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The tone of Emperor Keilusa was incomparably softer than when they had first met. Setting aside the formal language that he had to employ as an Emperor, his voice seemed surprisingly similar to Kishiar's.

"To meet the hero of the Great Sarain Forest in such an informal setting might not be appropriate, but I assume you didn't anticipate the nature of this occasion when you accepted the invitation. This is merely a meal with my one and only younger brother, so feel free not to worry too much."

Interpreting his words, it seemed as if he was saying that he understood Yuder Aile hadn't come here willingly. Even if Yuder didn't adhere to the complex protocols of the imperial palace, he would be lenient.

'So, family really is family. Seeing how he guesses Kishiar's actions without a single explanation...'

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Yuder murmured appreciatively, prompting Kishiar to make a faintly displeased face as he grumbled,

"Your Majesty, that's a bit much. I distinctly remember properly explaining the nature of this meeting to both you and my assistant."

"I'm sure you explained. Your subordinate, who always looks so troubled when he comes here, would have heard your explanation as well. Is it not the same now as it was then, making things difficult even when you know the people around you?"

"Ha, if you say that, my assistant might get the wrong idea."

"Calling a misunderstanding what one thinks upon hearing the truth seems inappropriate."

Kishiar, who stood in front of the Emperor, felt genuinely like a younger sibling in the presence of his older brother. Observing Emperor Keilusa, who wore glasses and had a scholarly, delicate face that displayed articulate mastery over language, Yuder quietly revised his evaluation of the man upwards.

He had already suspected that Emperor Keilusa had considerable skill in manipulating his environment through written and spoken words. But seeing him interact with Kishiar, this was clearly not merely 'considerable.'

Kishiar, who was not easily bested in verbal engagements, seemed in no way inferior to his blood relative.

As the seemingly similar yet different brothers conversed, the door at the rear opened, and trays of food were gradually placed on the table. Seeing the simple yet elegant dishes made with seasonal ingredients, Yuder was reminded of the imperial cuisine he had experienced under Emperor Katchian.

The food he had seen then had been uniformly large, flashy, and seasoned lavishly with expensive spices. Despite the increasing scarcity of ingredients due to ongoing climatic anomalies and disasters, Emperor Katchian had never cut corners. His extravagant imperial cuisine had quickly become symbolic of both him and the then Orr Empire.

It was astonishing how the same dish could be so different depending on who the Emperor ordering it was.

The food before him seemed to symbolize Emperor Keilusa himself, reinforcing Yuder's resolve concerning his treatment and choices. Coming here to see the Emperor's private side first was clearly a wise decision.

"Now, let us begin the meal. As this is Sir Aile's first meal here, let me call for a servant to assist you..."

Even the Emperor's meals, however simple, were bound by a set of rather intricate protocols. Anticipating that Yuder might not be familiar with these, the Emperor was about to call one of the attendants standing behind him.

It was considerate of him, but the problem was that Yuder had already internalized most of the palace etiquette.

'How much should I pretend not to know in order to appear adequately normal without being off-putting?'

Before coming here, he hadn't given it much thought, but now he realized it was a surprisingly difficult task.

As Yuder was mentally calculating, his eyebrows subtly knit together. At that moment, Kishiar raised his hand.

"That's taken care of. Since he came with me, I'll instruct him. Your Majesty, please eat at ease."

Unexpectedly, both Emperor Keilusa and Yuder turned their gaze towards Kishiar at the same time.

"...Wouldn't that make Sir Aile even more uncomfortable?"

"What are you talking about? From the perspective of someone who is here for the first time, isn't it more comfortable to be guided by someone you see every day? Right, Yuder?"

Before Kishiar's radiant smile, Yuder fell silent. It was clear that Kishiar had quickly picked up on his discomfort.

"...I'm fine either way."

"Very well."

Upon hearing his younger brother's audacious answer, the Emperor momentarily adjusted his glasses, as if pressing on his forehead. "Do as you please," he finally said, lifting his spoon. His ability to discern what could be discussed further and what couldn't was a testament to his profound wisdom. He clearly knew Kishiar La Orr well.

With a mischievous smile, Kishiar unfolded the neatly folded white cloths in front of him. Commoners often don't use any cloth when eating, but nobles always use one. It served to protect their clothes from food stains, or to wipe their mouths after eating.

However, in the Emperor's dining setting, three cloths were used.

The first cloth went on his lap, the second was tucked between the neck of his top to cover his chest, and the last was placed on the side most frequently used by his hand. This was to wipe his hand intermittently or serve as a backup in case the other two cloths got dirty.

Without needing explanation, Kishiar moved precisely so that his actions were evident. Yuder discreetly followed his lead but a tad slower.

Between the appetizers and the main course, there was a rule to dampen a cloth with water to wipe one's hands. The posture and sequence when using forks, spoons, and knives were also carried out in almost the same manner.

Initially, the Emperor watched Yuder carefully a few times, but when he saw that Yuder was adeptly following Kishiar's lead, he stopped looking and focused on his meal. Yuder noticed that the food placed in front of the Emperor was significantly less in quantity and made from softer ingredients compared to his own. Even though he spoke as if he wasn't that ill, it was apparent that he was in a condition where even eating was burdensome.

"Do you have any idea why I summoned you today?"

During the meal, the Emperor directed his words to Kishiar. It seemed like the real conversation was about to begin.

"Well, I understand it's not to revoke the palace entry prohibition. You were going to conclude the matter of last night's incident with a letter, weren't you?"

"Yes, that's right. Despite the surprising news that one more imperial sword mark has appeared, the likes of Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince have been unusually quiet. Whenever they are this quiet, noisy events usually follow. That's what worries me, and that's why I wish to borrow your perspective."

"So, you've changed your mind about me not getting involved, it seems."

Despite the snide and cunning reply, suggesting that the Emperor had changed his mind based on last night's events, the Emperor showed no particular reaction. Setting down the knife and fork he was holding, he calmly wiped his lips and responded.

"To be precise, it's not really a job. With the upcoming Cavalry award ceremony at the palace, many people are busy preparing, tailoring new outfits and buying jewels. I'm merely asking you to take a look around while you prepare as well."

"It seems the ones actually receiving the awards are rather quiet, while those who won't are even busier."

"Very busy, indeed. So much so that proper reports aren't coming in, despite unidentified tailors and jewel merchants flocking to the palace where the Crown Prince resides."

At that, Kishiar momentarily paused in cutting his meat.

"I see. The palace has been unusually quiet for a while now."

A sharp smile flickered in the eyes gazing at the Emperor. Yuder caught on that Kishiar likely had some idea about this roundabout information the Emperor had revealed.

"Among the rumors I've heard from outside, there's talk that these new tailors and jewel merchants are not what they seem. They are said to have been gaining a reputation for effectively treating troublesome ailments like migraines, ailments that even divine powers can't cure."

"If that's true, Duke Diarca would be extremely interested in such people. Is the Crown Prince also attending the party?"

"Yes, he sent word yesterday that he would attend."

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"Good news indeed. I'm exceptionally pleased as the Commander of the Cavalry that there's so much interest in this event for our Cavalry," Kishiar said with a bright smile. Just by looking at his face, one would think he was genuinely delighted to hear about the participation of Crown Prince Katchian at the party.

But everyone in the room knew that wasn't the case.

"Considering I planned to finalize preparations for the party attendance before this break is over, I'll certainly take note of your guidance," Kishiar continued.

"Looking forward to it."

"I'll be visiting Karl Lorwick Street in the Fourth Wall District tomorrow, it's been a while."

A neatly wrapped-up conversation. The Emperor, pleased with the response, took a few more spoonfuls of his meal—a delicately cooked mixture of vegetables, mushrooms, and soaked rice. This time, his gaze turned to Yuder, who had been quietly listening so far.

"Well... the real stars of the upcoming party are the likes of Sir Aile and such, and here I've started off with something boring."

"Not at all."

"I've heard impressive accounts of Sir Aile's exploits in the West. It's said you can manipulate multiple elements at once, is that true?"

"Yes, it is."

"Remarkable. Has this been the case from the beginning?"

Yuder paused before answering. He had lied when he first joined the Cavalry, saying he could only use two elements and that he could only channel them through his sword. Kishiar's gaze next to him was distracting.

Even though he knew Kishiar wouldn't add anything to whatever he said, that very fact made him more self-conscious.

"I gained the ability to use my power properly after I joined the Cavalry," Yuder finally answered, neither completely truthful nor entirely false.

"I see. Was it difficult undertaking missions in the West? I heard you were seriously injured and was concerned."

"Thanks to your concern, I've fully recovered."

The Emperor seemed eager to hear more details about how Yuder had managed to face the giant Pethuamet alone. Yuder answered, incorporating stories about other Cavalry members and those who had assisted at that time, so as not to make it sound like his own solitary accomplishment.

However, an unaccounted-for variable interfered: Kishiar.

"I'd like to add a little to that part. While it's true that others helped on the path to defeating that giant monster, the person who first suggested the idea was also my assistant."

"I see."

"...But it wouldn't have been possible without the cooperation from others, so we can't overlook that," Yuder said.

