.

However, Duke Peletta was still here, and he even approached quickly enough that Kiolle didn't even need to think of an excuse to start a conversation.

While trying to erase the face of the black-haired man who was a constant annoyance, Kiolle forced his brow to smooth in an effort to not display his discomfort.

"I stepped out to get some fresh air, but I got lost on my way back."

"Really? Didn't you visit here last year as well? It's surprising that someone like you, who frequently visits the palace, would lose their way."

Kishiar, feigning surprise, soon nodded with a smile.

"But I suppose that could happen in Deluma Palace. After all, it's said to be a place where the magic of the Archmage Luma still lives and breathes, and sometimes paths appear that weren't there before."

"Is...that so?"

'Damn this Duke Peletta.' Kiolle cursed inwardly at Kishiar's face, which wore a mocking smile as if he were the fool.

'Damn it. I need to speak up and get out of here, but I can't think of what to say because he keeps making unnecessary comments.'

Without knowing Kiolle's growing impatience, Kishiar continued speaking with a calm face.

"You smell different today. Have you changed your perfume?"

"No, I... I'm not sure... You seem to have a keen interest in scents."

Why was he making such a fuss about a perfume? Kishiar whispered softly in a low voice when Kiolle replied with a grimacing face.

"I'm quite interested. Among us Awakeners, there are occasionally those who emit scents that ordinary people cannot perceive. It's much stronger than body odor, and sometimes it even rubs off on a third person who has been with the person emitting the scent. Quite a fascinating phenomenon, isn't it?"

Kiolle didn't understand what Kishiar meant by these words. However, upon hearing the word 'Awakener', he saw an opportunity to bring up his purpose and quickly opened his mouth.

"I don't know much about the power of the...the 'Awakener', or rather, I'm not interested in such things. I heard there's something called 'manifestation', is that related?"

He hoped that Kishiar would catch on, but his face remained unperturbed.

"Do you know about 'Second Gender Manifestation'? Interesting. Who told you?"

'Who told me?' He felt instinctively that this was the optimal moment to pass on the information he had intended. Kiolle lifted the cup to his lips as if to take a sip of his drink and spoke in the smallest voice possible.

"...Someone said that if I mention this, Your Grace would understand."

The bitter-tasting sip of drink left a trail down his throat. Kiolle, who had put down his cup, stiffened his shoulders in surprise when he saw Kishiar's red pupils strangely glowing.

'What is this?'

"Indeed... My assistant has left his seat earlier and has not yet returned. I thought he might have lost his way, being fascinated by the magic like you... You two know each other, right?"

"...Yes. We've met."

It was a conversation without a clear subject, but both could vaguely guess the meaning.

"My assistant has been consistently requested by the Diarca Family to be sent from the Cavalry. I thought you were still angry about that incident, but it seems not."

"To be honest, I was only intimidated."

"Intimidated, you say."

Hiding his lips behind the cup and murmuring in response, Kishiar's eyes thinned into a smile.

"Thank you for telling me. I won't forget to repay you for this favor in the future."

Kishiar turned and vanished towards the terrace. Only then did Kiolle let out a thin breath and relax his tensed body. He realized he had been much more on edge than he'd thought, which irritated him.

'Helping that guy...'

It was all because of the oath. If it hadn't been for that damn oath, he wouldn't have dared to have a loud conversation with Kishiar in front of the Crown Prince.

"Kiolle! Have you gone mad? How dare you converse with Duke Peletta in the presence of His Highness the Crown Prince!"

As soon as Duke Peletta disappeared, his third elder brother scolded Kiolle with a low voice. However, the admonishment did not frighten him in the least. He was an annoying presence, always sulking and jealous of Kiolle, for he himself could not gain even a sliver of their father's attention.

Compared to the wrath of the dark-haired Cavalry member who'd recklessly throw punches at people, his brother's mild hostility was laughably feeble.

