

## Turning 491

### Chapter 491

"No. Weren't you just recently agonizing over whether to discuss the past? I thought I had resolved it to some extent by making sacrifices with this very body, and now what...!"

Enon had an exceptional ability to sense things, as he had often claimed he could easily read the minds of younger people. Yuder had no intention of revealing it this way, but since Enon had caught on, there was no need to hold back any longer. Yuder took a shallow breath and spoke.

"...That's how it is. Your suspicions are probably correct."

"Really? You actually did it during the holiday?"

"Yes."

Upon vocalizing his answer, Yuder felt a sudden realization that all those events had indeed transpired in reality, and an odd sensation washed over him. Enon, too, appeared to share a similar emotion, his eyes twitching in a complicated expression before he finally exploded.

"What happened to the libido suppressant I gave you!"

"...So that's your first question? I didn't take it. You said it was natural, so I believed you."

If it hadn't been for those words, Yuder might have taken even longer to decide to turn the key to their relationship anew.

"..."

"I chose to stay with Commander because I wanted to. I'll probably continue to do so."

Enon had been the one who knew best how Yuder had evolved to reach this point. If Yuder had decided that it was okay for everyone to know about his changing relationship with Kishiar, then Enon was surely one of the first who should be informed.

"So I have no regrets."

"You don't regret it?"

Enon's gaze became almost piercing as he suddenly stood up. A moment later, he collapsed back into his chair, holding his forehead in his hands.

"Ha. The medication you took to the west, worried that the surrounding mages might get exhausted—that was also for the Commander, wasn't it?"

"..."

"I thought so... But how can you be sure that this isn't just a temporary addiction effect, triggered by the mutual attraction between two Awakeners with opposing second genders?"

Caught off guard by the unexpected question, Yuder looked up in confusion.

"What are you talking about?"

"After I asked you about this, I started gathering some information from other members. They say there's nothing as blind and temporary as attraction due to second gender connection. Were you aware of that? If this is just a transient phenomenon, you may be taking an enormous risk."

"Enon."

Yuder cut him off.

"Is that why you asked me about it back then?"

"Yes! If you weren't acting so irresponsibly with your own body, would I have been curious?"

"..."

"I've been suspicious from the start. Changing the future, not taking revenge, but simply sticking around a specific individual—I thought you weren't a typical madman... I wanted to discuss this issue with you when you returned, but then this happened..."

It appeared that Enon's suspicion and concern had started much earlier than Yuder had imagined. He had noticed occasions when Enon suddenly got angry or displayed a strange reaction, but he hadn't paid much attention to them. Now he considered that these might have been related to this issue.

However, Enon's anger didn't last long. It seemed to dissolve when he couldn't find a trace of hesitation in Yuder's eyes.

After a long silence, Yuder finally spoke.

"I appreciate your concern. But there's no need to worry. I've already thought everything through."

"..."

"It wasn't because I manifested a second gender that I chose to be with the Commander. To be honest, that wasn't even a starting point for me. It was rather the opposite. I'm sure of it."

Enon remained silent for a while.

Just when he thought the conversation might end there, Enon quietly opened his mouth.

"So, he now knows everything about you?"

"No."

"What? Didn't you say it was all out in the open? Then what—"

"He doesn't know everything yet, but it's okay now. The issue has been resolved."

"I really don't understand you. Nor the Commander, for that matter. No matter how I see it, this seems crazier than any of the insane things you plan to do in the future."

His tone was harsh, but embedded within it was a genuine concern for Yuder. Yuder thought of all the risks Enon had just summarized as 'insane things,' and quietly smiled.

"Yeah, thanks."

"..."

Whether Enon thought he was being mocked, he shut his mouth with a grimace. But Yuder's gratitude was sincere.

He had never before realized how significant it was to have someone wholeheartedly speak on his behalf. Whether or not anyone was concerned about him, Yuder had always been on edge, wary of others.

It might not be dramatically better now compared to then, but at least he could genuinely believe there was no need to be overly cautious or suspicious.

After a moment lost in thought, he spoke as sincerely as possible.

"At first, I never thought I'd end up like this, never thought I'd be involved with the Commander either. But now it's better than it was. If my soul has found peace since being together, then the choice can't have been entirely bad. And I intend to keep it that way. So, don't think too poorly of the situation."

"..."

"The Commander said he would wait for me until the end. It's my choice now, and the same goes for the vacation."

"You've got to be kidding me..."

With an exasperated sigh, Enon ruffled his hair as he let out yet another uncountable curse.

"Let me ask you one more thing. Was there anything like this in the 'past'?"

"We were entangled, but it wasn't the same."

The person he had been involved with might have been the same, but nothing else about the circumstances was. And the outcomes were different, too.

Enon, who had been staring intently at Yuder's face without blinking, slowly responded.

"Fine, I get it."

Through his voice, Yuder sensed that Enon had softened emotionally and regained his composure.

"How's your body? Any pain?"

"None. I'm fine."

"I'd trust you only if you were as big as Kishiar."

Enon stood up from his seat after making a light jab at Kishiar's size. He looked as if he had aged years in just a few minutes.

"Leaving?"

"Yes. I had more to say, but I'm too tired. I need to rest if I'm to follow you tomorrow. We'll talk more later."

"You're coming tomorrow?"

"I need to know who I'm dealing with if I'm to investigate on my own. It's faster to see it firsthand if it's happening in the capital."

With that, Enon waved his hand in a somewhat hasty gesture and left. Yuder stood up from his seat, watching Enon's retreating figure. For some reason, he felt like returning to Kishiar's office where he had just left.

...

The following day was one of those rare occasions in the history of the Orr Empire where something extraordinary occurred.

The head of the Tain Ducal House, one of the four great noble families that wielded immense power over the Orr Empire, stood trial. The Duke had exploited his position, which allowed him control over the western trade routes, to illegally smuggle dangerous goods. Worse still, he was accused of human trafficking and even running slave auctions.

However, the atmosphere was entirely different from the trial of the Apeto family. Most of those who came forward to defend the Tain Duke were from other families. As for the Tain family itself, it was quite the opposite. People were rushing in to condemn the Duke, citing even more reasons than the charges that had already been levied against him.

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For a long time, Duke Tain had been using the family's assets as he pleased without consultation, wielding his authority recklessly and squandering over half of the once-considerable fortune. Most of the personal lands and money he had owned had either been squandered or invested recklessly ages ago.

When the news spread that the duke was under investigation, a storm of whispers followed, claiming that the overseas investment projects he had initiated under the family name were also fraught with chronic financial issues. Those who had tolerated delayed payments solely because of the name of the Tain family began to raise an uproar. Scandals that had been suppressed through the power of his authority burst forth one after another.

Priscilla Van Tain, the newly designated heir of the Tain dukedom, was so swamped with handling the multitude of communications that she sent word she could not attend her father's trial, creating a significant ripple among the aristocracy.

To make matters worse, even the men sent by Duke Diarca to assist Duke Tain returned to Duke Diarca, shaking their heads as they found no viable solutions. And it was more than just a rumor. The real issue was that Duke Tain had not gratefully accepted the help offered by Diarca.

Eventually, Duke Diarca discreetly withdrew his prior support before Duke Tain's trial, skillfully distancing himself. Rumors circulated among the Crown Prince's supporters that in private, Duke Diarca had referred to Duke Tain as "the epitome of foolish blood expelled by the Tain family," declaring there was no need to waste even a penny on helping him.

Duke Tain defended himself by blaming the Southern merchants for providing incorrect information, but public opinion was not in his favor. It didn't help that during his investigation, not only had he lost his aristocratic composure but had even physically assaulted the investigating officers, demanding they bring in the Southern merchants.

"Rumor has it he was so addicted to gambling that he spent millions daily at high-end gambling houses."

"The Tain family is almost out of both land and money. Even the ancestral mansion was mortgaged to a foreign country, and everyone found out too late."

"He was so desperate to solve the issues that he even sold off treasures passed down since the founding of the country. What a waste. I feel sorry for the heir."

"I wouldn't be surprised if the stubborn old men of the Tain family assassinate the Duke before the trial even ends."

The rumors spread like wildfire, thanks in part to the discreet efforts of the Emperor and his subordinates. Using information collected by the officials he had dispatched to the west, the Emperor launched an effective public relations campaign. He made it appear as if the problem lay solely with Duke Tain, who had dragged his family and heirs into disrepute. This tactic had a far greater effect than anyone involved had anticipated.

Those who had supported him because of his name began to betray Duke Tain one by one as the situation grew dire. Cunning individuals like Baron Willhem had long since shown their willingness to admit that everything had been done under Duke Tain's orders.

Witnesses to the acts commanded by Duke Tain also expressed their intent to appear in the related trials. Among them were the leader of the Western Mage Union, Micalin Punt, and his mages; Baron Koelt, who had been monitoring the actions of Baron Willhem all along; Awakeners who had

narrowly avoided becoming victims of human trafficking; and even participants in the illegal auctions, hoping to lighten their own crimes. Evidence and testimonies abounded.

The true nature of a man who had neither the skill to win allies, nor social influence, nor ability, was exposed for all to see even before the trial began.

The courtroom, where not even the Duke's wife had appeared, was filled to capacity with people who had come to witness the downfall of a man once deemed one of the most noble in the empire.

Before them, Duke Tain cut a pitiful figure, hiding behind those who spoke in his defense.

Though Duke Tain acted as if he knew much about his own schemes, he actually knew nothing substantial. He couldn't even remember how much he had gambled, or which items he had smuggled, without someone to rely upon.

So began the pathetic trial, devoid of any expectation that the Duke would prevail, contrasting sharply with the prestige of the four great ducal houses. At that moment, the twelve fountains symbolizing the six walls of the imperial capital initiated their semi-annual water replacement.

The ancient and beautiful fountains, just by undergoing their water replacement, always drew crowds. And where there is a crowd in one place, it means fewer people elsewhere.

Thus, within the normally busier fifth wall, six people gathered, dressed in a way that attracted no attention.

Naturally, these were Yuder Aile and his companions, who had escaped from their Cavalry headquarters in civilian attire for today's task and had arrived near the location of the planned transaction.

"Wow, it's really odd how few people there are. Is this fountain water replacement really that interesting?"

"I heard from some locals today that mages from the Imperial Mage Office come out and change the water over the course of half a day. It must be quite the spectacle."

Hinn answered Devran's question.



"Seriously? It takes half a day just to handle twelve fountains? The guys in our Cavalry who deal with water would do a better job."