"Indeed. Nor can we overlook the fact that they later attempted to siphon off some smaller monsters for experimentation."

"Ah, I already encountered that part in the reports."

The Emperor nodded, recalling the incident. Kishiar grinned broadly. When Yuder silently stared at him, Kishiar, sensing his gaze, tilted his head with a casual shrug.

His face clearly communicated that there was no issue.

'I really can't discuss anything related to that time.'

Every word spoken drew out a host of comments about the Western Mage Union's mistakes, and even details about the injuries Yuder had sustained. Despite not having witnessed Yuder's actions against the monster, Kishiar added incredibly detailed descriptions, saying, "I only heard about this, but..." His embellishments were so vivid, they could have come straight out of a hero's tale.

Kishiar had thought he understood quite well the extent to which Yuder regretted the events that had unfolded, but now it seemed his understanding had been lacking.

If things continued this way, it seemed inevitable that Emperor Keilusa would come to believe that Yuder Aile had singlehandedly managed everything from start to finish, and had suffered all the injuries alone. Therefore, he hurriedly addressed Kishiar.

"Commander, I appreciate your high regard for me, but the question from His Majesty was about how I captured the monster. I believe it's only appropriate to answer accordingly. It's a fact that I moved with the help of others."

"True. I never said you were wrong. I just wanted to make clear that you were my assistant from beginning to end. Was there any falsehood in what I said?"

"..."



The issue wasn't whether there was falsehood or not, but that such statements could induce a biased perception in the listener. Yuder had no intention of appearing as if he alone was capable. Maybe in his naive and ignorant past life, he would have felt entitled to all the recognition, but not now.

He had realized, after dedicating a lifetime to it, that the spotlight required its own form of sacrifice. A nail that sticks out gets hammered down, and in the process, one often overlooks what's truly important.

Yuder was more content with his current life than his past life filled with wealth and honor. He had no wish to break that satisfaction by drawing more attention.

As he hesitated over what else to say to the brazenly smiling face before him, a faint sound of laughter came from his side. Turning his head, he saw Emperor Keilusa covering his mouth with a fist and chuckling.

Considering that Kishiar had always maintained a tireless and composed expression, Yuder was somewhat surprised.

"Before meeting Sir Aile, I had an impression based solely on reports. Reality is quite different."

"I apologize for raising my voice in your presence, Your Majesty."

"What's there for my assistant to apologize for? If apologies are necessary, I should be the one to offer them. Although I'm sure His Majesty wouldn't find it necessary."

"Yes, it's not necessary."

At the Emperor's quick reply, Kishiar glanced at Yuder as if he had expected as much. The Emperor, having stifled his laughter, sighed and spoke.

"Sir Aile seems unusually humble. You've achieved something great, yet you don't wish to come to the forefront. At the same time, you don't hesitate to speak candidly to the Commander; you deserve to be called audacious as well."

"I'm unworthy of such praise. As I've just mentioned, I didn't accomplish this alone..."

"But if you weren't there, that monster would not have been captured so easily."

The Emperor cut off Yuder's words and stated flatly.

"I don't think we were able to catch the monster quickly because it was weak or insignificant. We could do it because your judgment and abilities are that remarkable. Don't undervalue what you've done."

It was terrifying how similar the words were to what Kishiar, his kin, might say.

"While it's true that everyone contributed to achieving this, it's also good to receive proper recognition for what you've done. I was a bit concerned that the reward I would offer might seem too small, but it looks like there's no need to worry about that."

"Excuse me?"

At Yuder's question, another faint smile crossed Emperor Keilusa's face.

"Your Majesty, would it be appropriate to bring in dessert now that the meal has concluded?"

Before Yuder could ask anything further, one of the attendants cautiously interjected. It was someone who had been listening intently to the 'great tale of Yuder Aile's monster handling', feigning indifference but clearly intrigued. Emperor Keilusa glanced at Yuder and Kishiar with a noticeably invigorated voice.

"I have no plans to eat more, what about you? Shall we bring in dessert? The food seems to have... suited your palate. Fortunately."

The Emperor, about to ask if the food had suited them, switched his words upon seeing Yuder's empty plate.

"...Yes."

"I was also thinking that the fish dish was quite good. The finishing butter sauce had a smooth, slightly sweet aftertaste. If you want more, just say so."

Kishiar interjected from the side. Yuder shook his head quietly.

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Is that so? Then I'll just order one more portion for myself. Apologies to Your Majesty, but I'll bring in dessert after I eat a little more."

Kishiar signaled to an attendant to bring in more food. When the dish arrived, it wasn't Kishiar who ate it.

Saying that he was full after the time that passed, he naturally passed the dish, a steamed white-fleshed fish flavored with butter sauce and lemon, to his assistant. In no time, it became Yuder's share.

"..."

Once again, the sound of the Emperor exhaling softly could be heard. Yet, the smile on Kishiar's face remained unchanged.

"Kishiar."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"It seems you're quite pleased with your new assistant."

"He is indeed someone to be pleased about."

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It was a response without a moment's hesitation.

"Simply saying that I like him is not enough. What I have gained since meeting him is something I could never exchange for anything else."

The choice of words was awkwardly intimate, especially to say in the presence of the person in question. Yuder was unsure how to react and instead just looked down at his plate.

Compliments were familiar to him. He had lived his life with unparalleled abilities, so it was only natural. Even those who disliked Yuder had to grind their teeth while acknowledging his skills. And the praises he received after each successful mission had become so frequent that they hardly moved him anymore. Even Emperor Katchian had consistently praised Yuder's abilities as the Empire's most valuable jewel in the presence of foreign envoys.

But the words that flowed from Kishiar's mouth felt entirely different, even if they were also compliments. Perhaps it felt this way because he had never heard Kishiar of his past life say anything like this about him to anyone else.

Was there always such a difference between praise heard directly and praise conveyed through others?

Yuder kept moving his knife and fork, enveloped in a peculiar sensation. It felt necessary for staying composed.

"Really? You're saying things you've never said even when you've succeeded in bringing out the talents of your adjutant. While the abilities of Sir Yuder are impressive, of course..."

"I'm not saying this just because of his abilities."

"Oh? Then what else have you gained?"

Kishiar responded without hesitation.

"I've gained confidence in what I'm doing, a reason to live more vividly, and an ambition that awakens my forgotten drive for challenges. And..."

Kishiar paused, smiled, and then finished.

"I've gained everything necessary to achieve those things, through what only he can do."

Just as Yuder was about to make the final cut of his dish, the tip of his knife nearly slipped.

Was Kishiar planning to disclose their relationship to the Emperor right here?

The Emperor slowly set down his teacup, which he had been holding to his lips. His gaze shifted from the swaying tea to look at the two men beyond his glasses.

"Everything, you say."

The Emperor's voice was low, and his expression seemed oddly mysterious for a moment. But then he turned his head, as if it had been a mere illusion.

"Fine. It seems that Sir Yuder has finished his meal. Bring the dessert and let everyone else leave. I would like to speak more comfortably with Duke Peletta and Sir Yuder."

"Yes."

At the Emperor's command for dessert and for the attendants to leave, everyone moved swiftly. Soon, all that remained were two plates of dessert, a new cup of tea for the Emperor, and only one attendant.

Once out of public view, the Emperor called Kishiar with a clearer voice than before.

"Kishiar."

"Yes."

"You didn't bring Sir Yuder here today just for a casual meeting, did you? Am I correct?"

"You are."

"Then please, state your purpose. If you keep praising him, rumors that are already spreading in the West could become awkward misunderstandings that are taken as fact. Are you aware that you're not the only one involved in these rumors?"

At the words "awkward misunderstanding," Yuder's fingertips twitched for a moment.

Sometimes, a word thrown out unexpectedly can hit the mark.

When they were in Tainu, pretending to be lovers had been an act. But doing the same now would no longer be just a performance. As thoughts of what had transpired since the start of the holiday rushed through his mind, a sudden chill ran down his spine.

When Yuder had rushed into the Commander's room, determined to accept all aspects of Kishiar, he had sensed that everything would change from then on. However, he had never considered that their relationship might be revealed to Emperor Keilusa right from the start.

Only then did Yuder fully realize that this meeting was not only a chance to familiarize themselves before therapy; it was also an occasion to meet the family of someone with whom he had intimately shared his body and soul.

Just moments ago, he had seen Keilusa as the Emperor of the Empire first and foremost, feeling a certain distance. Now, he saw him completely as Kishiar's 'brother.'

Whether or not he sensed Yuder's mounting tension, Kishiar's face remained bright and cheerful.

"Of course, I am aware. I am a bit disappointed that you find my heartfelt words awkward."

"This is no joke."

"I'm not joking either. I've been thinking that after returning from the West, I should not leave the rumor unaddressed for too long. In fact, if it spreads more, I'd gladly welcome it."

The Emperor's usually calm eyebrows twitched.

"You have no intention to suppress this, then?"

"Correct."

"I really can't fathom what you're thinking."

"What could I be thinking? Certainly, I plan on doing nothing that would harm His Majesty, the Empire, or Yuder."