"I didn't say anything special. He approached me and started talking, I just responded. What did I do wrong?"

As Kiolle retorted sharply, his brother's face turned beet-red with embarrassed anger.

"I knew you were getting complacent because you're Father's favorite, but today you've gone too far. When we get home, I'm going to tell Father everything that happened today..."

'So do it, or don't.'

Ignoring his brother's words, Kiolle turned his gaze, only to be startled upon realizing that Kishiar, who'd just been in the hall, had suddenly vanished. It was a mystery how such a tall figure with a strong presence could disappear in an instant.

'Ah. That's right. I forgot to tell him that last bit the Cavalry member had said, Your Highness.'

Hadn't the Cavalry member said that Kishiar didn't need to come? A slightly uncomfortable feeling came over him, but he decided it wasn't very important. After all, he'd given most of the necessary information; that should be enough for the man to bow in gratitude to Kiolle.

Even with Kishiar briefly absent, the atmosphere of the party did not change. Some had left for home, but most were engrossed in discussing who might have been behind Lenore's death and the assassination attempt on the Crown Prince.

In the center of everyone's attention, the concerned Crown Prince Katchian maintained his dignified demeanor, but his mind was elsewhere. He discreetly called over a servant who had been keeping an eye on his surroundings and engaged him in conversation.

"Did you find the strange man who knocked out the servants and disappeared?"

"Not yet, Your Highness."

"Your skills are less than I expected."

"But, Your Highness, nothing has yet transpired against your commands. They say there were no signs of anyone entering the underground storeroom, so perhaps the servants fainted for some other reason."

"Some other reason..."

Facing the gaze of the Crown Prince, the trembling servant opened his mouth to reply.

"I thought it might be due to the magic left behind by the Archmage Luma in the Deluma Palace. There was a report of encountering the Armor Knight earlier, so I judged there was a possibility that the fainted servants might have unknowingly provoked the Armor Knight..."

"Why are you the one to make that judgment?"

Turning

Chapter 158

"Why are you the one to make that judgment?"

Interrupting mid-sentence, the gaze of Crown Prince Katchian appeared serenely calm on the surface, yet held a chilly depth.

"Did I ever say you could?"

"N-no, Your Highness."

"I've known all along that you listen more to Duke Diarca's words than mine. But I didn't realize you were foolish enough to think your opinion superior to your master's."

Listening to the Crown Prince's low, murmuring words, a chill ran down the spine of the servant. The Crown Prince's face betrayed no anger.

"No, Your Highness. You misunderstand. I exist to serve you and only you. Why would you say such a thing?"

"Is that so? Then, are you saying your action of dealing with matters without informing me, who had issued the command, is merely a misunderstanding and not a sign of your disregard for me?"

"Absolutely not. From the moment you first entered the palace, I've faithfully stood by your side. Please don't doubt my loyalty."

Hearing the servant's words, Katchian was silent for a while. This was the first time the servant had encountered such a situation since serving the Crown Prince, causing him to feel rather flustered. The majority of those serving Katchian were appointed by Duke Diarca, but until now, that fact had never been a problem.

The Crown Prince, a calm and insightful boy, had always respected the opinion of Duke Diarca, who had placed him in his current position. He had never significantly rebelled against the duke's words. But what could have prompted him to speak this way now?

'Could it be because of the discomfort he's felt throughout the festival period....'

Duke Diarca had confidently expected to land a blow on Duke Peletta and his Cavalry during the festival, but he had not succeeded even once until this day. This failure had created an awkward tension between the duke and the prince for the first time, which in turn had led to the presence of only their third child and Kiolle at today's party.

It was enough for the still young prince to grow discontent with the capabilities of the Diarca household and decide to take matters into his own hands.

'If His Highness intends to draw a line and warn Duke Diarca, how should I report this matter to the Duke....'