"Exactly! If Yuder did it, it'd be over in a second."

"..."

Yuder remained silent, watching his colleagues puffing up with pride. The commonsense answer that the reason for today's low turnout was not only the fountain water replacement but also Duke Tain's trial seemed irrelevant here.

'Choosing the day when the attention of the entire capital is most scattered must have been intentional.'

Up to this point, most of the people they had seen were engrossed in one of the two major events, making it a perfect day for a clandestine transaction.

"...Hey, there's a suspicious guy over there."

Then, Enon, with his craggy face standing next to Yuder, spoke up. He pointed to a man lugging a large bag, wandering around and approaching them. Though the man seemed to make an effort to look unsuspecting, Yuder could clearly see the caution and flaws in his behavior.

'He's not used to this kind of thing. What he's carrying must be money...'

After making his assessment, Yuder signaled to his companions.

"Looks like the Diarca side has arrived. Focus, and be careful not to get caught. Gakane, do as we discussed earlier."

"...Yes."

Gakane nodded and expanded the size of the shadow clone that had so far concealed its presence. From a distance, it looked like an impenetrable darkness, making it difficult to see what lay within.

A person from Diarca's side glanced around before entering the building indicated by the address on the note. The place appeared to be a rather ordinary house.

Not long after, another group appeared from the opposite direction. Five individuals, their faces hidden beneath travelers' cloaks, drew near.

'The man in front looks fairly old. And the ones behind him are young men and women... Is he the leader of the group?' Yuder thought.

While Yuder and his team observed, the group stopped in front of their target house and knocked on the door. It soon opened. Only after they had filed in did Yuder's team exhale the breath they had been holding.

"Phew. Are those five the healers?"

"Most likely."

"It's hard to tell if they are Awakeners just by looking at them."

"Definitely," Yuder asserted, eliciting expressions of awe from the other members.

"How can you be so sure? Can you sense it?"

"It's not so much about sensing... If an Awakener is using their abilities, I can faintly see it if I concentrate."

"You can see that?"

"Ever since I recovered from injuries in the West, my eyes have improved."

Yuder had been able to vaguely see the flow of energy emanating from Awakeners before, but since his Eye of Magic had opened, this perception had significantly sharpened. He could clearly see the transparent aura emanating from the body of the man in the lead, even though they were quite far away.

Whatever the man was doing, he was continuously using some kind of ability.

"Speaking of which, after Gakane recovered from his injuries, his shadow clone ability improved. Does our power grow every time we recover from injuries?"

"Uh, well, now that I think about it, my own abilities did improve after I nearly died in Hartan," Devran recalled, as he responded to Hinn's curious question. Yuder, concerned that his promising young members might willingly injure themselves to gain power like in a previous life, immediately issued a warning.

"Don't even think about risking yourselves like that. There's no guarantee that you'll always become stronger after recovering from an injury. Better to just concentrate on regular training."

"As if we'd do something as ridiculous as jumping off a cliff to improve our abilities. You underestimate us, Yuder."

Finn chuckled, feigning weakness. His innocent yet mischievous expression betrayed no hint of the grim fact that, in a previous life, some members had actually attempted such foolhardy acts.

"But do we just keep waiting like this until they come out? I'm getting impatient."

"Should Finn and I teleport inside the second floor of that house and eavesdrop?"

"There's no need to take such risks; we already know what the transaction entails. We stick to the original plan and follow the healers once they leave."

"Um... they seem to be coming out already."

Gakane, who had been steadily enlarging the shadow clone, quietly spoke. True to his words, the door of the house where the people had entered creaked slightly.

A moment later, the door opened and the envoy from Diarca, along with the five healers, emerged. Yuder quickly changed the direction of the wind so that their conversation could be heard more clearly.

"...All checks have been completed. You have accurately given all 500,000. We're also pleased with the new accommodations you've provided. Please pass on our thanks."

"Understood. If you encounter any discomfort during your stay, feel free to speak up. I shall take my leave now."

The man from the Diarca faction bowed deeply to the healers. As he did, Yuder felt an odd sense of discomfort. The man's demeanor was now overly familiar and polite, a stark contrast to the apprehension and caution he'd exhibited upon entering.

Once the man from Diarca turned his back and left, the healers collectively removed the hats they had been wearing. Their faces seemed to brighten as they exhaled in relief. One among them turned to an older individual and spoke cheerfully.

"Sage, you've worked hard. Starting today, this will be our new lodging..."

"Did I hear that right? 'Sage'?"

Devran, who had overheard the conversation, questioned with a smirk. However, what he said went unnoticed, for Yuder was deeply stunned by something else.

'...Whose face is that?'

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Yuder's gaze was neither focused on the middle-aged man known as the Sage, nor on the bespectacled young man who was speaking to him. What had truly caught Yuder's attention was a timid young man standing at the farthest corner, clutching the hem of his cloak tightly.

‘His face looks much younger than I remember, but the reddish skin indicative of southern heritage, the long scar on one ear, even the color of his eyes...’

He looked strikingly similar to the 'Sage' who would reveal himself years from now, if one disregarded age.

In Yuder's mind, the face of the 'Sage,' whom he had personally executed for bewitching Emperor Katchian in his past life, resurfaced.

The current 'Sage' of the Star of Nagran had been an extremely elderly man with long hair when he revealed himself years after the Star of Nagran's internal demise. His back hunched, he found it difficult to walk without a cane, and his skin was full of wrinkles. To anyone who saw him, he appeared to be close to his final days. Such an elderly Awakener was exceedingly rare, so much so that Yuder had never met another like him.

Kanna never referred to the Sage from this timeline, who existed prior to the residents of Star of Nagran, as an old man. She had said he was somewhat advanced in age, which meant around the same age as Steiber or just a bit older. Other descriptions and actions thus far hardly resembled the 'Sage' Yuder had killed.

The 'Sage' had garnered an undeserved title of 'spiritual mentor' and had led many followers, but he was neither moderate nor meticulous. The reason he could attract so many followers despite his inconsistency was his ability to scratch people's hidden ulterior motives with cruel words nonchalantly.

The 'Sage' blamed the weakness of the world on the weak, preaching that the superior should punish and make them repent. When secretly applying his awakened ability, he could achieve astonishing effects even with a minor mental power that barely changed people's moods.

Had Yuder not boldly dragged him in front of Emperor Katchian to interrogate him, had he not rattled the man by recalling that the name of his cult, 'Star of Nagran,' coincided with a long-gone terrorist group, Yuder might have met an earlier end. Emperor Katchian's trust in the man had been that deep at the time.

Therefore, Yuder had never been particularly convinced that the 'Sage' he killed in his past life was the same as the Sage of the Star of Nagran existing in this timeline. The Sage of this era, at least on the surface, acted contrary to his own actions, leading Awakeners while meticulously hiding from the state.

He did know in his past life that the man he killed had some connection with the current Star of Nagran. He had always intended to gladly deal with him if they ever crossed paths again, but...

‘I never thought I'd encounter him so young, here of all places.’

Yuder scanned the young 'Sage's' face, tinged with a mixture of disappointment and puzzlement.

'How is this possible? It's only been 11 years. Could that old appearance in my previous life have been conjured by his abilities?'

At that moment, another young man standing beside the 'Sage' gently tapped him on the back and spoke. Although the voice was too soft to catch the words clearly, the name caught Yuder's attention.

"...Let's go, Diemon."

'Diemon. Different from the alias he used in my previous life. I wonder if that's his real name.'

Yuder committed the name to memory. Only then did he turn his gaze toward the middle-aged man whom the youths had called Sage.

The man looked like any middle-aged man one might encounter from the Empire. His grey-white brown hair and smiling face gave off an impression of kindness that anyone would feel, and his eyes were incredibly warm.

"Let's go inside, Sage. It's cold. If you're planning to go out tomorrow..."

Pressured by the awkward yet caring gestures of the young men, the middle-aged man, referred to as the Sage, entered the house. Among them was the 'Sage' from his previous life who timidly held out his hand and mumbled.

Yuder swallowed a cold, sardonic laugh at the sight.

"...They've gone in? If that house is their new base, we won't have to follow them immediately. What do you think, Yuder?"

Hinn grinned as he asked, his tone suggesting that he was open to any course of action. Yuder finally shifted his gaze away from the closed door and looked around at everyone.

"...I agree, there's no need to follow them right away. But I think I've found out something important."

"Something important? Like what?"

"Their true identities."

"Huh? They're Awakeners, aren't they? What else is there?"

"We all know about the Star of Nagran group that we chased in Tainu, right?"

Feeling the eyes of his comrades upon him, Yuder spoke slowly yet gravely.

"They're not ordinary Awakeners. They are definitely part of the Star of Nagran. The one they called the Sage seems to be their leader."

"The leader of the Star of Nagran? That old guy?"

Finn, who had personally confronted the Star of Nagran in Tainu, widened his eyes in disbelief and quickly turned his head toward the house where the Sage and the young men had entered.

"What? I thought Finn said you had captured all of them except one."

"That's only part of it."

"So...we've hit the jackpot, then?"

Hinn swiftly came to a conclusion. Her eyes, cute as a water fairy's, twinkled uncontrollably with excitement.

"What should we do? Charge in right now?"

"No. Other than coming to treat the Crown Prince, they haven't done anything yet. We need to prioritize gathering information. I'll report to the Commander, and as for surveillance..."

"I'll handle that part."

Enon, who had remained silent and withdrawn up to this point, suddenly spoke up. Everyone except Yuder looked at him with puzzled eyes.

"Can you handle surveillance alone? How?"

"I've lived in the capital for quite some time and know people here and there. Monitoring a single house should not be a problem."

His nonchalant tone seemed to reassure the team, as a 'I see' expression faintly dawned on their faces.

"That makes sense. If you've been living here, then..."

"So that's why Yuder brought you along."

"...I'll attach my shadow to that house as well. That way, we can at least detect when they leave."

Gakane added softly. His abilities had advanced considerably during the western mission; not only could he manifest his shadow as a separate entity, but he could also use it to track specific targets. One of the new skills he'd acquired was the ability to attach his shadow to someone and detect their movements.

'I had heard the story while returning from the West, but this was the first time I actually saw it written down. I was struggling to grasp its full implications.'

Yuder inquired to get a precise understanding of Gakane's ability.

"So, up to what distance does this work?"



"The further the distance, the less I can perceive. But within the range between here and the Cavalry headquarters, I can sense comings and goings even in my sleep."

"Wouldn't it be noticeable once attached?"

"If it's hidden in places like the shadow of a wall, no one would know. No one has ever noticed it during training either."