Emperor Keilusa touched his temple. Behind those red eyes, identical to Kishiar's, a myriad of thoughts seemed to race by.

"Sir Aile, are you aware of this as well?"

The Emperor's arrow was aimed at Yuder. The tone of his voice hinted that he might take Yuder's side if he said no. Although Yuder, like the Emperor, was hearing this for the first time, he did not feel as disconcerted.

All the tension that had been building up melted away the moment he met Kishiar's red eyes over the plate of dessert.

"No, but I am fine with it."

"Fine? Is that your sincere sentiment?"

The rumors stemming from their pretend relationship in the West were no longer a subject of anger or fear for Yuder. He had long since prepared himself for the repercussions once they returned to the capital.

But Kishiar—his intense gaze told Yuder that he had no intention of simply letting the rumors die down.

So Yuder was not worried.

"Perhaps the Commander wishes to use the rumors to raise awareness about the treatment of the Awakeners... Am I correct?"

"Your Majesty, look how wise my assistant is."

"Just answer the question."

The Emperor sighed shortly after hearing Kishiar's joke.

"Whether the Commander wishes to suppress the rumor or make further use of it, I am committed to supporting him until the end. But I do appreciate your concern, Your Majesty."

"..."



Kishiar smiled at Yuder. The Emperor remained silent for a long time. Yuder sensed that the Emperor's gaze was repeatedly shifting between him and Kishiar.

"Fine. Since that is what you think, Sir Aile, I have already promised to give all authority over matters concerning the Awakeners to Duke Peletta, so I have no room to say otherwise. However..."

"..."

The Emperor's gaze lingered unusually long on Kishiar after breaking off his sentence.

"Kishiar."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Is that rumor from the west... No, never mind. Let's leave that subject."

"Yes."

"Now, speak of your true purpose."

The chief attendant quietly poured more warm tea into the teacup, sensing the weariness in Emperor Keilusa's voice. The atmosphere suggested that no more shocking revelations were expected.

Then, with a single sentence, Kishiar froze the deep fatigue of the Emperor in place.

"I believe Your Majesty has some idea through what I've already said, but I've come here so that you might gain what I have gained from Yuder."

"Certainty, zeal, challenge—are these what you're referring to?"

Upon hearing Emperor Keilusa's muttered confirmation, Kishiar nodded his head.

"Yes. No one knows better than Your Majesty what is needed now."

All that was needed to do something was one thing.

A healthy body that could move at will, and a sound vessel to hold it.

As if Yuder understood the unspoken words, the Emperor and the chief attendant also seemed to grasp his meaning. The chief attendant looked at him, casting off his prior composure, and Emperor Keilusa's face solidified into an inscrutable expression.

"I'm not sure if I've understood you correctly. Didn't you say Sir Aile is not specialized in such matters? How then? Moreover, does Sir Aile know about this?"

"Of course he knows, Your Majesty. I've spoken directly as I deemed it permissible."

"..."

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Standing behind Emperor Kailusa with his mouth closed, the chief attendant appeared unable to even blink.

"Your Majesty. Do you remember the gift I sent you some time ago?"

Kishiar had gifted the Emperor stone mediums imbued with the power that came from the Red Stone. In fact, a small portion of it was still tucked away in a corner of the room, inside a vase.

The Emperor's gaze briefly drifted toward that particular vase before returning to Kishiar.

"...Of course, I remember. But it showed no effect, as you know."

"Would we not be uncertain whether it had an effect or not until we open it?"

At those words, the Emperor's mouth halted once more. Speaking on behalf of the Emperor, who was struggling to find the right words, was the chief attendant, who had been quietly standing by until now.

"Pardon me, Your Highness, but it sounds to me as though you are suggesting we can find out the efficacy of this gift, like opening a box to see what's inside."

"Your ears serve you well, Yuliver. And if Your Majesty permits, I'd like to try this with the help of my assistant."

"... You are not satisfied with revealing this matter to an outsider, now you wish for His Majesty to be directly..."

The chief attendant, an older man, seemed to tremble slightly at the corners of his eyes. His expression indicated he was at a loss for words in the face of such audacious claims.

'Of course, he doesn't seem to believe me... His greater concern is likely that I know something related to the royal family's secrets.'

Yuder surmised the emotions that the Emperor and Kishiar must be feeling based on their expressions.

"Of all the things you've done to surprise me, I thought the event of last night would be the most shocking in my life... Yet, not even a day has passed and you've overturned that notion."

"It's too early to declare last night as the biggest surprise of your lifetime, Your Majesty."

"What exactly..."

The Emperor, seeming like he wanted to say more, sighed again. Although the weariness in his eyes remained, he finally nodded and spoke.

"Fine. Let's hear it."

Contrary to his expectation that the Emperor might refuse without even listening, he agreed to hear them out. The conversation thus far seemed to have had some influence.

"Commander, may I speak first, if you don't mind?"

And at that point, Yuder decided to take the initiative.

While Kishiar had laid the groundwork, it was Yuder who had resolved to begin this venture. Without his words, persuading the opposition would be impossible.

"Go ahead."

"Thank you."

Yuder put down the dessert fork he hadn't yet touched and calmly met the Emperor's gaze. A dark shadow flickered across the Emperor's face.

"Sir Aile. I don't know how much you know about this matter, but I am... quite frankly, bewildered. Not to undermine your abilities, but this issue is..."

"Your Majesty's concerns and questions about my sudden involvement, especially when I have only recently joined the Cavalry, are quite understandable."

At Yuder's composed reply, the Emperor let out a long sigh. His eyes, which had been as deep as a profound darkness, scanned Yuder with a newfound sharpness.

"Why step forward, even when acknowledging its unlikelihood?"

"Because I believe that if there's a possibility I can be of assistance to Your Majesty, I must come forward now."

"Assistance? In what manner?"

The Emperor's reaction was entirely different from when he had heard that Kishiar had been helped. Emperor Kailusa looked like he had no expectations of his own condition improving.

And then Yuder slowly took off the black glove he wore on his right hand in front of them.

Upon seeing the vivid, branch-like, dark-red veins on his exposed hand, both the Emperor and the chief attendant simultaneously furrowed their brows.

"These markings appeared when I took on the mission to recover the Red Stone. The force I exerted with my hand spread throughout my body, leaving this trace. At first, I thought it was a condition that needed treatment, but eventually, I realized my body is gradually adapting to this pure power."

Yuder explained the process he had gone through. The initial pain he felt after the power of the Red Stone invaded him, the changing thoughts after meeting Enon, the incidents when creating a medium with that power, and finally the first time he accessed Kishiar's body to align the cycles.

Throughout Yuder's recounting of how he utilized that power in the West and how he had gained control over it, the other three remained silent.

Yuder calmly concluded his words.

"Using this power, I can see the flow of energy within another person's body. If it works as it did in the tests with the Commander, it may also be beneficial to Your Majesty. While I can't make any promises, I hope you'll grant me one opportunity to examine you."

"..."

"I came here to tell you this."

Even after all was said, the Emperor did not easily open his mouth. Kishiar was the first to break the heavy silence.

"Your Majesty must be aware of the Awakener power I possess. During the process of testing Yuder's power, I realized my ability complements his very well. Wouldn't you feel more at ease if I were to assist him?"

"Do you truly believe so, Duke Peletta?"

The Emperor's tone shifted to a more formal one. Kishiar smiled openly and nodded.

"Yes."

"You've been conducting such a risky experiment, of uncertain outcome, without informing me, and you still find it amusing?"

"Your Majesty, I ask that you trust my assistant as much as you trust me. Because of him, I was able to achieve results last night comparable to those of the First Emperor. Ever since his power touched me, I've felt a newfound stability in my body."

"Duke Peletta."

The Emperor, once again using a formal address, raised his hand to stroke his face.

"I know my body best. While God may have granted you another chance, I don't believe I will be afforded the same luxury."

"Your Majesty."

"I have long considered what will happen after I'm gone. That's been the case for many years now, and it is becoming increasingly real."

The gravity of his words was immense.

Even Kishiar, who usually maintained his composure, lost his smile for a moment.

"Your Majesty, please do not speak so."

"From what I've heard, there's no assurance of success, and in an unlucky situation, merely attempting it could be dangerous, could it not?"

"..."

"In that case, I do not want Duke Pelleta to waste your newfound opportunity and the power of someone like Yuder, who may become a significant figure in the future, by making useless attempts. If you leave here, refrain from conducting any more 'tests'."

The weight of those words left a palpable impact, silencing even the eloquent Kishiar.

The Emperor was resolute. With a weary voice, he said he did not wish to continue the conversation any further, effectively cutting it off.

However, Kishiar was not one to back down so easily here.

"When I was in Peletta, who was it that told me never to give up if there was even a sliver of a chance? When I asked you to give up on me, you never agreed to do so."

Instead of responding, the Emperor turned his head away.

"Then, naturally, I will do the same."

Yuder could not take his eyes off Kishiar's face, who was smiling as he looked at his blood relative.

Afterward, the Emperor left early, citing fatigue, and did not partake in the dessert. What remained were the dessert and the two men. It was clearly a breach of etiquette, but Kishiar shamelessly suggested they should go ahead and finish the dessert.