As if reading the flurry of thoughts racing through the startled servant's mind, Prince Katchian remained silent for a long while. Only when beads of cold sweat began to stream down the servant's bowed back did the prince finally respond in his usual tone.

"I'll let this one slide."

"Th-thank you, Your Highness."

"Act as befits your station and spare me your unnecessary thoughts. Do not give me a reason to doubt you."

"Of course, Your Highness. I promise I won't repeat such a foolish mistake."

"Good."

After saying this, Crown Prince Katchian changed the atmosphere and issued a new command.

"Reduce the personnel searching for the assassin to a minimum and focus on pursuing Duke Peletta. He has abruptly slipped away; he must have an objective."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"And... the man I asked Duke Diarca to look into after the parade incident on the first day of the festival. I didn't see him today."

"My apologies, Your Highness. Could you clarify who you mean..."

"The Cavalry member who took care of the assassin in place of Duke Peletta."

"Ah, yes. I remember now."

Though he had spoken, the events of that day remained a faint memory in the servant's mind. There was indeed a Cavalry member who Prince Katchian had abruptly ordered to be investigated, immediately following the shocking event when the assassins ambitiously prepared by Duke Diarca all failed miserably. However, Duke Diarca did not take Katchian's words too seriously, acknowledging them superficially and subsequently conducting no investigation.

Prince Katchian also remained silent, and it was thought that he had forgotten about it due to the increasing tension with Duke Diarca. But, apparently, this was not the case.

"If the entire Cavalry has arrived today, he surely would have come as well. Was anyone missing?"

"Everyone is accounted for, as far as I'm aware."

Prince Katchian turned his gaze around, scanning the various clusters of people scattered throughout the vast hall. They were the Cavalry members, all dressed in identical white formal attire.

"I could have misremembered his face, it was such a brief encounter... but I can't help but be concerned. I was rather curious to see him again today."

"Pardon?"

Upon hearing the servant's confused murmuring, a trace of annoyance flickered across Katchian's face.

"That's enough. Go ahead and start the tasks I've ordered immediately."

"Understood."

With a hint of fear that the prince might detain him again to say something, the servant hastily retreated as if his tail was on fire. Left alone, Prince Katchian calmly returned to the other nobles and took a seat next to the fatigued Empress.

Although she was pretending otherwise, he could feel the Empress's discomfort towards him, but he could easily ignore such minor irritations.

'She will have nowhere to go once the Emperor dies soon.'

Despite being part of the most prestigious imperial family of the Orr Empire, both the Empress, infamous for her weak blood as a lowborn from the Herne Duchy, and Prince Katchian, an adoptive child brought up from the Diarca family, were like outsiders brought in from elsewhere.

As the childless Empress, rendered so by the barren Emperor, he could well imagine the anxiety she must feel every time she saw him. That's why Katchian felt a minor sense of relief whenever he looked at her.

Always appearing alone in the official ceremonies on behalf of the Emperor, then retiring, the Empress was like a living proof of Katchian's bright future.

"Your Highness, the Crown Prince! You have arrived."

Facing the nobles feigning concern about his near-assassination, the young Crown Prince offered a gentle smile.

"Commander!"

Meanwhile, Gakane, who had been unable to enter the hall and was catching his breath, suddenly saw the towering figure stepping out and hastily rose to his feet. The tall Kishiar, who had been striding along, his numerous jewels clashing and ringing, stopped in his tracks upon seeing Gakane.

The eerie feeling he had earlier tried to resurface at the sight of Kishiar, but Gakane forcefully swallowed it down. At first glance, Kishiar did not look much different than usual.

"Commander, where are you heading to?"

"You're the one to talk. Why are you here all alone?"

"I am..."

Struggling to find the right words, Gakane finally remembered the letter from Lenore tucked away in his possession and quickly pulled it out.

"I was feeling a bit stifled, so I stepped outside for a moment and received this."

"A letter, you say?"