"That must be really convenient. If I had that ability, I could slack off in the training ground until I sensed Yuder or the Commander approaching."

"Finn."

"Just kidding."

With a stern look, Yuder, arms crossed, stared at the closed door of the house. After a moment, he made his decision.

"Fine. It seems like the best we've got so far, so let's go with it. Proceed cautiously with the remaining tasks and investigate in your own ways."

"Understood."

Once the conclusion was reached, Finn left, stating he had other matters to attend to. Yuder took one more careful look at the lodging where the Star of Nagran was staying amidst his hurrying comrades.

'The Sage, and Diemon.'

The current Sage and the one who would be a Sage in the future.

It felt incredibly strange that due to unforeseen circumstances in his previous life, he was seeing both of these individuals here together.

'When I return, I'll report this and call for Kanna. I should also visit Hosanna, and Gayle and Doyle brothers, whom I haven't seen in a while.'

But before that, there was one more thing he had to do.

"Gakane."

Yuder whispered softly, avoiding the eyes of the noisy Eldore siblings and Devran. The red-headed young man, who was walking a step ahead, slightly tensed his shoulders.

"Let's talk when we get back."

" ... "

...

When they returned, the Cavalry headquarters was in the midst of practicing a dance. The members were so engrossed in learning the aristocratic dance for the first time that they hadn't noticed a few had stealthily slipped away and returned.

The Eldore siblings ran towards their practicing comrades with bright faces, while Devran grumbled and disappeared with a reluctant expression.

As for Gakane, he was quietly observing his practicing comrades with a face that hardly ever displayed his usual smile.

Yuder spoke as he watched him.

"If you're going to practice dancing too, we can talk afterward."

"I... already know how to dance."

Gakane answered softly.

"Don't you need to practice, Yuder?"

"I also know how to dance."

While it was true that Yuder was planning to dance man-to-man with Kishiar, since the dance's basics were already known to him, he wasn't as pressed for time as those who were starting from scratch.

"I see..."

"Anyway, if neither of us needs to practice, there's no need to stay here any longer. Follow me."

Yuder led Gakane to a secluded area. It was next to a large tree near the training ground, a place where members rarely visited at this hour.

"You've seemed off since yesterday. Is it because of what the Commander said? The thing that's been bothering you?"

"...Yuder. About the dance with the Commander. Do you really have to be the one to do it?"

Instead of answering the question, an unexpected counter-question flowed from Gakane. Yuder blinked twice.

"What?"

"While I understand the idea of changing the criteria in light of the second gender consideration, and the Commander always thinks in the right direction, so I believe it's a well-considered decision. But... why does it have to be realized in a situation that hinges on your future? Why does it have to be you?"

At the end of the rapid-fire words, Gakane bit his lip tightly. Blood rushed to his cheeks, making them flush, and beads of sweat formed next to them.

"Yuder. The social circles where nobles gather are truly terrifying places. If you start off like that, your future won't be that of a promising new star in the Cavalry; you'll be forever overshadowed by the Commander. People might not realize how terrifying that is... but I do."

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"Gakane, calm down for a moment."

Yuder reached out his hand to Gakane, whose voice was escalating, and restrained him.

'I almost always forget that this guy comes from a prominent family... Never thought I'd be reminded of it here.'

"So you're saying... you'd rather I not dance with the Commander?"

"It's not that I'm saying don't do it without reason..."

"Right. For the sake of my future."

"It's more than just the future," Gakane added firmly.

"I know you've done similar things in Tainu, but that doesn't mean this should be taken for granted. In fact, if I had been there at that time, I would have seriously discouraged you. Your reputation would have been truly ruined, even if it was all an act."

What Gakane was talking about had long lost any meaning for Yuder. He was someone who had already seen where his 'promising future' would end, and he knew it was not pretty. But he couldn't outright say that.

Yuder decided to elaborate more on how he was fine with the situation.

"As I've said before, I'm fine. Dancing with the Commander won't make the rewards I'm to receive disappear, and I have no interest in the social scene. If dancing can help mark the day when our Cavalry receives formal commendation as the beginning of meaningful change, then I think that's a good thing."

"I know you don't care about that sort of thing. But you may not always feel that way," Gakane's voice quivered slightly.

"Please don't take it lightly. No matter how exceptional you are, once people have a bad impression of you, they will never look back. You might not need that now, but there will come a time when you do... and by then..."

Gakane's eyes weren't on Yuder. His dark green pupils trembled as they stared into empty space.

"It will already be too late."

The emotion lurking within those words was tinged with an unfamiliar light, something Yuder had not seen since meeting Gakane.

Yuder raised an eyebrow.

'Is this not just him over-worrying because he knows aristocratic sensitivities well? Could it be based on his own experiences?'

"Is this something you've experienced yourself?"

"If I say yes, will you reconsider?"

"That would be difficult. I've already promised the Commander."

"Why did you make such an important decision so impulsively? Others might not understand the risk, but if you had talked to me even once..."

"Gakane."

Yuder sighed softly, interrupting him.

"I appreciate the concern, but it has to be me who does this."

"Please, Yuder. Don't sacrifice yourself. Even if you've made a promise, the Commander will understand if you explain. Or rather, let me..."

Gakane would neither retract his worries nor cease trying to persuade Yuder. In that case, there was only one thing to say.

"I'm not making a sacrifice. This is simply the future I want. No other opportunities are necessary."

Gakane, who had been about to continue his persuasion, closed his mouth for a moment. Yuder stared at his somewhat pale face with an expressionless look but filled with certainty.

"If you don't understand, see it for yourself that day. I'll show you the opportunity I seek."

...

After his conversation with Gakane, Yuder had planned to find Kanna and meet the Awakeners belonging to the Star of Nagran. However, for some reason, he could not find Kanna anywhere he went.

After searching about three places, he eventually gave up and decided to move alone. The first place he visited was the restaurant where Gayle and Doyle were working. The brothers, who were busily peeling potatoes with knives in preparation for dinner, sprang up with surprised faces as soon as they saw Yuder.

"Uh, you...!"

"Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Well, would it be okay... after we finish peeling these potatoes?" Gayle hesitantly replied. "We have to soak them in saltwater right after, so leaving them would be a bit... If we use our abilities, we can finish quickly, so can you wait just a bit?"

"Is that so?"

Yuder's gaze shifted toward the remaining potatoes and the large barrel of saltwater next to them. A moment later, he raised his hand and made a light flicking motion. The startled brothers quickly stepped back, but his intention was not to attack.

"What, what's that?"

The potatoes and knives floating in the air began to move on their own. The skins were neatly peeled off, and the peeled potatoes immediately started plunging into the barrel of saltwater, one after another. The incredibly rapid process was soon over, and all that remained was a pile of potato skins, like fallen leaves on one side.

"Is that good enough?"

"Wha-, how did you do that?!"

"It doesn't matter who does it if we were going to use abilities to peel the potatoes anyway."

"But your ability wasn't like this; it was more like, boom, an explosion, wasn't it?"

"The principle is the same. Depending on how it's manipulated, I can cause explosions or peel potatoes."

The brothers' eyes widened as if they were about to pop out. They looked at the perfectly peeled potatoes several times as if they couldn't believe what had just happened and eventually followed Yuder, their faces filled with fear and anxiety.

'Did helping them peel potatoes really scare them that much?'

At first, he thought they were just typically afraid of him, but after seeing him use his abilities, they seemed even more fearful, which somehow felt odd.

The keen sense of someone who had long been investigating suspicious matters suddenly perked up. Those brothers were hiding something.

'I should have brought Kanna along.'

Yuder eyed the brothers cautiously and decided to probe a bit.

"Do you know why I came here?"

"...Is it because of Hosanna?"

Doyle timidly asked. It was well-known among the members that one of the Star of Nagran had been escorted from the west to this place. The brothers had gathered enough information to suspect that the person was Hosanna while doing odd jobs.

"Half-correct."

"What did Hosanna say? That we're going to escape?"

"We didn't do anything! We just worked! Even when that guy Hosanna and Nahan asked us to go, we said no! We really didn't do anything, so there's nothing to blame us for! We're really innocent!"

"..."

Hosanna and Nahan had asked the brothers to go?

'Just from what they're saying, it sounds like they have joined the Cavalry or something. When exactly...?'

The brothers still hadn't realized they had misspoken. Although they knew that Hosanna had been captured, they didn't know that he hadn't even woken up yet for questioning.

Yuder decided not to share the information he had on Hosanna for the time being, opting instead to fully trust the brothers' words. He asked them to elaborate further. What he learned was astonishing.

'... They really went back and forth here in a carriage? Not anywhere else, but Cavalry?' Really?'



Even if half of the Cavalry had been absent at the time, including himself, that could not serve as an excuse. The fact that no one had known about this until today was simply baffling.

Gayle and Doyle emphasized with fearful eyes that they hadn't done anything wrong. Gayle, scared of losing their current stable and peaceful life, contrasted sharply with Doyle, who appeared to have seriously considered escape when it was suggested, and was particularly tense, breaking into a cold sweat.

'If it's true that Nahan told them the Sage would understand if they wanted to stay here, he must've been taken aback at the time too.'

It was clear why Nahan had left the brothers behind. Judging by the fact that he told them to think carefully until his return, he must've planned to gather information about the Cavalry through their eyes.

'I almost got stabbed in the back from the inside. I knew his skills were unnaturally specialized in infiltration, but to pull off something like this...'

It was highly likely that the claim that Nahan had reported their survival to the Sage was false to begin with. The evidence was that no one had looked for them since his visit with Hosanna. Judging from the reaction of the average Awakeners in the West, people seemed to think they were already dead.

"We've, we've really told you everything honestly now..."

The brothers whispered to Yuder, lost in thought. He lifted his eyes and nodded.

"Alright, go back for now."

"Back where? Our room? We're not going to be locked up like Hosanna, are we?"

"No intention of locking you up, just go back to the dining hall."

"Alright!"

"You really trust us?"

Yuder sighed, brightening the brothers' faces. Before they rushed away, Yuder left them with a word of caution.

"There was no issue this time, but if anything similar happens again, make sure to inform me first. If you want to continue working with the Cavalry, you should prioritize the safety of the place you belong to."

The brothers scampered away, visibly chastened.

Yuder immediately headed to his next destination: the room where Hosanna lay.

"Ah, Yuder, you came to check on him?"

"Yes. Any changes?"

"Nothing much. His eyelids twitched a few times, but he hasn't woken up."