"Luckily, the lid has a magic seal, so it's still cold. Shall we open it?"



The dessert, its full form previously hidden by the lid, was as special and impressive as Kishiar had claimed. Cinnamon-flavored cookies as long as fingers, and ice cream topped with fruit syrup, were stacked like a round sphere.

Yuder had seen it in his previous life but had never tasted it. He had deliberately avoided it because of people who boasted that such a dish was something commoners would never get to eat. Encountering the dish once more under different circumstances felt strange.

Reading his expression, Kishiar gently asked, "Don't you want to eat it? You don't have to if you're full."

"...No. I was just observing it because it looks unique."

What was then was then; what is now is now. Recalling how Kishiar had been looking forward to the dessert even before arriving here, the irksome memories of the past quickly faded away.

Silently, Yuder picked up a spoon and scooped some of the firmly frozen cream. The ice cream was bitterly cold as expected, but it went down smoothly, without any sense of discomfort or aversion.

"Your mouth must be cold. Let's have some warm milk to go with it."

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Regardless of the presence of the attendant, the expression of the man who poured the milk himself hadn't changed one bit since Emperor Keilusa had left. But just because his face remained the same, did it mean his thoughts did too?

Yuder opened his mouth quietly instead of telling him not to do it.

"Are you alright?"

"What's there to not be alright about?"

Kishiar, who skillfully poured the milk without spilling a drop, looked at the milk he had collected and responded.

"Didn't I tell you? The plan was just to introduce you and have dinner tonight. The Emperor has become familiar with your face and deemed you a valuable asset. That should be enough for now."

"..."

"The Emperor didn't leave in anger, so don't worry that I might be upset. Unless, of course, you are considering ending your attempts at treatment."

Of course not, right? Eyes filled with trust curled up gently with a smile.

Just as he had said, regardless of what Emperor Keilusa had uttered, Yuder had absolutely no intention of quietly giving up or retracting his attempt to treat him.

Yet the reason his heart felt slightly unsettled was because until just before the topic of treatment had come up, the two had looked at each other like the best of brothers. Even without exchanging affectionate words, one could easily guess how much they cared for each other through their gazes alone.

It was an aspect of Kishiar that Yuder had never known.

It was also an expression that Kishiar, whom he had known in his previous life, had never shown.

'More precisely, perhaps it's something I could never have seen,' Yuder thought as he swallowed the cold, sweet cream that wrapped around his tongue and set his spoon down.

"...Of course, I have no intention of backing down at this point. The Emperor seems to want a definitive solution, so I intend to provide one by the next time we meet."

"Good. And don't forget that I should have a place in that effort too."

After finishing dessert, Kishiar naturally stood up and led Yuder outside. His strides were unhesitant, as if it didn't matter that there was no one to guide them.

"Shouldn't we wait until the steward arrives?"

"It's fine. The carriage is probably still parked by the back door. We can just ride it back. They probably expect that I won't be returning anyway."

"..."

However, as they were heading towards the back door to escape, Kishiar suddenly stopped and shifted his gaze somewhere. The ease that had filled his face momentarily clouded, and a low murmur escaped his lips.

"I feel a familiar presence."

Sure enough, a procession led by a noblewoman and several maids soon appeared. Yuder was pondering this unexpected encounter when the noblewoman also seemed to notice them and stopped.

With her hair, which was almost silver, elegantly coiled up, she lifted the veil that had been half-covering her face and smiled.

"Oh my, Duke Peletta. I wasn't aware you would be here today. Has the Imperial ban on your entry been lifted already?"

"Your Highness, the Empress," Kishiar greeted with a reciprocating smile. Yuder too bent his knee in courtesy. The Empress signaled with her hand for them to rise.

"As you said, it hasn't been lifted yet. But I caused a small incident last night that startled His Majesty, and I received a letter as a result. So, I've come for a brief visit."

"Ah, if you're talking about last night then..."

The Empress slightly parted her lips as if she found a clue. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand, glancing around.

"My goodness, I thought as much. I figured if anyone could do it, it would be you, Duke."

"I'm not sure whether to say I'm pleased to meet your expectations or to first admire your wisdom in immediately identifying me as the culprit."

As Kishiar raised an eyebrow in mock contemplation, a small dimple appeared on one side of the Empress's cheek. Her face, previously as solemn as a wet flower, finally brightened.

'They seem...closer than I thought.'

Conversing with the Empress, Kishiar felt like a mischievous younger sibling, contrasting his formal demeanor around the Emperor. The Empress seemed equally at ease. She had previously always sat quietly, like a shadow or a statue, but now her gaze toward Kishiar was warm and vibrant.

"I came here to personally deliver flowers I've grown in the garden," she said. Indeed, the maids following her held bundles of delicately wrapped flowers.

"Would you like to have some refreshments at the palace before you leave?"

"While the invitation is tempting, I fear the Emperor might finally impose a permanent ban on my entry if I accept. I have a companion with me, so let's save it for next time."

"Understood. You've brought a Cavalry member, I see?"

Only then did the Empress truly notice Yuder's presence.

"If you've brought a Cavalry member, could it be the one that's been the talk of the town lately?"

"Yes, he is Yuder Aile, my assistant. He even greeted His Majesty today."

Kishiar responded with palpable pride, smiling at Yuder.

"As I thought. I heard he was quite young, so I had my doubts."

"My apologies."

Yuder bowed his head and responded dispassionately. The Empress hesitated for a moment before asking an oddly specific question.

"Since you are Aile, you must have also met His Majesty today."

"Yes."

"Considering the Duke's temperament, the sudden occasion must have been difficult for you. Did you also share a meal?"

It was a question laden with implications. After a moment of silence, Yuder answered.

"Yes. As you have mentioned, it was an unexpected occasion. However, thanks to His Majesty and my superior, I experienced no difficulty and had an honorable and overwhelming opportunity. Thank you for your concern."

"I see. I'm glad to hear that you had a good time. His Majesty also seems to take a liking to you, which makes me even more curious about you. It's a shame we don't have more time to talk."

She then put her veil back on.

"I should go before it gets too late. May both of you have a peaceful journey."

Just as they were about to part ways in opposite directions, Kishiar suddenly spoke.

"The truth is, I didn't just come here today to get scolded."

The Empress halted.

"Do you remember the last thing I told you during the harvest festival party?"

"..."

"I came to show you the result today. His Majesty seems to think it's too late, but I told him I don't think so. Because the one by my side told me so."

The Empress turned her head once more. Yuder felt her gaze on his face, but her expression was inscrutable, concealed behind her veil aside from her tightly sealed lips.

Moments later, the Empress turned away and left. Her attendants also followed, retreating from the scene.

"What did you discuss with Her Majesty the Empress during the Harvest Festival party?"

"I briefly mentioned the situation after the retrieval of the Red Stone. I assured her that everything would work out."

Kishiar responded softly as they walked towards their carriage.

"It seems you worry about His Majesty's health even more than I do."

The distance from the Dawn Palace, where the Empress resided, to the Sun Palace was considerable. Yet she had walked that far without a carriage, merely to deliver flowers and not to see the Emperor. This likely corresponded with the reason both had arrived and departed the welcoming ceremony in separate carriages. Yuder sensed this even without an explanation.

"Besides, mentioning it in advance ensures that Her Majesty will scrutinize why we visited today and perhaps support us in future endeavors, don't you think?"

The inexplicably bitter feeling he had earlier vanished as if it had been a lie.

Yuder realized anew that the man beside him never made a careless move.

"I didn't realize you had that in mind in such a short span of time."

"Hmm. It was a nasty trick I could pull because I know His Majesty's weaknesses better than anyone else in this world."

Finally climbing into the revealed carriage, Kishiar whispered with a secretive smile.

"It's unthinkable from the outside, but the only person who could bring down His Majesty is Her Majesty herself. Just like the only person who could bring me down is standing right in front of me."

Yuder's perception of the Empress had always been vague, in both this life and his previous one. But the moment she had looked at him, seemingly to indirectly inquire about the Emperor, her gaze was clearer and stronger than anyone else's.

Emperor Keilusa's Empress, Rosa Faria La Orr.

Even the name, long buried under layers of forgotten memories, became vivid at that moment.

"..."

"And so... considering we wrapped up this evening's dinner well..."

As his whisper grew softer, almost inaudible, only Kishiar remained in Yuder's field of vision.

The carriage had not yet left the palace grounds. This shouldn't be happening.

Yet, even as he thought this, Yuder leaned his head against the hand that caressed his cheek and closed his eyes. Moments later, their lips met, and a sweet scent filled the air.

It tasted like the ice cream and cinnamon cookies they had just eaten.

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My future would be guaranteed once I graduate. For my future!

Turning

Chapter 476

"Greetings, Sir Diarca. You're always hard at work, aren't you?"

"..."

A middle-aged man with a gracious demeanor, his cloak thrown over his shoulders, offered his salutations to Kiolle da Diarca, who stood at the entrance of the Bright Palace. The three young men following him hastily bowed their heads in greeting.