"The deceased Lenore Shand Apeto had left it to a servant, saying he wished to entrust it to Prince Revlin. After the servant delivered it and requested protection, I provisionally agreed and received it."

Usually, Kishiar would have responded immediately, but he merely looked at the piece of paper without saying a word.

"...Commander?"

Upon hearing Gakane's cautious call, Kishiar took a deep breath, closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"Be careful with that letter. It has a bad odor."

"Pardon?"

"When you return, send it directly to my office. Also, if you return to the hall, could you find Ever Beck or Steiber Rendley and ask them to oversee the Cavalry's return on my behalf?"

"Oversee the return? Then, Commander, you..."

"I need to dine with His Majesty the Emperor today, so I may stay a bit longer. I had previously arranged this, so the assistant and Deputy Commanders are already informed. Just relay my message, and they will handle it. Don't worry."

"Understood."

Before Gakane knew it, Kishiar was back to his impeccable Commander-like demeanor as if his earlier strange behavior was a lie.

"Normally, I should personally order the return, but now... an unexpected matter has arisen."

"An unexpected matter, you say..."

"Could you handle it for me?"

Instead of answering the question, Kishiar issued an order. Gakane was slightly worried, but he nodded in response.

"Certainly. Then, Commander, do we send all the troops back without leaving anyone to accompany you?"

"No."

Kishiar, who had turned around again, gave a curt reply and looked somewhere. Following his gaze, Gakane saw a few groups of soldiers walking beyond the corridor. Judging by their scanning of the surroundings, it seemed they were investigating the death of Lenore.

Watching them quietly, Kishiar opened his mouth in a low voice.

"Assistant, Yuder Aile will stay. Don't worry."

Upon hearing Yuder's name, Gakane recalled that he had not seen him in the party hall for a while.

'Did the Commander send him on an errand beforehand?'

"Then, I'll leave it to you."

As soon as Kishiar finished his last words, he immediately turned around and disappeared. Only after his figure had disappeared to the end of the corridor did Gakane realize what the strange atmosphere he felt from Kishiar was.

'Ah. I see.'

It was anxiety. Kishiar, unlike his usual self, had briefly revealed a hint of restlessness.

Why would the Commander, who always maintained a smile and poise in any situation, abruptly leave the hall in such a way? Although Kishiar, a member of the imperial family, would not be in danger moving alone in the imperial palace, Gakane couldn't help but worry, having seen his unusual behavior. However, as a Cavalry member, Gakane knew that carrying out the task the Commander had entrusted to him was a priority.

He put the letter back in his pocket and took out his identity badge.

Turning

Chapter 159

The moment when Yuder Aile first manifested his second gender happened unexpectedly while he was in his office, engaged in his usual reporting routine.

He could not recall exactly what he was discussing at that time. It was likely the usual banter about the day's training, fitting for a Deputy Commander well into his cups.

That day, Kishiar looked utterly exhausted, as if he had been up for several nights. Despite his fatigue, he insisted on finishing all his duties before resting, which irritated Yuder. Only later would Yuder realize that this was due to Kishiar nearing his heat. Nonetheless, it was a day like any other.

Until that event occurred.

'Why the sudden change?'

Kishiar, with a puzzled look on his face, asked Yuder who had abruptly stopped speaking mid-sentence. However, Yuder couldn't respond. By the time he had sensed something was wrong and risen to his feet, an overwhelming storm had already started enveloping his body.

'Something feels...wrong. My body...'

As Yuder collapsed, a disoriented Kishiar managed to catch him. While his actions were kind, in hindsight, it was the worst response.

The moment they made contact, the balance Yuder was barely maintaining shattered. An immense collision occurred within an invisible space.

Yuder felt as if something was breaking violently within him. All that remained in the wake of the pain swirling around him like a storm, mingled with the fragments of what had broken, was a heat so intense that it felt as though his entire body would turn to ash.