The member who had been holding the string wrapped around Hosanna's arm answered calmly. Sitting quietly next to Yuder as he scanned Hosanna's face and limbs, the member soon shifted uncomfortably.

"Uh... Yuder, if you're going to examine him, can I step out for a bit? I ate little this morning and danced all day; I'm really hungry."

"Go ahead. Be quick."

"Yay! I'll run and be back in no time!"

The member happily stood up and dashed out. Yuder took the string left behind, wrapped it around his hand, and sat down on the chair next to the bed. Hosanna's face, now resting on the bed, was clean and free of wounds thanks to consistent care, but showed almost no sign of vitality.

He looked down at the emaciated young man from the South and placed his hand on the stomach area to sense the inner energy.

'The recovery of his strength... hasn't changed since the last time I checked.'

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Even though his body had fully recovered, he couldn't open his eyes. The reason was the sluggish restoration of his inner energy. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have been helpless in this state, but now he knew there was one method he could employ.

A method only Yuder Aile could execute.

It was the same approach he had tried on Kishiar—directly inspecting the power of the Awakener within.

Normally, he would have waited a bit longer for him to wake up on his own before attempting it. However, considering the Sages and other members of the Star of Nagran had appeared, there was no time to delay.

'Nothing would serve as better proof that I can precisely see and manipulate the insides of others than this. If it seems too difficult to manipulate, then I'll stop right away.'

Yuder took a deep breath and focused his mind, confirming that the member that had left for a meal had not yet returned. A golden light flared in one of his eyes, and a red energy extended from the veins on the back of his gloved hand.

Moments later, energies sleeping within Hosanna's body glowed and revealed themselves before Yuder's eyes.

'So far so good... this works well even on others.'

Perhaps due to having practiced several times on Kishiar, Yuder found it much easier to inspect the insides than before.

With caution, Yuder quickly scanned Hosanna's interior, making sure the strong Red Stone energy entwining his hand didn't manifest too intensely.

Like all other Awakeners, there was a red-hued power underneath Hosanna's belly. However, it was incomparably smaller than Kishiar's and the energy flow seemed insignificant. It was like a candle on the verge of going out.

'Sharing energy as I did with Kishiar could be dangerous. Let's start by gently stimulating it.'

Yuder removed his gloves and revealed his reddened hand. The moment his fingers touched, the energy within Hosanna jolted as if pricked by a needle.

Simultaneously, Hosanna's body also responded violently, like a fish speared by a harpoon.

"...Ah!"

"..."

His eyes remained closed, but his breathing grew significantly stronger and his heartbeat quickened.

As his body started moving, the previously stagnant energy began to flow as well. Until now, the energy had been faint like a puddle in a drought, but it became clearer, following the rhythm of the heartbeat. Though it looked strained, it was undoubtedly effective.

Confirming this, Yuder started to move his hand that lay over Hosanna's jittering energy. The Awakener energy, essentially of the same Red Stone origin, reluctantly began to follow like a toddling child.

As the stagnant energy became more lively, Hosanna's fingertips also started to tremble intermittently. After repeating this several times, warmth returned to his previously cold body temperature, and his cheeks and lips also regained their rosy hue.

Yuder then withdrew his energy. The light in his eyes dimmed, and the violent red energy gradually calmed. He felt somewhat fatigued, even though only a few minutes had passed.

'But it's bearable.'

He continued to intensely observe Hosanna's eyelids, which looked as though they could open at any moment. After what felt like an eternity—

"Ah... ugh."

Finally, the trembling eyelids laboriously opened, revealing deep hazel eyes within.

The once blurry, unfocused eyes that seemed unaware of their surroundings slowly cleared up after a few sluggish blinks. Eyes that had been vacantly scanning the ceiling turned sideways to meet Yuder's face.

"Hosanna. Are you conscious?"

"..."

"I am Yuder Aile of the Cavalry. Do you remember who you are and why you're here?"

"..."

Dry lips seemed on the verge of making a sound, but then stopped. Moments later, confusion, questions, and shock began to rise one by one above Hosanna's eyes.

'Fortunately, it doesn't seem like he has lost his memory or become foolish.'

Yuder had been wary because it wasn't uncommon for Awakeners who had pushed their powers to the limit and neared death to suffer such fates. It was a relief.

As if instinctively trying to flee, Hosanna attempted to use his abilities. However, his body merely flickered a couple of times; he couldn't even exert proper strength, let alone teleport.

'As expected.'

Without a word, Yuder raised a cord connected to Hosanna's arm to show them.

"In your current state, you can't use any abilities. Even if you did, it would only affect the person connected to you. So, stop wasting your energy. If you want to live, I recommend you rest without exerting yourself for a few years."

"...Huh, eh, cough, cough."

Hosanna attempted to speak but ended up coughing softly from their parched throat. Yuder lifted a finger and created a small droplet of water.

"You're probably parched. Drink this first."

Hosanna breathed slightly faster, as if anticipating an attack. Just like the brothers Gayle and Doyle, they seemed to be afraid of Yuder's very existence.

"Just open your mouth. I'm controlling the amount of water for convenience."

Reluctant to open his mouth, Hosanna left Yuder no choice but to support his head and gently force his jaw open. When a small stream of water flowed slowly into his mouth, Hosanna finally swallowed it, eyes flickering cautiously. It resembled a timid dog accepting water.

After sipping the small amount of water over an extended period, Hosanna seemed to sag with exhaustion, as if he had just completed a monumental task. His eyes seemed to struggle to stay open; it appeared that this was the limit of his physical strength for now.

"You're awake, and that's enough. We'll talk later."

"..."

Seeming unfazed, Yuder watched as Hosanna drifted back to sleep. His large, brown eyes harbored questions about Yuder until the end.

"Yuder! I'm back! Got caught up eating and lost track of time."

Not long after, the member of the Cavalry who should have been on watch returned. He hadn't even considered the possibility that Hosanna had awakened.

Instead of pointing out the crumbs on the cheerful member's face, Yuder handed him the cord tied to Hosanna's arm.

"Hosanna woke up briefly. He drank some water and went back to sleep, but this means his recovery will speed up considerably."

"Wha... What?"

"Don't let your guard down just because he can't use his abilities. Keep it a secret that he has awakened until the Commander gives instructions. I think we should also reduce the number of people monitoring him to just a few. Now, I'll be going."

"What did you say?!"

Ignoring the astonished cries behind him, Yuder left the room.

His expression appeared intensely serious, but it was not because Hosanna had woken up; it was because of the man he was soon to meet in the briefing room upstairs.

"... He probably won't be too pleased, either."

If he reported that Hosanna had woken up, he would inevitably have to tell Kishiar what had happened while he was awake. He was confident that he could cleanly explain and make understandable the reasons for using the power of the Red Stone and its apparent effects. Yet, Yuder couldn't help but feel a slight worry and concern that he knew would inevitably flit across Kishiar's face, no matter what he did.

Facing a giant monster alone had been easier for Yuder than that momentary expression. But the unfamiliarity, while still uncomfortable, was no longer painful, which was quite strange.

Stopping in his tracks, Yuder ascended the stairs with a suddenly softer expression.

That day, many things within the Cavalry had changed before nightfall.

The number of guards constantly surrounding Hosanna had increased from one to two, and Lusan began to frequent his room as if it were his own dining room. In addition, security was tightened to prevent unauthorized persons from entering the area, and news of Hosanna's waking up was only to be known by the members in charge of surveillance and the Deputy Commanders.

Aside from that, the number of personnel securing the entrance to the Cavalry headquarters had also doubled. However, thanks to a clever arrangement of party preparations and dance practice, this change was not visible on the surface. No one knew that the innermost depths of the Cavalry headquarters, which seemed preoccupied with the upcoming party and receiving awards, were actually becoming increasingly solidified in preparation for what would follow.

People were more interested in the ongoing trials of political machinations, the new and beautiful jewels that nobles were acquiring, or whether the Emperor would make an appearance at the upcoming party, than in any changes within the Cavalry.

And this included Duke Diarca, who had also ordered a special gift to be prepared for the Cavalry.

...

Finally, the day of the party to honor the Cavalry dawned.

The official start time of the event was around sunset, but the members woke up as if it were dawn, busily polishing and preening themselves.

The formal wear they donned was similar to what Kishiar had tailored for them during the previous harvest festival, but it looked entirely different. The belts around their waists and the outer decorations had changed somewhat.

The formal wear that Kishiar had designed was fundamentally simple and white, allowing for a completely different impression with just a few changes in outerwear. Members were amazed at how different they looked with the simple addition of elegant winter scarves or shawls, or small fur capes that covered only their shoulders.

"Wow, did our Cavalry always have so many striking figures? Everyone's suddenly transformed into nobility; it's hard to get used to."



"Steiber seems to have changed the most among us."

Deputy Commander Steiber, who had slicked back his hair with some stylish oil for today, looked at the members and chuckled.

"When is the Commander coming down?"

"He should be down soon!"

"Then we should start preparing 'that carriage' now."

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At Steiber's words, the eyes of his friends and the members who were close to him all turned meaningful and joyous, like those of delighted children.

"Wow, finally? I'm really looking forward to seeing you unveil it in front of everyone."

"You won't believe how well it's preserved; it hasn't rotted at all. I wouldn't be surprised if you all fall over backward in awe. Hehehe."

"Hehehehe."

"It may not be our catch, but since we're part of the same Cavalry, it's almost like we caught it. So, why shouldn't we be happy?"

"Exactly. The one who caught it doesn't know how to smile, so it's only fair that we enjoy it on their behalf."

While they all wore sly smiles, the other members were busy praising each other's outfits and happily chatting about their high expectations as they finalized their preparations to depart for the palace.

As departure time neared, carriages far more luxurious than those used during the harvest festival lined up in front of the Cavalry headquarters's main gate. They were sent by Emperor Keilusa for today's stars, the members of the Cavalry. Among those who were delighted by the grandiose scenery was Lusan, who had boldly joined in as a medical officer. Standing next to him with a skewed posture was Enon, who didn't seem to care for the whole affair. However, his attire was so attractive that he couldn't help but draw the attention of those around him.

Soon after, Ever, adorned in formal wear, descended the stairs that led to the dressing room with brisk steps.

Upon seeing the smiling Steiber and the members, she paused for a moment, then approached and spoke.

"Steiber, is something special happening? You all look so happy."

"Oh, Ever. You look marvelous with your hair down like that. Nothing much, really. We're just excited about moving the 'Golden Carriage' soon. Hehehe."