Wearing armor that bore the insignia of the Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resided, Kiolle didn't even bother to glance at the faces of those who greeted him. It was an obvious snub, yet the other party seemed unbothered. He stood there smiling as if he could wait forever in good spirits.

'Damn it.'

Once again, Kiolle found himself on the losing end of an invisible battle.

Sighing, he reluctantly led the man inside. Though the Bright Palace lived up to its name with countless windows allowing abundant sunlight, it was now shrouded in darkness, the windows covered by heavy curtains despite the daytime.

They walked through the gaping darkness of the corridor and headed toward the chamber where the Crown Prince was staying. The knights guarding the door stepped aside with a salute upon seeing Kiolle's face.

Kiolle approached the door and knocked. A moment later, the sound of a lock being undone came from within.

This was as far as Kiolle was allowed to go. He opened the door, looked down at the visitors with a furrowed brow, and spoke.

"Go in."

"You seem to be in a rather foul mood again today, heh heh. We'll speak again shortly."

With a jovial tone, the man entered first, and the three following him hurriedly scurried in after him. Unlike the carefree middle-aged man, Kiolle's demeanor suggested he was somewhat dispirited.

'Every time I see them, they leave a bad taste in my mouth.'

Kiolle turned away, glaring at the closed door. The knights who were guarding it deliberately looked elsewhere, as if afraid their eyes might meet his.

It had been several days since he was transferred from the Imperial Knights to the Bright Palace by his father's orders. Though he had become the closest personal guard to the Crown Prince immediately upon his arrival, Kiolle was far from pleased.

After nearly being assassinated, Crown Prince Katchian seemed to have lost some of his mental stability. To begin with, there were no mirrors in the Bright Palace. This was because Katchian would fly into a fit of rage every time he saw the 'scar' that supposedly marred his cheek and chin.

The prince would frequently become restless for no reason, lash out in anger, and isolate himself. It was impossible to know how to respond when he claimed the barely noticeable scar was vivid and large. His sudden bursts of profanity and refusal to eat had become almost routine.

Given the situation, Kiolle could understand why Duke Diarca had not chosen someone else to serve as the guard. However, the most significant problem was that the Crown Prince vehemently rejected Kiolle's presence.

Whenever the Crown Prince saw Kiolle, he would run into his room without a greeting and lock the door. Each time, Kiolle was left to taste a subtle annoyance. It was hard to believe this was the same

person who had once greeted Kiolle with smiles and compliments. Given the circumstances, Kiolle felt helpless and frustrated, his tongue tied because of the identity of the one he served.

Even Duke Diarca, who seldom issued harsh punishments to Kiolle, had strictly ordered that this particular matter was not to be taken lightly. This only added to Kiolle's frustration, as he couldn't discuss it openly with anyone. Some of his siblings, believing that the task Kiolle was entrusted with was of great importance, made no effort to hide their jeers whenever they encountered him. Had they known the reality, they likely would have laughed it off, saying, "Well, if that's all it is."

Externally, Kiolle carried himself as if he was perfectly content with the situation, but he truly despised it—especially guiding the unidentified commoners.

These individuals, who had gained nearly exclusive access to the Crown Prince's chamber, had begun appearing after Kiolle had become a knight escort. Although they claimed to be merchants dealing in jewels and clothing, they were actually 'healers' who had gained notoriety among the nobles.

They had caught the Duke of Diarca's eye by successfully treating the migraine headaches of Baron Durmand, a close friend of the Duke. While the Duke had always been skeptical about such mystical practices, he seemed to consider these healers as an exception.

As far as Kiolle knew, their initial fame among the nobility arose when they similarly cured a few individuals connected to the Apeto family. The Duke tested their skills by sending them to treat others suffering from ailments similar to Baron Durmand's. When even those patients praised the healers' abilities, the Duke covertly initiated contact to see if they could treat mental disorders as well.

And that had led to this current situation.

When these unknown commoners first appeared, Kiolle felt as if the air itself had been polluted. In particular, a middle-aged man, who seemed to be their leader, infuriated Kiolle; no matter how much he glared, the man remained utterly shameless.

Yet astonishingly, after a brief and secretive conversation with them, the Crown Prince began to allow them limited visits.

The audacity! That they could freely roam areas where even Kiolle had been denied access by Duke Diarca.

As if that weren't bad enough, he couldn't discuss this disgraceful affair with anyone else, and he alone had to bring them in and escort them out.

For the first time in his life, he found orders from his father and the Crown Prince utterly repulsive. No matter how much he showed his reluctance, the Duke of Diarca was adamant.

"Of course it's distasteful, but we have no choice if they prove effective. If they don't, you are to dispose of them yourself. That's why you are there, Kiolle," the Duke coldly stated.

The Duke believed that these measures were necessary to stabilize the volatile emotions the Crown Prince held towards the Diarca family, and to administer treatment before any further deterioration of his mental state.

But how could he approve of this, when he couldn't even properly see what kind of treatment they were conducting within the Crown Prince's chamber?

'Sure, the attendant who is on standby inside says it's alright... but can I really trust that? And if something goes wrong, won't it all fall back on me?'

Damn it. This situation was even worse than the oath laid by that commoner from the Cavalry, Yuder Aile!

While cursing inwardly, Kiolle noticed a red mark peeking out from where his arms were folded. The sight of that mark, evidence of the oath he'd shared with Yuder Aile, brought back memories of their encounter a few days ago.

That day marked a welcome ceremony held for the Cavalry returning from their duties in the west. Kiolle had little desire to attend, but had no choice when he was summoned by Duke Diarca.

As he arrived, he noted familiar nobles sitting with faces as if they were chewing on dirt. Clearly, the fact that he ultimately showed up indicated that the "incident" that had transpired was bothering everyone in various ways.

On that day, Kiolle was not as shocked by the appearance of the Emperor—who had shown himself for the first time in years—as he was by his father. Instead, he couldn't take his eyes off Yuder Aile, who had descended from the carriage with Duke Peletta and walked proudly to the gathering.

Indeed, the audacity of Yuder Aile's actions in the west had become widely rumored even in the capital. The extraordinary man who single-handedly severed the neck of a colossal monster, or the shameless debauchee who mingled physically with Duke Peletta daily in Tainu.

People secretly wondered which face of Yuder Aile was the real one. Some speculated that this might be a new, intriguing hobby for the ever-curious Duke Peletta, while others disparaged Yuder as a powerful commoner who had climbed his way up by seducing the Duke.

And indeed, seeing Yuder Aile again, Kiolle felt that he didn't fit neatly into either category, yet somehow could belong to either.

The first time he'd seen him, Yuder had appeared as pallid and unpleasant as a ghost. But whatever he had eaten or done in the west, his complexion now looked exceedingly healthy. He didn't seem diminished in the least even beside Duke Peletta, who was like a monumental barrier, alluring as a nightmare that drew people's eyes toward him.

The damned man. Unbelievably healthy. Kiolle cursed internally as he watched, and as if Yuder had read his thoughts, he turned his head. For a brief moment, their eyes met. Feeling as if his inner thoughts had been exposed, Kiolle quickly averted his gaze.

When he looked back, Yuder was no longer looking at him.

Turning

Chapter 477

"...Sir Diarca, it seems the treatment for today is all finished..."

Kiolle's unpleasant musings were abruptly cut off by the cautious words of other knights nearby. Annoyed, he turned his head only to hear the sound of a polite knock coming from inside the Crown Prince's chamber.

With an icy expression, he ordered the door to be opened. A middle-aged man with graying hair stepped out, smiling warmly in gratitude.

"I am always grateful for your consideration."

"How is His Highness the Crown Prince today?"

"Much improved. He didn't even smash the mirror when we showed it to him."

As proof, the man held up a small wooden hand mirror he had carried with him on previous visits. Until very recently, it had been shattered into countless pieces; today, it was intact.

"His Highness has a constitution that resists external treatments, perhaps because of his inherently sturdy nature, like a lone tree standing tall. But there was a significant change today, so it seems he'll be able to have dinner without any issues. He even listened calmly to the steward's talk about the upcoming party."

"..."

If this was true, it was an astonishing change in a short amount of time. The knights around him showed signs of surprise, but Kiolle only scoffed.

"Ha! We'll see if that's true. Anyone can talk big."

"Of course, you're correct."

"Did you use the same treatment on His Highness today as before?"

"Yes, I did."

"I can't understand it. To me, it seems you're just lighting candles and mumbling to yourself."

Barely avoiding a direct insult, the middle-aged man maintained a kind smile.

"My 'treatment' involves neither divine power nor medicine nor magic. I light a few fragrant candles in a dark room, approach the afflicted, and murmur something as I rub their forehead or body, and engage them in conversation."

It was hard to believe that such absurd treatment could work, yet the Crown Prince had shown actual improvement. It was unsettling.

"Of course, Sir Diarca, it may appear that way to you. But sometimes words can be a better cure than any divine power. I simply know which words can help which people."

"Is that so? I'm very curious about these magical words."

"If you're curious, would you like to participate in a treatment session? His Highness might even allow it next time."