Had there been even a slight moment to resist the power overwhelming his body or to gather his thoughts, perhaps things could have changed. But such a moment was never given. Only then did Yuder

realize how easily the physical could transcend the limits of reason and enter a realm where control was impossible.

And then, it was over.

He managed to regain consciousness a few times. But that was it. Yuder sunk endlessly into a daze, devoid of reason and cognition. The only thing he could do was cling desperately to what he perceived as a lifeline.

Terrifying pain. Vicious pleasure.

Fear of everything forcibly merging, knotted together like a jumbled patchwork of rags.

Just when he thought he had reached the limit, a deeper abyss opened below.

All traces of the human Yuder Aile were crushed and melted away, replaced by something foreign. No matter how fiercely he struggled, bit, or flailed, he couldn't escape this invasion. Against this novel assault, he was utterly powerless.

After melting and merging, when his consciousness finally reawakened, a week had passed since the manifestation began.

'I'm sorry.'

Kishiar, who had awakened before him and had been by his side all this time, muttered with a devastated look on his face.

'It's not your fault.'

While his mind couldn't understand why Kishiar was apologizing, his heart flared up with intense pain.

It was merely a case of unfortunate timing. His first heat had coincided with the onset of the second gender manifestation, with an Alpha Awakener on the verge of his heat present. Regardless of what had transpired, he didn't die, and his abilities were not impaired, so it was all right. Such thoughts should have put an end to the matter, but he could no longer accept this reality as cleanly as he used to.

Every sense of sight, sound, and touch felt strangely different, as if the very process of perception and cognition had been altered. This bizarre feeling was unbearably discomforting.

This sensation was evidence of a change that couldn't be reversed.

Since that day, Yuder could no longer treat Kishiar as he once had. It was a fact that was strange and occasionally, regrettable. And just as Yuder had changed, Kishiar, too, had changed significantly since that day.

Their relationship, emotions, distance, and many other nameless aspects that constituted and supported the two were all stirred up beyond count. The fact that he had become a second gender manifester with no scent, unlike others, was not even surprising in comparison to these changes.

'I'm not sure what happened to us, but I'll try to figure it out. Definitely.'

Definitely. Though he said this, there was no strength in Kishiar's voice. He never managed to reveal the true nature of the peculiar incidents that had occurred between them for a week until he eventually died.

And the same held true for Yuder, who had outlived Kishiar. After manifesting his second gender, he met with lovers who had mixed bodies, and even those who had had children, but none of them said they had experienced the same things. There was no one who could clearly explain what had happened between Kishiar and Yuder...

"..."

Yuder suddenly opened his eyes. His mouth was dry due to pain and heat. His surroundings were so narrow and dark that he could not distinguish between the past and reality he had just been lost in.

However, the touch of a small bracelet in his writhing, moving fingers helped him to regain a bit of his senses.

He was still tightly clutching the magic tool bracelet, sitting with his knees up as before. Despite his mind feeling hazy as if submerged in water, his bodily senses were surprisingly sharp and vivid, bringing immense pain whenever he moved even a little, causing an involuntary groan.

Swallowing his labored breath, he stuck out his tongue to moisten his lips, but an unbearable thirst overwhelmed him.

'How much time has passed?'

It was hard to tell time without a window. He couldn't even confirm if there was any sign of movement outside. The pain was too unbearable when he tried to move his gaze slightly, so Yuder quickly closed his eyes again.

According to the memories from his previous life, the heat came as soon as the pain ended. He didn't know if it would be the same this time, but all he wanted was for it to end quickly. Even the sensation of sweat trickling down his forehead was painful enough to make his hands tremble.

'Soon, quickly.'

Repeating the same words over and over, he was suddenly hit by a strange realization. Thinking back, he remembered spending his time in a similar way when he was locked up in the imperial prison, facing death in his previous life.

After the torture ended and he was thrown back into prison, there was nothing else to do but to blankly let the flow of pain pass, making it a rather unamusing time.

