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In an instant, the atmosphere around Yuder turned icy cold. Even those who had been laughing and pretending not to pay attention to him suddenly became cautious and hesitant to speak. The man who had addressed Yuder also struggled to reply, his face a blend of disbelief and fury. However, he eventually managed to collect his emotions and spoke again.

"Ahem... I see. Well, given your commoner background, it's understandable. I am Baron Durmand. I've heard much about your recent achievements in the West."

"Is that so?"

"..."

This time, an even greater number of people remained silent for longer. Baron Durmand twisted his face into something resembling a rat and asked, "Really, now. Don't they teach you about manners and eloquence in your Cavalry? I approached you to offer congratulations, but you seem quite guarded."

Due to the palpable tension, even the dancing Cavalry members started to direct their gaze in this direction. Most wore expressions of surprise and concern.

Yuder sent a subtle, reassuring look to a few of the members who seemed on the verge of rushing over to him.

'It's fine. Just stay where you are.'

The members were probably shocked, thinking that as soon as Kishiar left, Yuder would be surrounded and attacked by nobles. However, this was a situation Yuder had already anticipated.

For the perfect execution of the dance scheduled for today and the events surrounding it, Kishiar had not even disclosed to the Emperor and Empress who he would be dancing with or what kind of dance it would be. They could guess that the Emperor, learning of this late, would call for his sibling, and that actions would be initiated by Duke Diarca as soon as Kishiar left.

If he had to be on guard anyway, Yuder figured it was better to control the situation himself. When you create a predictable opening for the enemy to attack, there's no need to be on guard all the time.

And now was precisely that moment.

Jimmy, who seemed ready to rush over after having been guzzling food, Ever, who had even stopped dancing to scan the surroundings with a sharp gaze, and Kanna, who had been scrutinizing the faces of the nobles one by one, all stepped back quietly upon meeting his gaze. But Gakane still approached as close as a few steps away, crossing his arms. Though he was smiling as if nothing was amiss, his posture clearly conveyed the message that he was ready to intervene at any moment.

'So much for saying it's okay.'

Still, the dark mood Yuder had often sensed on Gakane's face during previous encounters was mostly absent, so he let it pass. Perhaps because Gakane had moved closer, the atmosphere seemed to relax somewhat.

'Is it because of his face?'

Ignoring the murmurs around him, Yuder calmly opened his mouth.

"It never occurred to me that you approached to offer congratulations, especially since you began by cryptically introducing yourself and stating you've heard much about me. In the manners I've been taught, one typically states their purpose first, offers congratulations, and then exchanges introductions. Mentioning someone's prior status after they've been officially titled is considered a serious breach of etiquette. Has something changed that I'm not aware of?"

"..."

Baron Durmand's face flushed crimson. It was as if he hadn't expected a commoner-turned-hero to not only stand his ground but also counter him in such a manner.

The crowd always brimmed with people who would needle him like this whenever Yuder received a new title or a significant reward. He had long grown accustomed to the vexing task of discerning the intentions of such people.

Being taciturn on occasions like this was not a flaw. There was no need to grovel and shudder at every sarcastic comment. Although power and influence among nobles weren't solely determined by one's official title, Yuder did share the same rank as the man before him. Officially, he couldn't be considered any lesser.

'There's technically no need for formal language... but fine, I can tolerate that much. Getting caught up in etiquette based on age differences is too tedious.'

"Your point seems valid. I must have momentarily forgotten in my excitement. Haha. But I trust you're not overly offended by such trivial matters?"

"No, I wasn't particularly offended."

"Good. Then let's just consider this a small misunderstanding."

Baron Durmand forced a smile, his eyes tinged with barely suppressed fury, and moved on. The surrounding nobles also turned their gaze away, resuming their conversations as if nothing had happened. Yuder wondered what sort of expression they'd make if he praised them for maintaining etiquette while refusing to admit any fault and attributing it all to 'misunderstanding', but he decided to let it go.

'Baron Durmand. He was known to be close to the current Duke of Diarca. After the Duke died, he held his position for a while but fell out of favor with the heir and retreated to a rural domain.'

A man of little personal achievement, relying only on the power of the faction he was part of; a typical leech. While he might have been somewhat respected among the nobles, he wasn't indispensable to the Diarca Duke's family.

The man was just the right kind to be sent in lieu of the Duke himself for bothersome and noisy affairs like this one.

And that, in turn, offered Yuder an inkling of how Duke Diarca felt about him and the Cavalry. Not a threat significant enough to draw close scrutiny, but not entirely dismissable either. If this was the 'gift' prepared by Duke Diarca, then the remaining gestures would be equally mediocre.

'I had thought that something much stronger would come out, especially considering Kiolle's whining...'

As expected, it was all for naught.

A brief, icy smile flickered across Yuder's lips and vanished. His gaze then shifted to Duke Diarca, who was drinking wine, appearing wholly unconcerned by the ongoing events.

'If this trend continues, then next would be...'

"But I do genuinely wish to celebrate the hero of the West. Might we meet again personally after today?"

Yuder stared quietly into Baron Durmand's eyes, which sparkled oddly as if he were earnestly inviting him, then shook his head without changing his expression.