'Is this insignificant man mocking me now, thinking I'm too harmful even to be present during treatment?'

"..."

Kiolle swallowed the retort that had risen to his throat and shot the middle-aged man a glare before abruptly turning away and walking off. Even in his small actions, it was abundantly clear that he had no respect for the healers and loathed them intensely.

As Kiolle pushed the healers out of the palace without a word and turned to leave, one of the young men following the middle-aged man spoke up in a concerned whisper.

"Is this really okay, wise one? We came trusting the promise of Duke Diarca, but the heir of the Diarca family disdains us so... I'm worried things won't go well. Perhaps we should even use our abilities on him, risks of being discovered notwithstanding..."

All the young people nodded in agreement at the words. However, the man called the sage simply smiled.

"Duke Diarca can do nothing to us, so don't worry. Didn't you see the Crown Prince today? Let's only think about what's best for him. That's enough."

Not long after the healers left, Kiolle received word that Prince Katchian had summoned him and his attendants. Meeting the Crown Prince face-to-face for the first time in quite a while since his appointment as a bodyguard, Kiolle felt a strange sensation. The prince's complexion had darkened, yet his eyes shone a peculiar shade of red.

Was he always like this? I don't remember him being so... unsettling when he was in high spirits. Just as Kiolle pondered this, the Crown Prince slowly opened his mouth.

"Since the healer has gone, I feel much clearer in my mind. It's as if I've awakened from a nightmare. Everyone... you must have suffered a lot because of me."

"No, Your Highness," the attendants replied in unison. The Crown Prince, his lips slightly upturned, exhaled deeply and continued.

"We must send our thanks to Duke Diarca for aiding me. My body still feels weak, but I wish to attend the upcoming party. Could you convey my request for him to assist with the preparations?"

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Additionally, I'd like to have dinner in the dining room today. Make the arrangements."

"Understood!"



The attendants quickly bowed, their faces filled with enthusiasm. Kiolle also saluted to indicate his compliance and exited the room.

Everything really did go as the healers had promised. Kiolle was still annoyed that he couldn't fully trust them, but he had a message to deliver and headed straight to the Diarca estate.

Upon hearing the news Kiolle brought, Duke Diarca expressed his surprise.

"Is this true, Kiolle? The Crown Prince said this?"

"Yes."

"Those healers really are something. To think they even managed to cure the Crown Prince..."

The nobles surrounding Duke Diarca started to murmur amongst themselves. Among them was Baron Durmand, who had been treated for migraines by the healers and had maintained contact with them ever since. He couldn't hide his delight upon hearing the news.

"Didn't I say so from the start? They are extraordinary people. Ha-ha. The one who cured my migraine mentioned that mental ailments are harder to treat, but the new one seems even more skillful. They pulled it off."

"We shouldn't let our guards down yet," Duke Diarca said, quickly tempering the elation.

The nobles immediately silenced themselves. There was a weight to Duke Diarca's words that could not be taken lightly.

"Is the 'gift' we planned to give to the Cavalry at the upcoming party ready?"

'Gift?'

As Kiolle felt puzzled by the unfamiliar word, a known noble nodded and replied, "Yes, there won't be a problem."

Duke Diarca picked up his pipe from the side, lit it, and continued to speak.

"Considering they've done such an outstanding job hunting monsters, we should provide a fitting 'gift.' Be careful not to get caught..."

At that moment, Kiolle, standing next to the Duke, suddenly flinched and looked down at his hand.

"Kiolle? What's the matter?"

"...Nothing. May I be excused now?"

"I recall telling you earlier that you should stick around and observe what this old man is up to..."

Kiolle answered urgently.

When Duke Diarca looked closer, Kiolle did seem quite fatigued; his complexion wasn't good. It made sense, given that he had spent another day dealing with the commoners he so despised.

Duke Diarca clicked his tongue and nodded. "You must be tired from dealing with so many people. Go and rest."

As Kiolle bowed his head and retreated, the nobles by the Duke's side rushed to praise him.

"Kiolle has truly matured lately, becoming an impressive knight. Your Grace, you have nothing to worry about for the future. Haha."

"He's still far off. A guy who complains about how hard it is to put up with the filth."

Though his words were dismissive, Duke Diarca's expression was not displeased. The nobles quickly sensed this and continued to praise Kiolle to elevate the Duke's mood.

Meanwhile, Kiolle entered his room and took a deep breath, rolling up his sleeve. The sudden sense of drowsiness and the faint pain emanating from the oath mark on his wrist were the reasons he had returned so abruptly.

From past experiences that had rapidly depleted his stamina, almost luring him into eternal sleep, he deduced that this was a warning sign for potentially violating the contract.

'Why now? I haven't said anything this time!'

He quickly reviewed the vows of the contract in his head. He had never revealed his deal with Yuder Aile to anyone, nor had he issued unilateral commands or insults to his father or any nobles.

Then that left only the third term.

'Kiolle da Diarca will, within his means, assist Yuder Aile.'

"... Could it be?"

An ominous thought suddenly sprang up in Kiolle's mind, accompanied by the echo of his father's recent words.

'Considering they've done such an outstanding job hunting monsters, we should provide a fitting 'gift...''

Though he had lived a life swinging his sword as he pleased, he had a good idea of what that meant. His father was planning to send a message to the Cavalry, more precisely to Duke Peletta and the Emperor behind them. Given the hints, it seemed likely they would target the individual who had performed best

in monster hunting to send their message. Normally, this would not bother Kiolle, but now that the contract was in question, he couldn't just let it slide.

'Damn it...'

A silent curse escaped his lips like a scream.

...

"Why is that, Yuder? Did someone call for you?"

"... No, I think I was mistaken."

Yuder turned his head toward Kishiar's call and walked over to him. More than halfway through their vacation, they found themselves on Karl Lorwick Street, located in the Fourth District.

Turning

Chapter 478

In the resplendent street named after the legendary merchant Karl Lorwick, one could easily feast their eyes on the most precious and beautiful items from across the continent. Some even referred to this place as the Street of Gold and Silk.

Yuder had little interest in the glittering necklaces displayed at the jewelers or the exquisite fabric with intricate embroidery, not to mention the expensive wares imported from foreign lands that graced the signs of renowned stores. All that held his gaze was Kishiar La Orr, who was engaged in cheerful conversation with the merchants.

"Hmm. Fashion has indeed changed quite a bit while I've been away."

"Yes, traditional formal wear embellished with multiple layers of fabric, embroidery, and gems has always been popular. However, lately, many people have been seeking a cleaner, brighter look—much like a white rose."

"Adding just a touch of colored gems to such attire can actually make it more eye-catching than a dress laden with multiple colors. Take, for example, the dress worn by Baroness Cecile at Count Anteigne's charity party held not long ago."

The formal wear the merchant pointed out stood out from the others displayed around it. Amidst an array of flamboyant dresses created using a profusion of bold colors, this particular dress and robe were crafted entirely from different shades of white fabric, crowned by a single blue gem near the chest area, lending it an aura of majesty.

"Baroness Cecile became the talk of the event by appearing with a blue ribbon at her waist that matched the gem on her chest. She received praise for being more beautiful than anyone else at the social gathering—all with just one gem and one ribbon. And that dress was prepared by our store."

"Excellent. You have quite the flair for fashion."

"Your words are too kind."

The merchants beamed and nodded at Kishiar's compliments.

"Do you have any more similar designs you can show me?"

"Yes, of course. Please wait a moment."

As they briefly busied themselves to present more examples of trending attire, Kishiar playfully inquired of Yuder,

"Do you remember what I said the last time there was a harvest party?"

Yuder could guess where Kishiar was going with this, based on the dress designs they were looking at, and quietly replied,

"You said that we should look forward to a new trend in formal wear that suits your taste spreading across the entire continent."

"See? I was right, wasn't I?"

Back then, Kishiar had radically changed the formal attire for Yuder and the rest of the cavalry unit. The use of almost exclusively white fabric in formal wear, normally a spectacle of various colors, and the absence of any gems except for buttons and embroidery of gold and silver was practically unheard of among the nobility.

Such unconventional attempts were usually met with ridicule or avoidance, but not these outfits. Amidst a sea of other formal wears, they blended in while still maintaining a sense of luxury. Even when worn by all 300 members, they didn't appear ridiculous in the slightest.

The dresses the merchant showed bore a striking resemblance to the ones the Cavalry had worn. It was evident to anyone that the dresses were inspired by those outfits.

"To be honest, I'm surprised. I thought no one paid any attention to our attire at that party."

"People always notice, even if it seems like they don't. That's how trends start."

If the merchants could confidently declare it a trend, it meant more than just a few were wearing it. Kishiar wasn't surprised; even though they had not felt the influence of their attire at several western parties, he said it was only to be expected.

"All fashion trends in the Empire start from Karl Lorwick and the capital. It takes a few years for a trend that has just started here to spread throughout the Empire."

"Is that so?"

"Here, I've brought more of the clothes we talked about."

At that moment, their conversation paused as merchants appeared, carrying heavy-looking clothes and a pillar-like rack to display them. Kishiar examined the garments, all deeply influenced by the traditional cavalry uniforms, with satisfaction. He then pointed to one and said he would place an order.