Only then did Ever seem to understand the reason behind their smiles. A smile similar to Steiber's appeared on her face.

"I see. Thank you for the compliment. Your hair looks great up as well. Have you considered doing it like that more often?"

"Hmm... applying oil and styling it every day might be a bit too much. But thanks for the compliment."

Steiber closed his eyes briefly and then reopened them, smiling.

"By the way, where is your expected partner?"

"Ah, Gakane went to help Kanna with Jimmy. It's about the clothes."

"Ah, yes. I heard Jimmy has grown a lot lately, so he needed some major clothing adjustments?"

Steiber warmly smiled, thinking of the young boy growing up so quickly even though he should still miss his parents. Then, he subtly shifted his tone.

"Come to think of it, you agreed to dance the first dance with Gakane to help Yuder, didn't you?"

"Huh? Oh, right. Yes, that's true."

Currently, in the Cavalry, there were fewer Omega Awakeners than Alpha Awakeners. Even if everyone paired up, there would still be leftover Alpha Awakeners. Though these remaining Alpha Awakeners could choose a partner without considering their secondary gender, after much thought, Ever had chosen Gakane, another Alpha Awakener. Even though there seemed to be no visible difference to others due to their differing primary genders, her decision was made out of a desire to help Yuder in any small way she could.

"So, has anyone pestered you for the second dance?"

"The second dance?"

"Yes, someone like Lord Elle, for instance..."

"Why would Elle's name suddenly come up in this context?"

Ever tilted her head, seemingly puzzled as to why the name of Pruelle Van Tain, who had recently become a temporary member of the Cavalry, would suddenly be mentioned.

"I decided to dance the second dance with Liv."

"Liv? Liv Dwayne of Jung?"

"Yes. She's an Omega Awakener and we share the same primary gender. She's not my first dance partner, but I thought it would be fine for the second, so we agreed."

"I see... And for the third?"

Ever furrowed her brow slightly.

"Steiber. I don't know what you're thinking, but Lord Elle is a good person. He's not particularly interested in me; he's just someone who dreamed of joining the Cavalry after the trial of the Apeto family."

Hearing Ever's words, Steiber flinched and gave a wry smile.

"Haha. Right, sorry. But if you'd seen Gakane's face when I said I'd dance with him, you'd understand why I'm so curious—"

"Everyone, are you all ready?"

Just then, Kishiar's voice resonated from behind them, drawing the attention of all the members present. Steiber and Ever paused their conversation and turned their heads.

"Wow."

Someone among the members standing next to Steiber quietly let out a sigh of admiration. Though silent, Steiber felt the same.

Whenever they saw Commander Kishiar La Orr, they were already bewitched by his appearance, forgetting even their accumulated years and experience. But today, he was, unquestionably, the most resplendent among all they had ever seen.

Kishiar had worn a magnificent traditional costume brimming with vibrant colors and jewels during the harvest festival. But today, he wore the complete opposite: a simple costume made from black cloth. It resembled the white costumes of the other members but had a far more profound gravity.

The sharp red fabric draped over his shoulders, arms, and waist made him look like a deity from an ancient painting. Seeing was believing; one couldn't imagine that a single piece of cloth could carry such a majestic yet humble aura.

Apart from the golden embroidery on his outer garment, he had no other decorations, yet he appeared even more grand and overwhelming than before. A long earring in his ear and a single ring on his hand were his only adornments, and even those were void of any jewels.

His golden locks and red pupils alone held more brilliance than any gemstone.

Caught up in the spectacle of the towering Commander, Steiber's focus was momentarily diverted until he noticed another person standing a step behind Kishiar. Dressed as differently as the Commander was, he was Yuder Aile, a proud member of the Cavalry and a spiritual pillar of sorts.

"Oh..."

Steiber had only heard that Yuder wore a matching outfit to accompany the Commander during his time in the western region, but he had never seen it. Yet, the outfit he saw now seemed neither less nor more impressive than what he had heard.

Like the Commander, Yuder had swept his black hair back. Though wearing a lighter coat embroidered differently from the harvest festival, one could instantly tell he was Kishiar's counterpart. This was mainly because the belt tying his coat was astonishingly made of the same red fabric that Kishiar wore.

Dressed in a white formal uniform with a vibrant red sash stylishly knotted around his waist, and wearing white gloves—emblazoned with the emblem of the Cavalry instead of his usual black ones—the Commander's assistant Yuder shone like a chilly dawn star, his usual pallor nowhere to be seen.

In a sense different from Kishiar, Yuder seemed as though it was only natural for him to stand at the forefront, representing everyone else present. A strange yet captivating aura filled the eyes of the young man, who was only in his twenties. It was as if he had spent his entire life looking down at others from above.

"Why has everyone suddenly gone quiet? I know I'm extraordinarily good-looking, but it's a little embarrassing when even my men lose their composure like this."

Only after Kishiar broke the silence with a playful smile and a jest did the members regain their sense of reality. Bursting into hearty laughter, they lightly tossed comments back and forth, agreeing that he was right, how they were surprised all over again, and bowed their heads before their leader.

"Well then, shall we go?"

"Yes!"

Kishiar and Yuder climbed into the carriage. As the long procession of carriages began to move toward the imperial palace, passing the grounds of the Imperial Knights and heading out into the streets of the Seventh Wall, people couldn't help but express their awe.

"The Cavalry has arrived."

The palace, which was to host today's feast and party, was bustling with activity once the carriages arrived.

"Welcome, Your Highness."

The hurriedly-arriving attendants greeted Kishiar and the Cavalry with proper ceremony. Following their guidance into the front yard, Kishiar flashed a smile at Yuder, who stood beside him.

"It seems these clothes are quite astonishing. There's not a single person who isn't startled."

"Isn't that precisely what you intended?"

"Of course, that's true."

Today, Kishiar had actually chosen to wear a black formal suit, re-tailored from 'Da Fiel'. Originally a dress belonging to his late mother, the former Empress, it still added unparalleled grace to him even after two alterations.

'I was curious why I was told not to discard the red lining... I never thought it would be used like this.'

Kishiar had removed the dark-red fabric that had been used as a lining and had it wrapped over his clothing. Though simple, the end result looked as if it had been made to be worn that way from the very beginning.

He didn't stop there; he even took a portion of that fabric to make a new sash for Yuder's suit. Until today, even Yuder had been unaware of this fact. The surprise he felt upon seeing and experiencing it was indescribable.

It was just an outer piece of fabric and a mere sash, after all.

Yet even without coordinating their formal attire, the two drew more attention than if they had matched perfectly.

Yuder maintained his usual composure as he observed the expressions of those who were astonished first by Kishiar's formal outfit, and then doubly astonished by his own waistband. As he walked confidently toward the hall where the ceremony would be held, he never once lowered his tense jaw or relaxed his straight back.

"Please wait here for a moment before entering."

A servant led them to a spacious waiting room and then disappeared. It was only then that the other participants, who had been tense, began to relax and chat, examining the surrounding sculptures and decorations.

Yuder did not touch any of the snacks or drinks prepared for light refreshment. Instead, he gazed at the closed door, slowly reviewing the sequence of events he was to follow during the ceremony.

'After entering, receive the award in the pre-notified order, greet everyone, and return to my seat. Then the dance music will start,' he thought.

"Yuder."

As he was reciting the sequence of events for the umpteenth time and considering any variables or other noble participants that might be present, he heard a voice beside him. Turning his head, he saw Kishiar smiling, his eyebrows slightly furrowed.

"If you stand like that, people will mistake you for a sculpture. Whoever brought such a fine piece of art has excellent taste."

"You're particularly jocular today."

"I'm always serious, you know."

"..."

This was a ridiculous statement, and it had nothing to do with how tenderly Yuder was feeling toward Kishiar. Before he could maintain his silence for too long, Kishiar stepped closer and brushed back the strands of hair that had fallen onto his forehead.

"If you stand like this without realizing that your hair is disheveled, others might approach you and ask if they can do the same. So, be careful," Kishiar cautioned.

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Yuder only then realized that his hair had become considerably disheveled. But the real concern wasn't about his hair; it was about something else.

'So, this is his roundabout way of telling me to be careful once inside.'

While Yuder was busy gathering his comrades to establish an intelligence division within the Cavalry, Kishiar had not been idle either. He had utilized all his resources—from the Cavalry and the Peletta Knight to an array of unknown contacts—to thoroughly investigate any suspicious activities related to the party.

As a result, they had discovered numerous dangerous magic tools and poisons both inside and outside the palace where the party was to be held. Even among the palace attendants and maids helping with preparations, a few who showed suspicious behavior were either reassigned or expelled from the palace. Unfortunately, they were unable to find concrete evidence to catch the real culprit.

Despite the strong suspicion as to who the perpetrator might be, the lack of evidence brought to mind the assassins that had appeared during the Harvest Festival.

'They probably know that we've thwarted their pre-planned schemes.'



However, if they were not going to act because their intentions had been discovered, then Kiolle da Diarca would not have issued a warning to Yuder in the first place. Aware of this fact, Kishiar had pre-emptively notified his subordinates about the potential hazards that might occur that day. He had even provided a set of rules to the members, advising them to be extra cautious while preparing for the party.

Still, if Duke Diarca was planning to make another move against the Cavalry today, the most likely target would probably be Yuder Aile, the one who stood to gain the greatest reward.

'If I'm the target as expected, I'll be grateful, but if not, I have several contingency plans, so it doesn't matter...'

Still, Yuder didn't find the man's indirect warning to be cautious unnecessary.

As he went over the details and reviewed potential variables, his head, which had been clouded by chilly thoughts, felt as if it was melting under warm sunlight.

"Yes, I'll be careful."

At Yuder's obedient response, Kishiar smiled. He finally brushed Yuder's hair a few more times, styling it to his satisfaction before stepping back. Satisfied with his work, he spoke.

"I regret that I won't be the one to bestow an award upon you today."

"..."

"But at least I've claimed you as my dance partner."

"Duke Peletta, Cavalry members, please come this way. It's time to make your entrance."

Before Yuder could say anything, an attendant appeared, signaling that it was time to enter. The Cavalry members lined up behind Kishiar, their faces a mix of joy, excitement, fear, and concern. Though the emotions displayed were different, the common thread was a palpable tension.

As the attendant approached to open the large door, Kishiar spoke softly.

"Cavalry."

"Yes."

"Regardless of how remarkable those inside may be, today they are all here to celebrate us."

At his words, softened yet resonant, the tension in their faces slightly relaxed.

"Are they more frightening than the monsters of the West?"

"No."