Remembering that era, which was now a blurred memory, Yuder lost consciousness again. Suddenly, he woke up to a perceived presence.

The door was clearly shut, and his ears couldn't hear any sound. However, he could strangely perceive very clearly that someone was approaching from far away.

He had thought it a mistake, but it was not. Each time the slow but sure presence came closer from beyond the invisible wall, his breath quickened, and his body trembled. Yuder struggled to move within the agony, strengthening the grip on the bracelet he held.

And finally, when he sensed that the presence had drawn near, he exerted his strength and shattered the second crystal.

Crack.

A shield formed as the stone shattered from his fingertips. Simultaneously, a door silently opened, and a thin stream of light flowed in.

"..."

His eyes, accustomed to the darkness, experienced a sharp pain. Yuder, shielding his eyes from the light, was unable to recognize who was standing in the doorway. All he wished was for the person to remain oblivious to him and leave quickly.

However, as his vision gradually adjusted and the figure of his opponent began to take shape, and when it became clear enough to recognize the face,

All thoughts in his head came to a sudden halt and vanished.

Kishiar, supporting himself with an arm on the door frame, gazed down at him with serene eyes, dressed in disheveled formal attire. Even though he had put up a shield and should have been invisible, Yuder felt a piercing sensation as if his limbs were skewered under Kishiar's red gaze, and he let out a low groan.

It was unbelievable. How could he be here?

'Kishiar.'

His lips, which had unknowingly almost called the name, closed in silence, mixed with memories of the past.

In the silence, Kishiar's gaze slowly swept the narrow space, then focused on Yuder. A long sigh flowed over his expressionless face.

"...So you're there."

"..."

"The scent was seeping all the way out here. Judging by how much I struggled, it seems like you have manifested as an Omega."

Kishiar, who had been speaking slowly, suddenly tightened his grip on the door frame and then loosened it.

"You wouldn't know how many thoughts came to me on my way here. If something big had happened... if someone had found you before me and took you away... It's been a long time since I've had such a dizzying experience."

The moment he took his hand off the door frame and took a slow step forward, Yuder shattered the third stone in response to the slowly fading shield. As a new shield appeared over the one that was about to disappear, Kishiar furrowed his eyebrows and looked around.

"I see magic moving... Did you bring a magic tool? If so, it's for hiding. I have a rough idea where you got it, though..."

He took another step closer. As his body completely detached from the door frame, the door automatically closed, blocking out all light again. Yuder's body stiffened as it shivered reflexively.

'No.'

Wasn't it to avoid being alone with Alpha Kishiar in this situation that he had been trying so hard? Nightmarish memories flooded back in an instant, and the pain he had barely suppressed suddenly intensified. Yuder instinctively tried to retreat from Kishiar, but there was no more room to back up, already leaning against the wall.

"Are you listening?"

When Kishiar asked with a slightly strained expression, Yuder shattered the fourth stone.

"Even though you seem to be hiding from the eyes of others, this place is not safe. You need to release the invisibility to leave."

"..."

Kishiar, who had finally approached within a few steps, slowly extended his hand. However, his hand was halted in mid-air, unable to penetrate the shield. After palpating the solid barrier and chuckling as if amazed, Kishiar took several deep breaths and slowly sank to one knee.

"Please, Yuder."

Turning

Chapter 160

"Quickly, Yuder."

Thud.

As he took in a deep breath, a profound shock resonated within him once again. It was different from the agony that only served to intensify previously. It was a significant tremor, indicating that something within him, something that hadn't existed until now, had finally opened its eyes, taken form, and exhaled its first breath.

Without realizing it, Yuder's trembling hand reached down to his stomach. Even though he couldn't verbalize what had awakened, he knew instinctively with absolute clarity.

The most crucial part of the transformation of the second gender manifestation had just been 'fully' completed.

'Ah...'