"Reduce the pleat width at the back of the skirt, and remove the thin golden cloth on top. I intend to send it to the Dawn Palace, so don't be careless in your work."

"The Dawn Palace, you say?"

Upon hearing the name of the palace where the Empress resided, the merchants hesitated momentarily, as if they hadn't expected it, before asking for confirmation again.

"Yes. Since I wasn't able to prepare a gift for Her Majesty the Empress in the west, I plan to do so here. Ideally, it should be something she can wear comfortably on a regular basis. Also, create a matching hat, shoes, and socks, and send word to the Cavalry."

"Ah...I see. Yes, you can count on us."

Having secured the gift for the Empress, Kishiar pretended to browse for other items before he suddenly spoke again.

"Come to think of it, are all those clothes with attached notes being prepared for the upcoming party?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"There's quite a lot. It seems I'll have to wait a few weeks to receive the clothes I've ordered."

Kishiar's gaze briefly scanned the notes attached to the clothes.

"No, all the clothes here are in the final stages, so you won't have to wait long. We'll finish them as quickly as possible; don't worry."

"In that case, I trust you. Ah, I'd like to buy these buttons and pins right now; can you wrap them up for me?"

"Of course."

Kishiar stepped out of the store after buying a set of silver buttons with intricate patterns and gemstone pins designed for men's shirt cuffs. He handed them to Yuder right away.

"Here you go."

"Didn't I tell you that what I got from Tainu was more than enough? Why did you buy more?"

"Do you think one is enough? I'd need to buy at least ten times more to ensure that those who know me won't find our actions today suspicious."

"But still..."

"To be honest, I couldn't help myself. As soon as I saw them, I thought they would suit you perfectly."

Do you know how difficult it was to keep thinking that while we were talking? A shameless sense of delight radiated from his face like a light.

Yuder eventually sighed and accepted the items from Kishiar.

He already had so many things that he didn't know when he'd get to use them all. Even if there was a reason for it, constantly receiving gifts alone could negatively affect the morale of the entire Cavalry. However, Kishiar wasn't the type to act without consideration, and more importantly, he seemed genuinely happy every time he gave him something. That made it hard for him to strongly refuse.

The situation now felt different compared to when Yuder was pretending to be his lover in Tainu and was showered with gifts. Although the circumstances were similar, the atmosphere between them had



changed. Their relationship had evolved, which probably explained why the same actions now felt both more delightful and more complicated.

In the course of executing the Emperor's orders, and also in preparation for the upcoming party, they had already visited several shops on Karl Lorwick Street. Though they moved about alone, without any attendants, their presence wasn't overly conspicuous; the street was a common place for nobles to stroll and shop for pleasure.

Of course, there were nobles who recognized Kishiar's striking appearance and paused to greet him. The merchants put in extra effort, hoping to earn a bit more of the wealthy Duke of Peletta's coin, but that was it. People simply assumed that the profligate Duke had returned to the capital to splurge once again, and they regarded Yuder, who accompanied him, as nothing more than his knight or a servant. This was possible because Yuder's face was not yet well-known to the public.

"So, what did you think of this store?" Yuder asked.

"I noted quite a few names of families related to the Diarca faction among those who've ordered clothes for the party," Kishiar said, smiling. "I thought they'd despise our local fashions, but apparently that's not the case."

Each time they entered a store, Kishiar would make an order and engage the merchants in conversation related to the upcoming party, subtly gathering information about the event's preparations and the merchants' clients. He was so adept at subtly steering the conversation that the merchants failed to realize their client information was being scrutinized.

"Now that I have a fair idea of who'll be attending, let's go find out some real details," Kishiar suggested.

"Where are you planning to go next?" Yuder inquired.

"Hmm. There's a place favored by the Diarca family for generations, for tailoring and purchases. I intend to visit there."

The place he referred to was 'Da Fiel,' a store that occupied one of the largest and most extravagant buildings on Karl Lorwick Street.

Turning

Chapter 479

The moment they stepped into the shop entrance, which was visible from anywhere, all gazes converged on the two individuals.

Yuder never quite got used to those stares, no matter how many times he experienced them. Kishiar, on the other hand, seemed unfazed and shrugged it off with a smile.

"Welcome, Duke Peletta. Did you perchance inform us in advance of your visit? We've had no notice..."

A merchant hurried over, head bowed, to inquire. Although he pretended to be discreet, his words essentially amounted to a subtle complaint about their unannounced visit from such important guests.

"No, when have I ever done such a thing? Hahaha. I was just out for a walk and found myself here," Kishiar replied with a sunny smile, unswayed by any passive-aggressive grievances.

"Is this a place where one must call ahead?"

"Well, not exactly, but it would help us to prepare for your specific needs if you did..."

"It's fine, don't worry about it. Can't wait even if there's something specific? That's part of the fun too!"

Ultimately, the merchant lost this invisible battle of wills.

"Very well... What would you like to see? Our shop mainly handles bespoke tailoring and alterations, so it may be difficult to showcase ready-made garments."

"Don't worry about that; I've seen enough of those elsewhere. I'm here because of this."

Kishiar gestured to the hem of the long coat he was wearing. The outer garment he'd chosen for today was far more extravagant than his usual casual attire. The black outer layer shimmered as if one were looking at the Milky Way, with gold embroidery and an abundance of jewels. The inner lining was a rich, deep red. The coat was long enough to almost touch his ankles, despite his towering height.

Despite the coat resembling a winter garment more often worn by ladies, it suited him remarkably well and didn't look ridiculous in the least.

"This garment was refashioned from the winter dress of the late Empress. However, it doesn't seem to fit quite as well as I thought it would. I was thinking of getting it further tailored for the upcoming party. Do you think you can finish it in time?"

Faced with an order far grander than anticipated, the merchant momentarily found himself at a loss for words. Yuder was also inwardly stunned.

He had just thought it was a somewhat uniquely shaped garment. Who would have guessed it was refashioned from the dress of a former Empress?

Finally regaining his composure, the merchant licked his dry lips and managed to ask with forced calm, "Firstly, could you please specify the alterations you would like, Your Grace?"

"I don't have many requirements. Remove all the decorations attached to it, adjust the collar to be more formal, and change the lower hem's inner lining to the same black. Keep the removed lining separate and return it."

"You want all the jewel embellishments removed?"

"Yes. From the pearls on the collar to the sapphires on the hem—take them all off."

"Wouldn't that make the garment look rather bare? Even if we remove the decorations carefully, it may not be possible to erase all traces of them."

"That's fine. Don't worry about it. So, can it be done, or not?"

"If you insist on these exact modifications, then yes, it could be done within a few hours."

Though he had received a response, the merchant's expression was far from pleased. No matter how he thought about it, he doubted the modified clothing that Kishiar wanted would be appropriate as formal party attire.

"As expected, tailors from Da Fiel are adept at using magic tools. I've long wanted to meet the master of this place, Shufiel. Might I have that opportunity now?"

"I apologize. Master Shufiel had an appointment this morning and is currently out."

"Shufiel received an appointment and left? Was it a summons from Duke Diarca or Crown Prince Katchian?"

"No, it was... Baron Durmand who made the contact. If he knew His Majesty was coming, he would have rescheduled, but unfortunately, we were not aware..."

The moment the merchant mentioned Baron Durmand, his eyes darted sideways as though stung by something. Avoiding eye contact is a typical behavior exhibited by liars.

'Baron Durmand, huh? One of the old Duke Diarca's confidants. If Duke Diarca had summoned him, there's no reason for him to be so jumpy. It must have been Prince Katchian.'

This gave him a clue as to what Kishiar was searching for here.

'The master of this place was sent to Katchian by Duke Diarca. If they trust him enough to send him to assist the reclusive Crown Prince, then it's highly likely they've also sent impostors disguised as tailors.'

Emperor Keilusa had subtly mentioned yesterday at dinner about fake healers infiltrating Prince Katchian's palace. Kishiar seemed to suspect that the leads to find these people might be here.

"Well, that's disappointing. If fixing the clothes will take just a few hours, can I wait here? My arms and legs are sore from all the wandering."

Kishiar feigned weakness, making a similar face.

"I wish someone could massage them, it might help..."

Hearing Kishiar express a wish for the black-haired beauty to tend to him without a hint of embarrassment, the merchant, visibly startled, quickly retreated to an inner lounge.

"Pl-please follow me. I'll show you a comfortable place to rest."

Yuder smirked confidently, thinking that if his fellow members saw Kishiar pretending to be frail, they would have a harder time holding back their laughter than they did in Tainu.

The merchant led them to a room furnished with luxurious sofas and tables, offered them drinks, and hastily left. Although he said he would return if called, his eyes strongly suggested he hoped that wouldn't be necessary.

"Finally, we're alone."

"So now I should massage you, Commander?"

"That would be nice, but we don't have much time."

At Yuder's composed question, Kishiar broke into a smile.

"It seems the master here is busy preparing the Crown Prince for the party, so this is our opportunity. I'll stall for time here; can you go catch the tails of those suspicious healers infiltrating the Crown Prince's palace? Don't push yourself too hard."