"Though I've received a title, I'm committed to the Cavalry. It's difficult for me to make personal engagements."

"What if I told you that my birthday is soon, and I'm planning a grand celebration?"

"No."

"Well, in that case, will you at least accept this? It's something prepared for today."

At Baron Durmand's gesture, someone brought forth a long object wrapped neatly in red paper. It was impossible to tell what was inside.

"Even if you can't attend, you'll accept this, right? It's a token of my sincerity for today."

For a moment, the gaze of those around Yuder intensified. Some watched with anger, while others observed with a voyeuristic curiosity.

"It will be difficult."

"Good heavens! At this point, even I am genuinely offended. Are you saying you can't accept even this small gesture? Do you mean to ignore me?"

Baron Durmand dramatically shifted his shoulders, aiming to draw the attention of the crowd.

"I don't know why you would think that."

"Enough with playing dumb. I've also heard about dangerous items being found within the palace before this party. Several palace workers preparing for the event have gone missing. Everyone knows the Cavalry decided to be extra cautious due to these suspicious activities."

Baron Durmand's voice bristled with anger.

"Are you saying you're avoiding even a normal gift because you're suspicious? If you don't suspect me, then how can you refuse like this!"

Yes, he knew it would come to this.

Yuder was about to speak when someone else stepped forward before him.

"...I apologize for the intrusion. I know it's not polite to interrupt a conversation, but I've heard that actions like this are not permitted in today's party without prior permission. Have you received such permission?"

The person who stepped forward before Yuder could speak was none other than Gakane Bolunwald.

Though his smile seemed impeccably courteous, his sharp eyes were not hidden, causing murmurs to stir among the surrounding nobles once again.

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"Permission?"

"Yes. I heard that even our Cavalry needed prior permission if we wanted to bring surprise gifts for the comrades who would join us here. The warning also came with the instruction not to casually exchange food, drinks, or other items with strangers, for both etiquette and safety reasons. So, we arrived here carrying nothing."

"Gakane."

Ignoring Yuder's gaze, which seemed to suggest he should withdraw his words immediately, Gakane continued in a very clear tone.

"The information we received in advance ends there. We are not aware of any unfortunate incidents occurring in the palace during the party preparation period. I suspect Yuder—no, Baron Aile would have wanted to convey the same message. Perhaps it is a misunderstanding to call this an insult?"

Gakane pronounced the word 'misunderstanding' with particular emphasis. The expression on Baron Durmand changed. Instead of discussing the unfavorable facts, he quickly changed the subject.

"Is two people cornering one person an action worthy of those who are authorized to act in the name of His Majesty the Emperor? Baron Aile! Speak if you have something to say."

"I am the one who spoke, not Baron Aile. I stepped forward solely to clarify the facts. Would it not be hard to see a connection between Baron Aile and me?"

"What is your name?"

"I am Gakane Bolunwald."

"Bolunwald? That's an uncommon surname. Are you from the distinguished family of General Jureli Bolunwald from the South?"

"Yes."

"Not from the current generation, I presume."

"He is my great-great-great-great-grandfather."

"I see."

Yuder, who only remembered that Gakane's family was once illustrious but had since fallen into decline, heard this information for the first time. The expressions of Baron Durmand and those around him changed slightly upon learning that Gakane was not of common birth. Their eyes seemed partly impressed, yet increasingly malicious.

"So, a once-prestigious family from the South. I remember hearing the unfortunate rumors that all you have left is your name, and you're even knocking on the doors of wealthy patrons to sell your title."

Gakane's face turned pale for a moment.

"To think I'd see you here, and you're even standing up for an ennobled comrade! Quite the story within stories. Truly a delightful spectacle."

Though he phrased it as if it were a pity, his true intent was clear. He was mocking Gakane's family for its fallen glory and simultaneously scorning him for standing up for a friend of common birth.

The reaction was immediate.

"Your words are going too far!"

"Why bring up irrelevant matters? Apologize."

"Gakane! Yuder! Just come this way!"

The Cavalry members who had rushed in surrounded Yuder and Gakane en masse. Yuder didn't even get a chance to respond. With everyone voicing their anger, the hall was filled with such commotion that it was impossible to understand who was saying what.

Even the music and dancing stopped. As the situation grew increasingly tense, an unmistakable look of delight appeared on Baron Durmand's face.

"Am I overstepping by saying I'm relieved the rumor has been exaggerated? Gifts are too dangerous to accept, the celebratory intent is unrecognized, and now even a simple expression of concern demands an apology! Ha-ha."

"In my opinion, there was no need to say such a thing in this place. Please apologize to Sir Volunbalt."

The one who spoke this time was Pruelle. When the First Prince of the Tain family stepped forward, Baron Durmand glanced sideways, as if calculating something. Seeing that Duke Diarca remained calmly seated, he grew even bolder.

"Oh, the First Prince of the Tain family. You weren't present at Duke Tain's trial, so I can only imagine how surprised you must be to see me here. You looked sick, but you seem healthy now."

"..."