"Do you think we don't deserve to receive awards?"

"No."

"Then that's the end of the discussion. Now, are you still nervous?"

"No!"

At their immediate, confident response, the corners of Kishiar's lips curved upward. With an air of unparalleled self-confidence and dignity, he issued his final command to the members.

"Alright. Let's go have some fun, shall we?"

At that moment, the doors swung open, flooding the area with light. The heralds announced in unison the solemn entrance of Commander Kishiar of the Cavalry and the Cavalry members who followed him. Various musicians lifted their heads high and played a grand and majestic tune.

The Cavalry members followed Kishiar, walking on a path laid out with red fabric. The enormous and exquisite hall of the Cantameria Palace was adorned with vibrant banners bearing the emblem of the Cavalry. Those who had already entered the hall burst into applause, captivated by the grandiose entrance of the Cavalry.

Unsurprisingly, most eyes were fixed on Kishiar at the front—on his audacious formal attire and his face. While there were whispers amongst the crowd, he appeared undisturbed, harboring only a relaxed smile as he moved forward.

Finally, all 330 members of the Cavalry were inside, but the door remained open. Following them was a gigantic object covered in golden fabric, carried on a wheeled cart.

"...What is that?"

Noble voices filled with curiosity echoed in the hall. Yet, no one could guess what it was. A restrained chuckle flickered across the faces of some members, doing their best to maintain their composure, then quickly vanished.

Kishiar took his seat at the front, reserved for the Cavalry. The members also found their places and settled down. Naturally, Yuder's seat was right next to Kishiar.

The seats for the Cavalry were directly below three magnificent chairs at the front of the hall. These chairs were reserved for the Emperor, the Empress, and the Crown Prince—the heir to the throne.

Would Emperor Keilusa make an appearance today? Many exchanged glances as they looked at the Emperor's chair, which had always remained empty up until now.

Soon enough, a herald loudly announced the arrival of the royal family.

"In the name of Orr, may the eternal light that never dims from dawn to dusk bless us!"

Everyone promptly stood up, placed their hands over their chests, and bowed their heads. Amidst a sea of shifting eyes, Yuder noticed Duke Diarca tightly sealing his thin lips in apparent discomfort.

Moments later, the Emperor and Empress entered side by side. The Emperor looked somewhat thinner than at the welcoming ceremony but appeared no less dignified, thanks to the makeup on his face and the sparkling crown of jewels on his head. The Empress also looked flawless, dressed in perfectly coordinated attire and accessories, a stark contrast to their previous modest meeting.

Following them, Crown Prince Katchian also revealed himself. The young prince, who was nearing adulthood, didn't look much different from the last Harvest Festival. His large, sharp eyes made him

appear younger than he actually was. He looked perfectly healthy, making one wonder if his period of seclusion due to "illness" had been a ruse.

"Ah..."

A soft exclamation came from the vicinity of where Duke Diarca was seated. It was undoubtedly from the nobles accompanying Duke Diarca and Prince Katchian.

The royal family took their designated seats. Emperor Keilusa, seated on the highest and grandest chair, let out a deep sigh as he scanned over everyone gathered. His gaze finally rested on the Cavalry and Kishiar, seated at the bottom of the stairs.

The Emperor's gaze subtly shifted when he saw Kishiar's striking formal attire. However, it was only for a fleeting moment—a moment that only Yuder, with his keen eyes, could notice. The Emperor quickly composed himself, reverting to a neutral expression. Though this was their first meeting since their private meal that had not concluded particularly well, none of the brothers let their emotions show on their faces.

The Emperor spoke softly but loud enough for all to hear. "I'm grateful that so many have gathered here. On this day, I thank God that I can bestow blessings upon you all."

What followed was the formal commencement of the ceremony. Representing the Cavalry, Kishiar stood up and elegantly took a knee before the Emperor. They exchanged a few polite niceties. The Emperor then commended the Duke of Peletta for skillfully leading the Cavalry and promised to provide new buildings and lands for the Cavalry, as well as abundant weapons to aid in their training.

Next, the first among the members to be called was, naturally, Yuder.

"Yuder Aile, come forth!"

As he rose from his seat in response to the summons, all eyes were fixed on him. Kishiar, who had returned to his seat, sent Yuder a fleeting smile. Yuder turned his head to avoid getting caught in that gaze and walked at a moderate pace until he reached the Emperor.

Upon taking a knee, just as Kishiar had done earlier, he could clearly sense the gazes of the Emperor, Empress, and Crown Prince settling above him.

"Yuder Aile has actively participated in the recent western monster subjugation mission as a member of the Cavalry and as the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. In particular, he risked injury to himself by boldly stepping forward alone to defeat a massive monster, all in the effort to save others. His achievements will go down in history and serve as an inspiration to all."

As the herald began reading Yuder's accomplishments from a prepared paper, he felt a ripple of whispers behind him. The entire Empire had been buzzing about the young man who had slain the infamous giant monster, and everyone present was shocked to discover he was so young.

## Chapter 498

For the first time, Yuder Aile fully came into their view, appearing entirely different from the vague rumors that had been circulating about him. Though undoubtedly young, he did not give off the impression of immaturity and servility that nobles generally associated with common youth.

He stood with an enigmatic ease, as if he had attended such gatherings hundreds of times before. His posture was so dignified that he could easily be mistaken for a seasoned member of any knightly order. His pale face exuded a frighteningly staunch sense of self-worth.

Just like other nobles, his slick black hair and red waistband emphasized his broad shoulders and straight back, making him appear considerably unique.

'I don't know where he comes from, but he's definitely not just any young man. The rumors about him single-handedly taking down a monster the size of a house don't seem to be baseless exaggerations,' even Duke Diarca momentarily harbored such thoughts. He clicked his tongue, realizing that had they not met under these circumstances, he would have certainly mistaken Yuder Aile as someone who had grown up in luxury.

An enigmatic commoner who commanded attention through an inexplicable aura. What was certain was that the rumors of Yuder Aile dining with Duke Peletta and engaging in debauchery suited him less than the terrifying accounts of him single-handedly tearing down a cliff to slay a monster.

Around that time, the herald finally finished recounting all of Yuder's accomplishments from the west and respectfully bowed his head. Emperor Keilusa spoke to the young man with black hair who was bowing before him.

"Sir Aile, you may raise your head."

Yuder lifted his gaze and head at a measured pace. Too quick, and he'd be accused of a commoner's lack of manners; too slow, and he'd risk being suspected of disregarding the Emperor's command. Years of navigating such nuances had instilled in him a natural grace.

However, the gaze he met this time was entirely different. As he looked into the warm eyes of Emperor Keilusa and the Empress, he felt something unlike anything he'd experienced in his previous life.

"For your courage in selflessly dedicating yourself to the people of Orr, and returning safely to this place, you should receive an appropriate reward. Therefore, I will grant you a monetary reward, a mansion, and furthermore, a monument will be erected in the Great Sarain Forest to commemorate your deeds. The monument will detail the events of that day so that no one will ever face the same danger again."

The announcement exceeded all expectations, causing a ripple of astonishment throughout the hall. Though many monuments were scattered throughout Orr to honor great Swordmasters and Archmages, the young man before them was neither.

'Isn't this too much of a reward just to strengthen the Cavalry?' Duke Diarca and other nobles exchanged glances as they began to silently share their thoughts. At that moment, Emperor Keilusa spoke again.

"Additionally, in the hopes that Sir Aile will continue to serve as a strong pillar for the Empire, I intend to bestow upon him the title of Single Victory Baron."

"..."

The title of Baron, even if it's the Single Victory title which can't be passed down to offspring, was an enormous deal. At least for decades, no one had received such a title. Several attendees wore expressions of near-fainting shock. Gasps of disbelief and astonishment rose from various corners, but the Emperor's expression remained unchanging.

And it seemed the same was true for Yuder, though in truth, he was quite astonished.

'Even the monument alone was beyond my expectations... and now, you add a formal title to that?'

Was that what was implied when Yuder had dinner with the Emperor?

‘This is too much, even if there's an intention behind it.’

Yuder initially bowed his head, signaling his refusal.

"I'm grateful for the honor, Your Majesty. However, I am not the person fit for such a position. The deeds attributed to me were not solely my own. I am simply an ordinary man content with helping the Empire and its people. I have already received too much for what I have done; please retract your offer."

"That's precisely why I wish to honor you," Emperor Keilusa responded, as though he had anticipated the answer.

"How can I entrust the responsibilities to someone who doesn't understand their weight?"

"...But."

"Let me indulge in the joy of choosing the right person. No more refusals."

It was an irrevocable rejection. The Empress, having read Yuder's expression, wore a slight smile as if agreeing with the Emperor's decision. It was the exact opposite of what Yuder had hoped for.

‘Then, the only one who could possibly object now is...’

Yuder shifted his gaze again, briefly locking eyes with Crown Prince Katchian, who sat opposite the Empress. The Crown Prince looked as if he was either contemplating something or simply finding Yuder to be a curious spectacle. It was an eerie and unsettling stare.

‘It seems no one is planning to object now.’

In the end, Yuder managed to refuse just the cash prize and the mansion, ultimately accepting the title the Emperor had bestowed upon him. The moment seemed to have been anticipated, as the imperial hall of the Orr Empire was prepared for the conferring ceremony. He became Baron Aile.

When he turned to acknowledge the crowd, the Cavalry members cheered loudly, their faces flushed. Yuder glanced at them with mixed emotions before averting his eyes. Kishiar, who was clapping, met his eyes and grinned as if he had been waiting for just that moment.

‘Did you know this would happen and yet say nothing?’

‘...’

He asked with his eyes, but all that returned was a smile. It was unclear whether the answer was yes or no.

He had suspected he might receive the largest reward among the members, but this was beyond excessive. Yuder sighed softly before kneeling once more before the Emperor, finally saying the words that should have been said much earlier.

"Thank you. While there may be no way to fully repay Your Majesty's endless grace and trust, please allow me to dedicate the head of the monster—brought by the collective will of the entire Cavalry—to the Sun Palace."

"The monster's head, you say? The one that Baron Aile risked his life to capture?"

Although the Emperor seemed to already know, he asked as if hearing it for the first time.

"Yes, it is the evidence of that day, preserved all the way from the Great Sarain Forest."

"Interesting. Let's verify it right here."

My God. As all the nobles began to murmur, four of the members brought a cart covered with a golden cloth toward Yuder. The moment everyone had been curious about had arrived.

"Those of you who are faint of heart, please close your eyes."