Amidst shock and confusion, a heat that seemed to scorch his innards suddenly surged from the depths of his mind. For a few seconds, his consciousness flickered out, and when it returned, he saw the time-worn barrier in front of him slowly dissolving.

He had to shatter the last, fifth crystal in the bracelet, but his hand, weary from the dreadful pain and lethargy, could only twitch weakly, refusing to obey his will.

After the barrier completely disappeared, Yuder was left entirely exposed in front of Kishiar.

'...So it's a failure after all.'

This was the end. Kishiar would touch him soon, and no matter what happened next, it would be beyond his control. Kishiar was the Awakener he had no confidence of beating, an Alpha with immense, unending power. In his current, ruined physical condition, he was no match for him.

The same scenario from his previous life was about to repeat itself.

Overwhelmed by heat, self-loathing, and confusion, Yuder sighed and closed his eyes. Even his gasping sounds felt disgustingly repulsive, making his stomach churn.

" ... "

However, despite his waiting, no sign of the impending situation came from the front. Even as his panting calmed down somewhat, nothing changed.

'What's happening?'

Finally, Yuder lifted his head with great difficulty, moving his agonizing body slightly, and slowly opened his eyes. An amused smile floated above the red pupils that had been silently watching him.

"...Only now do you open your eyes."

Kishiar was still kneeling on one knee, lightly supporting himself on the ground with one hand. Even though half of his neatly styled hair was now disheveled, his eyes were still clear, showing no signs of agitation.

"Seeing you make that expression made waiting worthwhile."

"...Commander, you?"

"I'm disappointed. Hiding your body to prepare for the sudden manifestation of your second gender was a good idea, but did you need to treat me like an enemy too?"

"But, Commander, you... Second... Alpha... I... soon... in heat..."

With a bewildered face, Yuder stuttered out, only to be met by a pained smile from Kishiar.

"Yes. My second gender is indeed an Alpha. I can sense that you're about to be in heat following your manifestation. That's unique. But what does it matter?"

If he had been in better shape, he would have retorted: what do you mean, what does it matter? However, due to the pain, the only sounds escaping his lips were ragged breaths.

"Right now, I'm the Commander of the Cavalry, responsible for you. You bravely stepped forward alone for my sake, so now it's my turn to return the favor. I can handle this much easily, so all we need to do is find a safe place within and escape together."

Thud. A shock reverberated in his head once again.

However, Yuder was so focused on Kishiar's words that he could barely register the pain and heat from the shock.

"Yuder Aile. Whatever you're afraid of now, I promise it will never happen. Won't you trust me?"

A voice that was unexpectedly soft for the situation.

As soon as Kishiar finished speaking, the massive energy that had been surrounding him seemed to get drawn back into his body, hiding itself. It didn't completely disappear, but thanks to that, Yuder's spirit, which had been crushed by pressure and pain, managed to clear a bit.

The dark shadows of his past, which had obscured his vision, melted away. The sight that came into focus was of Kishiar suppressing himself greatly, waiting for Yuder's answer.

'...Who, exactly are you?'

Amidst the groans that could not form into words, numerous thoughts laden with pain swirled.

How? Why? Why that far?

Various thoughts swirled chaotically, but in the end, there was only one thought left.

That Kishiar in front of him would not tread the same path as in his previous life.

Despite having no evidence, he was filled with a clear conviction, as if there was a cause. As if spellbound, Yuder nodded his head very slowly.

Upon seeing this, Kishiar, as if he had been waiting for it, immediately stood up from his place and removed the jewel pin attached to the shoulder of his ceremonial dress, smiling.

"I usually don't like forcing anyone to make quick decisions, but the situation is a little unfavorable now, so it couldn't be helped. Cooperation is most crucial if both of us want to get out safely. Now, close your eyes."

In that moment, Yuder's gaze went to the bracelet on his wrist. A small crystal hanging by a thread. He could probably break it again now, but it seemed pointless.