He thought as much. The role Nathan Zuckerman had back in Tainu was now his to play again. Yuder nodded in agreement.

"I'll return as soon as possible, but if a problem arises, I'll make a loud noise to signal you."

"No, use this instead."

Kishiar extended one of the rings he was wearing towards Yuder.

"It's a disposable magic item for signaling. Turn the gemstone one full rotation, and the ring I'm wearing will emit light."

Leaving two such expensive and disposable items on his fingers spoke volumes of his wealth and audacity. Yuder slid the ring that had fit on Kishiar's ring finger onto his middle finger, noting how loose it was. Silently, he left the room.

"I'll be back, then."

The hallway that led to the lounge was deserted. Though the shop was spacious, it was noticeably empty. Yuder moved quietly, looking for a place where workers might be.

'The first floor seems mostly for customers, so the workers are probably on the second floor or in the basement.'

While mulling over these thoughts, he carefully made his way toward what he suspected was the central staircase. It was then that he locked eyes with a newly arrived customer who was slowly rounding a pillar.

Had it been anyone else, they would have passed by without a second glance. However, this customer was different. His eyes widened, his mouth dropped open, and he pointed directly at Yuder.

"You...you...! What are you doing here...?"

Yuder clicked his tongue inwardly but maintained a neutral expression outwardly. Of all the people to run into, he had to encounter Kiolle da Diarca here. His luck was not favorable.

Turning

Chapter 480

'Every time I encounter this guy, something always seems to go awry.'

Whenever he had personally met Kiolle, inconvenient things had happened, such as his arm being injured by Nahan, or unexpected second gender manifestations suddenly beginning. On top of that, unlike the imperial palace where Kiolle needed to be cautious, this place was as good as Diarca family territory. Even a cowardly dog could turn into a courageous lion in its own den.

'But it doesn't matter if I make his luck worse than mine.'

He had already been planning to investigate why Kiolle became a bodyguard for Katchian, so encountering him here might not be entirely bad. After all, there was no better way to get reliable information than asking the person directly.

"Be quiet for now. Unless you want to announce our acquaintance to everyone here."

Upon hearing the calm reply, Kiolle closed his wide-open mouth. Looking around frantically, he seemed worried that someone might overhear. He appeared quite foolish.

Seizing the moment, Kiolle pinched the sleeve of Yuder's shirt between his thumb and forefinger and pulled him along. They ended up in a small storeroom below the stairs. Though empty, it was spotlessly clean. Once inside, Kiolle whispered cautiously.

"Why are you really here, you Cavalry scum? There's no way someone as poor as you should be here. Could it be... have you sensed something already?"

He seemed like he was about to say "pauper" but quickly corrected himself. Yuder felt the effects of language correction coming into play.

'Seems like the oath's been worth all the discomfort.'

Though trivial compared to the Red Stone's power, every time Kiolle nearly violated their pact, some of its power transferred to Yuder, momentarily influencing him. The sensation was so slight it was barely distinguishable from the warmth of sunlight.

"True, I have no reason to be here alone. I've come because our Commander has business here."

"Duke Peletta is here? Where?"

"In the waiting room."

Kiolle, who had been rolling his eyes anxiously, finally let out a small sigh and sharpened his gaze.

"So why are you wandering around alone! Do you even know where you are?"

"It's just a tailor's shop, isn't it? You're wandering alone too, so why can't I? Are you saying I can't even go to the bathroom?"

"Yo—"

Grinding his teeth, Kiolle clenched his fists and asked in a restrained voice filled with fury.

"So, you're saying you came out to go to the bathroom?"

"No."

"Are you mocking me!"



"There's no need to explain myself to you."

Kiolle's face twisted like crumpled paper. The agony of wanting to curse but not being able to was vividly visible. Deciding he had teased him enough, Yuder reached out and grabbed Kiolle's collar. Ignoring his sputtering, he pulled him closer.

"What, what are you doing!"

"Be quiet. Now that we've run into each other, let's get some questions answered."

"I refuse!"

"Seems you've forgotten the third term of our oath. Shall I remind you?"

"Would've been more convenient if I had forgotten. Because of that ridiculous term, this time too I—"

Frustratedly shouting, Kiolle suddenly clamped his mouth shut. He avoided eye contact, his face growing terribly pale.

"This time too? What?"

"Fine, then. What do you want to ask?"

Reacting so subserviently out of the blue was practically confessing that there was something hidden behind his previous words. Yuder decided to table the idiocy for later and first fulfill his purpose.

"You seem to have been reassigned as the Crown Prince's personal knight."

"What about it?"

"Were you fired from your position as a high-ranking knight in the Imperial Guard?"

"Fired? It's an official promotion! They said I was the only one fit for the job! I didn't take it because I wanted to!"

"Ah, I see. Then you must know a lot about the place. I hear people from here frequent the Bright Palace these days. Do you know who they are?"

"...Why?"

Kiolle responded with a suspicious and foreboding look.

"I thought I'd meet them, since I'm already here."

"Don't lie. You're here to dig up information on the Crown Prince's treatment, aren't you!"

Look at that. As expected, a little prodding and he spills information on his own.

Yuder couldn't help but think how much faster things would be if everyone in the world was as easy as Kiolle and replied.

"Yes, you're right. So, do you know who they are?"

"Do you plan to nefariously interfere with his treatment? Even if I've made a vow with you, if it harms my family—"

"If you're saying all that, the treatment must be going quite well in your eyes. They must be highly skilled individuals. Where did they find such people?"

At Yuder's question, Kiolle's mouth snapped shut. After trembling his clenched jaw, Kiolle managed to answer with great difficulty.

"...No."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't ask me if those charlatan healers are good or not, because as far as I'm concerned, they're not!"

"Charlatans?"

"What else would you call those who use neither divine power, magic, nor medical skills? I don't believe in such superstitions!"

This was an unexpected answer.

'Neither divine power, magic, nor medicine... But they were effective, so both the suspicious Katchian and Duke Diarca must have implicitly approved of the treatment, even assisting with the disguise.'

Then only one possibility remained.

'Awakeners.'

"And those people aren't here! They've only left their names here, I don't know where they came from, so don't ask about that either!"

"Hmm. Alright, too bad they're not here."

Of course, he didn't find it unfortunate at all. Kiolle shivered upon seeing the suspicious and cold smile that appeared on Yuder's lips. He forcefully removed Yuder's hand from his collar and shouted.

"If you're planning any mischief against the Crown Prince, stop. You may have gained some merit in the West, but don't get too full of yourself. If you try anything, I will not let it pass! Even if it means confessing everything to my father and breaking our oath!"

"I can't feel any sincerity, so let's leave it at that."

At Yuder's comment, Kiolle shut his mouth.

"You're not the type to jeopardize yourself by confessing just to break an oath. If you were, you would have done it by now. If you truly understood your role as the Crown Prince's personal knight, you wouldn't have left Bright Palace to come here. Lastly, I'm not interested in the Crown Prince, but in those healers."

"...No. I've been coerced by you... That's why until now..."

Kiolle tried to argue but soon trailed off and turned his head away. From the speed at which his spirit seemed to break, it appeared that he had some level of self-awareness about what Yuder had said.

"Why are you here today?"

Yuder asked Kiole, who hung his head with a look of injustice. He hadn't expected a response, but a moment later, a low voice answered.

"I'm here because my father ordered me to deliver a message."

"Why send you and not a servant? Do you often handle such menial tasks at home?"

"Don't look down on me! I am sent only when a task is too sensitive to trust to mere servants! It's an important job that comes with a reward!"

Kiole seemed to erupt, as if a sore spot had been touched.

"A reward?"

"Yes. A sword better than the one I'm using now! A legendary sword that you can't even imagine!"

'So they're giving him a sword just for running errands to a repair shop... Something about this doesn't smell like any ordinary tailoring errand.'

Tailors and jewelers who were actually healers in disguise frequented the old establishment of the Diarca family. And here was Kiole, coming to deliver a message from the Duke to that very place.

Anyone who thought there was no connection between these events would be a fool.

"So, you've already completed this delivery errand?"

"I was waiting to make the delivery when you showed up!"

"Good timing, then. Let me see it, too."

"What's so good about it? Why would I let you—"

"If it's just a tailoring errand, as you say, then there's no harm in me looking."

"Why do you want to see it in the first place! Ah, don't touch! Where are you putting your hand!"

Whether Kiole struggled or not after his collar was grabbed again, Yuder effortlessly slipped his hand into the inner pocket of Kiole's chest. Unless you were someone like Kishiar, who naturally carried all sorts of magic tools, the obvious place for noblemen to keep valuables was all too predictable.

Soon, Yuder's fingertips brushed against a piece of paper. Without hesitation, he unfolded it and soon narrowed his eyes, quietly exhaling.

'An order? This is a schedule, address, and the amount, all written in code.'

It was one of the code formats he had tired of using during his previous life when he was by the side of Emperor Katchian. It was impossible not to recognize it.

"You, you shameless bastard... Was the rumor true?"