Yuder briefly warned before lifting the cloth. The moment the giant head of Pethuamet was revealed, those who had not heeded the warning screamed or averted their eyes, holding their breath.



"My heavens, how can such a thing be...!"

Despite having been dead for some time, the head of Petuameth looked as vivid as if it had been alive just moments ago. The glinting eyes beneath half-closed eyelids were as large as those of a healthy man, and between the sharp teeth, the traces of a severed tongue were visible. It was the tongue that Yuder had cut off at the last moment.

Underneath a grand chandelier, the numerous massive wounds and torn flesh that hinted at a ferocious battle glowed eerily yet gruesomely beautiful.

Even the Empress turned away slightly, her face ashen as she gripped the armrest of her chair. The Emperor, however, swept his gaze over everything, neither turning away nor showing any signs of disgust.

"Seeing it firsthand is even more shocking. I've heard that the creature grew larger as time passed. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"May I ask what you were thinking when you faced that thing alone?"

Yuder paused, pondering how to respond.

Did the Emperor want a carefully crafted answer, or raw honesty?

In the end, Yuder concluded that there wasn't much difference between the two.

What he had been thinking at that time was...

"I felt relieved and satisfied."

"Relieved? About what?"

"Because I was able to put an end to it there and then."

If he hadn't been able to end it at that place, at that time, it was clear what would have happened. The entire West would have been destroyed, and many would have died. He was satisfied that the blood of the Cavalry members and Kishiar La Orr didn't once again flood the forests of the West. That was all.

Upon hearing the answer, a faint smile appeared on the lips of the Emperor.

"The courage of the Baron Aile is truly commendable. Are you really not going to accept the mansion and the monetary reward?"

"Yes, please do withdraw that offer."

He didn't need any more money than his current salary, and the Cavalry barracks was his home. What would he do with another house? It would only make commuting inconvenient.

"Then what should be done with the prepared mansion and reward?"

"..."

"Duke Peletta."

"Yes."

Kishiar's smug response made Yuder almost inadvertently turn his head.

"The reward and mansion intended for the Baron Aile will be bestowed upon the Cavalry. Duke Peletta, you will be responsible for ensuring that they are appropriately used."

"Leave it to me. I will use them wisely to bring joy to Your Majesty."

Frustrated as he was, there was nothing Yuder could do about it.

"Then, after today, send the monster's head to the court mages for permanent preservation and store it in the First Palace of the Sun Palace."

"Yes."

"Next, who will be rewarded?"

The answer of Deputy Commander of Shin Division Ever Beck resounded.

Yuder's part was over. He rose from his seat and watched as Ever approached him. The moment their shoulders brushed, Ever gave a quick smile and gently tapped Yuder's arm before confidently walking away.

Returning to his seat, Yuder received beaming glances from his comrades. Their eyes seemed to scream they wanted to speak with him, yet because they had to maintain composure, their twisting bodies looked almost pitiable.

"..."

Yuder quietly turned his gaze to the large man sitting beside him. Kishiar rolled his eyes and let out a delightfully joyful laugh. His expression indicated he was enjoying the situation immensely.

'...Phew.'

Well, if that's how it is, then it didn't matter.

Yuder sat quietly, watching as the names of the members were called one by one. Different from his own announcement, most accolades were not elaborately detailed; the rewards were concise. The majority of the Cavalry members received cash prizes and valuable jewels, along with the honor of a "Surname." Those who had already achieved more, or who already had a Surname, were awarded a magic stone brooch for their honorable deeds. By the standards of the Empire, this award was equivalent to the Platinum Medal.

After all the awards were distributed, the Emperor commanded that the head of Pethuamet be placed in the most visible part of the hall for everyone to see. The expressions of the nobles, who looked like they might faint, were quite something to behold.

And then, finally, the time for dancing arrived.

"Tonight's opening piece, and the time that follows, has been given freely for the Cavalry members and Duke Peletta to enjoy. I shall remain here. I will be taking a brief rest with the Empress in Conde's room, so everyone, please have a pleasant time," announced the Emperor. He seemingly used the Cavalry as an excuse to retire with the Empress. Perhaps it was due to his health that he couldn't move, but to the public eye, it was a somewhat reasonable explanation.

"Well, let's get started then," Kishiar stood from his seat, offering his hand to Yuder amidst the bustling crowd. His lips, tinged red, curved into a smile as he extended an invitation that Yuder had never heard in his past life, and did so with a playful and buoyant face.

"Would you do me the honor of dancing with you?"

The spectacle of the nobles, who couldn't believe what they were seeing as Duke Peletta respectfully bowed and extended his hand in front of Yuder, barely came into his peripheral vision. Just as he had expected.

Yuder quietly looked down at the hand offered to him and then placed his own hand on top of it.

"Yes."

Their hands clenched tightly, one around the other.

## Chapter 499

Commander of the Cavalry, Duke Peletta, confidently stepped into the center of the hall with his first dance partner of the evening. But the person holding his hand was not a lady in a gown; it was a man, tall and broad-shouldered, with an unmistakable air of solidity.

The mere act of two men dancing was unprecedented, and to make matters more astonishing, his partner was none other than the Cavalry member who had received the highest honor from the Emperor earlier that day.

"What an outrageous act!"

"I thought the rumors were just that, but he's really going to dance with that man?"

Even if Duke Peletta was of imperial descent, this crossed a line. Most of the nobles were appalled, viewing the act as a violation of tradition and an insult to their own stature. The astonishment was mutual among the nobles clinging to the Crown Prince and those surrounding Duke Diarca.

"My word, is such a thing even permissible in the imperial palace of Great Orr?"

"Shouldn't we stop them right away?"

"It's already too late for that. Did you not hear about the sudden rule change while this party was being prepared?"

Duke Diarca asked with an icy expression. Those who had paid little attention to minor rule changes looked puzzled or lifted their eyebrows as if recalling something.

"Could it be..."

"Is the odd rule change about not limiting the attendees by gender intended for this?"

"Good heavens, then that commoner who was given the title of baron, the one we heard about in the Apeto family's trial, is neither man nor woman?"

"So that's why Duke Peletta took that man to his bed..."

The shock compounded, each revelation tailing the last. People knew Duke Peletta had become an Awakener and manifested a second gender, but until now, they had never taken it seriously because it did not change his appearance.

For the first time, they realized that Duke Peletta's actions might not be mere debauchery. It was a confusing realization.

The atmosphere grew chaotic, divided between those who claimed that such behavior could never be tolerated and those speculating about dual genders based on what they heard during the Apeto

family's trial. Meanwhile, the other Cavalry members took their partners and stood beside their Commander. At first glance, the sheer number of them made them appear ordinary, but on closer inspection, they were far from it. Men danced with men, and women with women—the sight was shocking in itself.

Duke Diarca burst into sudden, derisive laughter amidst the stunned nobles.

"I've heard rumors about the admirable feats of the Emperor's cherished Cavalry and had high expectations. But what they're doing now seems no different from child's play. I have no intention of joining them in their dance, so I'll remain seated."

The hidden meaning behind Duke Diarca's words was clear. The shocking behavior of the Cavalry and its aftermath were a reflection of the Emperor's influence. Rather than giving it meaning by reacting, he intended to dismiss it as something 'absurd' without even the need for debate.

Following Duke Diarca's declaration not to dance, the nobles around him promptly returned to their seats as well. The buzzing that had filled the area around Crown Prince Katchian ceased, and the eyes that were once focused on the Cavalry were deliberately withdrawn.

However, not everyone was the same, of course. A prime example was Pruelle Van Tain, who had attended under someone else's name since he was not yet an official member of the Cavalry, and his younger sister Priscilla Van Tain, who had recently become the new heir to the Tain ducal family.

Too busy to even attend their father's trial, they had quietly entered the gathering today and kept to themselves, avoiding interactions with other nobles. But when most of the nobility began to decline offers to dance, they were the first to step forward and join the ranks of the cavalry.

"Priscilla, it's been a long time since we danced together," Pruelle said.

"Yes, and it's the first time at an event like this," Priscilla replied.

A young woman with auburn hair resembling Pruelle's and deep green eyes like aged copper took his hand and assumed her stance. However, the siblings' gaze was directed not at each other but at a particular spot.

"Is that the girl? The one who our First Prince has been chasing around at every trial and eventually caused him to flee to the west alone with Nipollen?"

Priscilla asked, side-eyeing Ever.

Her gaze fell on Ever, who was preparing to dance with Gakane and engaged in conversation.

"Yes," Pruelle confirmed.

"She looked quite impressive earlier. Seems highly capable too."

"I thought so as well."

"Well, you should have at least succeeded in asking her to dance. Do you know how much trouble I had getting ready to come here, with so much work piling up?"

"Haha, I'm really sorry," Pruelle apologized.

"Don't say you should have stayed home then. That's not what I mean," she added, seeing Pruelle's awkward smile. She softened her pretend-angry expression. Pruelle had seriously considered not attending today's party, given that she had just become the heir to the Tain house. Knowing this, Priscilla had insisted they come, dismissing what anyone might say about the Tain family.

Priscilla was thankful yet pained that Pruelle, who had given up everything to join the Cavalry for the sake of his siblings, still couldn't freely ask someone to dance because of family concerns.

"By the way, the person she's with looks really nice. What's the relationship between those two?"

"Ah, you mean Sir Gakane Bolunwald? They are just fellow members of the same Shin Division as far as I know. He's definitely handsome."

Though both had a similar shade of auburn hair, Gakane and Pruelle looked completely different. Even if not as breathtakingly handsome as Duke Peletta, who could command the attention of the entire ballroom, he was nonetheless unforgettable. The appearance of such a virtuous and handsome young man had certainly turned more than a few heads at the party.

"Don't think you're lacking compared to him. You're absolutely not," Priscilla stated firmly.

Pruelle could only smile at his sister's words. He felt grateful but also a little embarrassed that she thought so highly of him.

'It's thanks to everything going well in Tainu that I can feel this way. That's enough for now.'

The sight of the siblings whispering intimately attracted a fair amount of attention. Riding on this momentum, the next to step forward were Revlin Shand Apeto of House Apeto, also a temporary Cavalry member like Pruelle, and his lover, Dandenion.

Revlin had been only a temporary member, so he spent the entire western mission in the capital. He had only watched the welcoming ceremony from a distance. However, upon hearing about the new party rules set by the Cavalry, he quickly arranged a new formal attire faster than anyone else. Boys in matching outfits, unmistakably a set, joined the ranks of the Cavalry without hesitation.