A short hesitation disappeared like melting snow, and Yuder swallowed his hot breath, stretching out his body and closing his eyes. The golden cloak that Kishiar had removed from his shoulder settled over him.

"Uh..."

"Oh dear. Does this alone cause pain? I'm a little worried because you're sweating a lot."

Watching Yuder twitch, Kishiar, despite sounding concerned, quickly wrapped the cloak around him, completely covering him so no part of his body was exposed. It was done in a manner similar to how one would transport a patient or a corpse.

Before Kishiar's hand, holding the edge of the cloak, could cover his face, Yuder saw the sweat beads on his face. Even though he looked fine, it was indeed difficult to remain completely calm in front of an opponent who was wildly exhibiting his power.

'...Because of me.'

If it wasn't for him, if he didn't happen to manifest his second gender during his mission, none of this would have happened. Just as in his previous life, all that was left now was a sense of guilt.

"Commander, sir."

"Hm?"

As he managed to open his mouth and call, Kishiar understood and responded.

"I apologize. During the mission, just when...this..."

"Ah. Just in case you're blaming yourself for this situation, don't."

While gently supporting Yuder with one hand and holding him in his arms, Kishiar moved and opened his mouth low.

"The manifestation of the second gender is unpredictable for anyone. No matter how outstanding my assistant is, it's no one's fault that this has happened, as he cannot foresee the future. To be frank, I might also be to blame for leaving you to handle dangerous situations without any precaution."

'No.' Yuder thought, 'I could have anticipated it.' Although he hadn't prepared for the exact date, he thought he had somewhat prepared. However, the outcome still turned out like this. Remembering the unspeakable incident, he let out a thin breath. Kishiar remained silent for a moment to see what was on his mind before opening his mouth.

"Do you remember what happened on the day I manifested my second gender? It was worse than what you experienced today."

The day Kishiar manifested his second gender. He repeatedly murmured these words in his heat-soaked brain. It was a story he hadn't heard in detail even in his previous life.

"In hindsight... I'm not just ignorant about that..."

"One day two years ago, when I awakened, I was lying in my bedroom in Peletta Castle. It's a bit large for one person, but it's not a bad place. Anyway, right after awakening, didn't I have a manifestation? Terrified by the pain and heat I was experiencing for the first time, I thought my last day had come."

A weak chuckle echoed gently in his ear.

"What I did then... I called Nathan and made a big fuss to evacuate everyone from the castle. Then, I climbed to the top of the highest tower in the west of the castle. I knew what was there."

"..."

"I tried to kill myself with the Divine Sword Orr, which had been left unused after its previous owner used it. The divine sword inflicts a severe punishment if touched by someone not chosen by it."

For a moment, his bone-crushing pain seemed to disappear in surprise. Yuder was relieved that his face, hidden under his cloak, was not visible to Kishiar.

Kishiar's low and soft voice continued even as Yuder's body stiffened.

"But... as you see, I didn't die. Moreover, I became the Commander of the Cavalry like this. Life is really unpredictable. Isn't it? A bad thing happening today can lead to happiness tomorrow."

So, are you happy now?

Yuder suddenly wanted to ask, but the question quickly vanished in his fevered, hazy mind.

"...Over... there! ...Fo... found...!"

Then, voices of strangers came from not too far away. As Yuder stiffened his body, Kishiar soothingly patted his cloak and whispered.

"The hands and feet of Katchian who were chasing me have finally arrived. From now on, don't say anything and just stay as you are."

"...Huh..."

Instead of answering, a hot breath flowed out between his lips. Yuder slowly released the tension from his body and let himself lean into Kishiar's embrace. The dull and hazy pain came intermittently and it still hurt enough to make his limbs go numb, but he wasn't as fearful about the future as before.

Despite being in the midst of a manifestation and soon experiencing a surge of heat, the fact that he was leaning into the embrace of Kishiar, an Alpha, brought an oddly peaceful feeling.