Once one became two, it was quick for two to become three. The hall's atmosphere changed back to a pleasant one as a small number of nobles following the Emperor quietly filled the remaining seats.

And finally, dozens of instruments that had been meticulously prepared for today began to be played in unison. The nobles, who had been pretending not to notice, turned their heads in disbelief at the startlingly different opening from the solemn and slow pieces usually performed in the palace.

"This isn't the Rancha, is it?"

"How disgraceful, men dancing with men, and now the Avitan in the palace!"

Some looked offended, as if insulted; others shook their heads in disbelief, wearing expressions of despair; while yet others seemed lost, awkwardly glancing around at their neighbors. The hall was in utter disarray.

Be that as it may, the gathered crowd began to dance. At the center stood Duke Peletta, who turned a full circle as he guided the movements of the young man with black hair by touching his back. At that moment, the violin melody soared passionately, as if intent on drowning out the voices of those who had been gossiping.



The moment eyes turned toward them, the red fabric sleeve covering Kishiar's arm elegantly fluttered, cutting through the air. The movements were effortlessly graceful, sensually captivating, without a hint of unnecessary flourish.

As he took a bold step toward his partner's leg without showing any restraint, his partner Yuder Aile moved in time to the beat as well. It was a daring move, almost unimaginable for a man of common birth to be dancing with someone whom he should not even dare to touch.

While his dance skills were admittedly more rigid compared to the already renowned Duke Peletta, his movements, oddly proficient yet restrained, harmonized unusually well with Kishiar.

With Kishiar's excellent lead, the dance the two brought forth looked like a sword dance, as if they had long been attuned to each other, wielding two swords in harmony.

One thing was certain: it was similar yet different from any Avitan they had ever seen before.

Those who had been loudly decrying the dance as shameful, a dance fit only for commoners, graceless and inelegant, one by one fell silent. They felt that no words were of use before those who danced so boldly, as if they heard nothing else, refusing to avert their gaze from each other.

Among those present was Kiolle, who was stationed near the chair where Crown Prince Katchian sat.

‘He's insane. Completely insane!’

Kiolle had come as a knight escorting Crown Prince Katchian, so he wasn't officially a party attendee. The party he observed from a safe distance was, in his eyes, a scene of madness filled with impossibilities.

‘A man who's merely been granted a baronial title is dancing with Duke Peletta? And they're dancing the Avitan? Is he courting death?’

But no matter how much he rubbed his eyes, the reality remained unchanged. The sight of Yuder Aile dancing with a blank expression, snugly wrapped in Duke Peletta's arm, looked like the embodiment of shock and astonishment.

As Kiolle nervously watched the spectacle, his eyes caught sight of his father in the background, quietly conversing with other nobles.

His father didn't look perplexed like the other nobles. Instead, he twisted his thin lips upward in an aristocratic sneer, leisurely swirling the wine glass in his hand.

"..."

He may not have known, but that audacious black-haired Cavalry member had certainly left a mark on his father, and not in a good way. Kiolle was sure of it.

## Chapter 500

Duke Diarca, Kiolle's father, was a nobleman to his very core. It was easy to imagine how Yuder Aile, who brazenly broke all established rules while standing at the center of this chaotic scene, would appear in his eyes.

Duke Diarca was generous to capable subordinates who knew their place, but he was not merciful enough to extend that courtesy to those who opposed him.

Ordinarily, whether the audacious man engaging in shameless acts with Duke Peletta lived or died by his father's hand would have nothing to do with Kiolle. He might have even applauded from the sidelines.

But for Kiolle at this moment... he was bound like a chain by an oath.

'Surely he's not causing all this trouble just to later ask for my help? If the exchange of information was just bait, and he lured me here today for that...!'

Even if he had witnessed a scene so revolting, shocking, and baffling, Kiolle was also in danger if he sensed Yuder's peril and didn't assist. It was madness.

Suddenly, a low voice reached Kiolle's ears, as he was trembling with clenched fists.

"Was his name Yuder Aile?"

For a moment, Kiolle thought his thoughts had been read and lifted his head. The one who had spoken was Crown Prince Katchian, who sat alone on a high chair at the top of the stairs. The nobles who had surrounded him had, at some point, dispersed.

Calming his racing heart, Kiolle managed to find his composure and opened his mouth.

"I apologize. I didn't hear you properly. What did you say?"

"That man over there, dancing with Duke Peletta. His name is Yuder Aile, is it not?"

Though it could have been a rhetorical question, a reply came back. However, the Crown Prince's eyes were not focused on Kiolle but were fixed at the center of the dancing crowd.

"Yes, I've heard as much."

Adding 'I've heard as much' was Kiolle's desperate attempt to avoid any possible association with Yuder Aile. Naturally, the Crown Prince paid no attention to this petty resistance and continued speaking.

"I have seen that man before."

"Pardon?"

"It was during the Harvest Festival. I had personally asked the Duke to investigate him for displaying remarkable abilities, but heard nothing significant. I had forgotten about him until now, but seeing him today brings it all back. At first, I thought he looked different, but yes... it is undoubtedly him. Definitely..."

That the Crown Prince had seen Yuder Aile before and had even shown interest was news to Kiolle. But what did it matter now? Kiolle couldn't fathom why the usually indifferent Crown Prince was bringing this up and felt exceedingly uneasy.

Finally, Katchian turned his head toward Kiolle, who had been shifting his eyes nervously without either calling out to the Crown Prince or responding.

"Do you know anything about that man?"

"You mean, about him?"

Unknowingly, Kiolle's voice came out edged. While he feared he had displayed his discomfort too obviously, to Kiolle's relief, his tone seemed only to imply a noble's incredulity at the suggestion of knowing a commoner.

Crown Prince Katchian curled his lips in a faint smile and added further explanation.

"The Imperial Knights and the Cavalry share the same grounds, don't they? I seem to remember hearing that you were rather furious for a while about being insulted by a commoner from the Cavalry when you were in the Imperial Knights... Given that man's abilities, you may have heard some rumors as you came and went."

And so, the web of intrigue thickened.

Kiolle clenched his teeth, recalling the time when he first encountered Yuder Aile and how he had been humiliated. That's right, there was that incident. If he had banished him back then, he wouldn't be in this uncomfortable situation now. A long-suppressed anger surged anew.

"To say I don't know him at all would look suspicious... Damn it! Why do I have to consider all this while answering?"

"Well, as you mentioned, I've heard some rumors in passing. They say the assistant of the Cavalry Commander is quite... capable. I wouldn't know for sure, I have no interest in the matter of commoner."

The words scarcely left his lips, as he found it difficult to praise Yuder Aile in this situation. Nonetheless, Crown Prince Katchian seemed to be satisfied with the explanation and nodded his head.

"Indeed, a capable assistant. It means he wasn't selected just to be discarded."

"..."

"I heard earlier that Duke Diarca's side was planning to send a gift to the Cavalry to celebrate today's event. Were you aware?"

The subject changed abruptly. Kiolle furrowed his brows and responded with a questioning, "Excuse me?"

"Didn't you know? A gift fitting for one who excels in slaying monsters."

A cold, subdued laughter flickered in the Crown Prince's eyes, reminiscent of a cat. Just then, a mix of emotions swelled in the hall, filling the air with applause and exclamations. Kiolle turned to see that the first dance had ended. Through the crowd, he glimpsed the back of Yuder Aile, swathed in Duke Peletta's red fabric as he completed the final move of the dance.

As Duke Peletta whispered something into Yuder Aile's ear and chuckled, a faint smile appeared on Yuder's face. Kiolle felt a slight shock at this entirely different expression. Then he was struck by the realization that he was shocked in the first place.

Because of this, he missed the last mumbled words from the Crown Prince, who was also quietly watching the scene.

"I wonder how he will receive that gift. Whether the old duke's intuition will prove correct, or if it will be like that time..."

So close to saying, 'or he'll smash it to pieces.'

The first dance required the participation of everyone in the Cavalry. But starting from the second dance, only those who wished to participate could come forth. Yuder decided not to join the second dance and withdrew to the center of the hall. The nobles around him backed away as if they had seen a monster, a sight that amused him.

'Being treated like a lowly, slightly dangerous insect, as in my previous life, is far worse than this.'

The controversy between the First and Second Genders would undoubtedly flare up due to today's events. Everyone would soon know exactly what the Second Gender was. Simultaneously, it would

become public knowledge that Kishiar and Yuder were not merely using each other for amusement or reputation in the West.

Dancing at a party was never a solo endeavor.

The fact that they had practiced a dance never before performed in a formal setting was the best proof that both harbored the same purpose and shared the same intentions.

Even if rumors related to homosexuality followed, they wouldn't follow the same trajectory as in his previous life. Revealing Yuder Aile as not merely an ordinary Awakener but an Omega presented the perfect opportunity to shift perceptions about the Second Gender. That he was accompanied by Kishiar, who was both of imperial blood and an Alpha, was nothing short of appropriate.

From the beginning, Yuder never thought that everything would get better. However, now that a single dance had given him a 'fresh start' entirely different from his previous life, he was certain he would encounter a future unlike any before.

With that, Yuder's purpose for this dance had been completely fulfilled.

"One of the most splendid moments in life has just passed," Kishiar softly whispered, standing beside Yuder.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes."

"Me too."

Gently responding, Kishiar smoothed out the sash around Yuder's formal attire. A nearby man in noble garb backed away a little, choking back a strangled sound.

Just then, a servant, who seemed to have been waiting for the opportunity, approached Kishiar with an incredibly enigmatic expression and bowed.

"Your Grace, Duke Peletta, my apologies... His Majesty the Emperor wishes to speak with you. It's a very urgent matter, so you must go immediately."

"I see. Understood. I'll go now."

With a face that seemed to say he knew why he was being summoned, Kishiar obediently responded. He turned his head and gave Yuder a smile.

"Hmm... so far, everything has gone as expected. I'll go and appease His Majesties for a bit; you can handle the rest."

"Leave it to me."

"Good."

Kishiar, who seemed like he was about to say more, nodded and turned away. Yuder sensed that the unspoken words were a caution to 'be careful.'

As soon as Kishiar disappeared, countless gazes converged on Yuder, who was now left alone. The glares were so intense they felt like they would tear him apart and leave not a trace behind if looks could have teeth and claws.

"Sir Yuder Aile. Or should I now call you Baron? Do you know who I am?"

Among them, a man with a seemingly painted smile and an imposing demeanor approached Yuder. Yuder glanced briefly at Duke Diarca sitting behind the man before shaking his head.

"No."