"Well, if everyone desires an apology, what more can I, Durmand, say? I came here with a joyful heart to serve the Empire in my old age, and this is what I encounter. It's truly heartbreaking, but what can be done?"

Durmand retorted sarcastically and then raised his voice toward everyone present.

"Let me say this: the Empire's most revered poet, Duke Mechis Da Diarca, once wrote, 'Just as the color of a trodden shadow never changes, clear water can never become the sea.'"

"..."

"A poem that is quite fitting for today's circumstances, don't you think?"

"What does that even mean?"

"What's he talking about, shadows and the sea?"

Yuder heard the whispers of the Cavalry members not far from him. He instinctively sensed that the words were not favorable, but the unfamiliar poetic language made it hard for him to grasp the underlying meaning immediately.

Meanwhile, the faces of the people around Baron Durmand were all smiling, as if they understood perfectly. And Yuder knew that poem too. It was one of the lines that Emperor Katchian had often mentioned to him during his reign.

'Yes... The essence is that one's innate qualities cannot be changed, no matter what one does.'

No matter what you do, the color of the shadow underfoot never changes. Fish from freshwater can never live in the sea. Even if circumstances seem to change, in the end, nothing really does—an icy and clear-eyed recognition of reality.

'Now I understand where he heard that.'

Yuder clenched his fist and looked back at Gakane, who was standing nearby. His face was still a bit pale. The look in his eyes was one of embarrassment, clearly unprepared for the individuals who had stood up to defend his honor.

Gakane probably hadn't anticipated that events would unfold in this manner. He likely had no idea that Baron Durmand knew so much about his family and circumstances, that he would humiliate him so publicly, and that the other members would react in this way.

Gakane looked as if he was about to say something but then closed his mouth. Seeing this, Yuder let out a small sigh.

'If it had been earlier, I would have asked why he did something so pointless.'

But now he understood why Gakane had stepped forward. It was his own way of worrying and expressing himself. And the other members felt the same; none of them would have stood idly by if one of their comrades was being insulted. Yuder knew this because he would have done the same.

Yuder thought of Gakane, who had never made a fuss about his origins or revealed any personal difficulties during his long tenure in the Cavalry. Despite knowing that there was no need to go to such lengths, he understood a bit of why Gakane had stepped forward.

He let out a deep sigh.

'...The one thing that's certain is...'

There was no need to indulge this nonsense any further. Thanks to the passionate camaraderie of his fellow members, the situation had taken a slightly different direction than expected. While this deviated from the original plan, he didn't particularly mind. So, what could be done?

"Very well. I will accept that gift."

"...What? Yuder!"

"If Baron Durmand doubts the intentions of the Cavalry and myself, and believes this to be harassment, then the reason must be simply because I haven't accepted the gift. Accepting it should provide the proof you require."

Yuder approached Baron Durmand and snatched the gift wrapped in red paper.

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Originally, his plan was to sufficiently provoke Baron Durmand and then leverage the inter-relationships among nobles he knew to draw out Duke Diarca himself to the scene. Even if everyone knew that Diarca was behind Durmand, it made a big difference whether that was explicitly revealed or not. If he could just compel Duke Diarca to personally deal with someone of lowborn origin, he could bet that those who didn't particularly like House Diarca would be quietly pleased.

'Whether it's this side or that, everyone wants to muddy the waters of the Cavalry's success. But that alone won't make them committed enough to sail in the same boat forever.'

From Durmand's ramblings, it was clear that the elaborate ruse they had set up before the party was aimed at causing undue tension in the Cavalry and ruining public opinion.

'People wield the most power in attacking what they themselves dread and avoid. In this Empire, what the nobles fear most is the loss of their honor. Long periods of stagnant peace have made fights over rotten honor even more potent than armed conflicts.'

A low voice resonated in Yuder's mind, it was a recollection of something Kishiar had said in his previous life when forcefully sitting him down to lecture him on the duties and virtues a Cavalry Commander should possess.

"If you truly want to scare them, drag them down to our level. Even a single mingling word can seriously tarnish their honor. This method is faster and more effective than a punch, especially when we are seen as inferior and have nothing to lose."

Back then, he hadn't fully grasped that words could be stronger than fists. But as he grew older and experienced more, he realized that it was not untrue.

Although the current situation didn't seem too favorable for the Cavalry, those who had stepped up from this side were mostly members who were either of lowborn origin or had never really fit in among the nobles.

The point was, if they were dragged down to the same level, the other side had much more to lose than the Cavalry did.

Yuder untied the gift package he had been holding in front of Baron Durmand. A long, crimson-tinted glass bottle revealed itself.

"Alcohol."

He had suspected as much from the weight and the sloshing liquid inside. The name stuck on the surface was also not unfamiliar to him.

"Quelochet."

Upon reading the name, a few individuals started whispering with surprised faces.

The world was full of unique drinks for the culinary adventurers out there. Quelochet was one of them. Although its color resembled ordinary wine, it was actually brewed from various dangerous toxic materials that had been processed. While the most dangerous elements were removed and it was diluted enough to be drinkable, it still remained hazardous. Occasionally, people even died from consuming it.

Still, just like there were people who enjoyed pufferfish dishes or venomous birds or scorpion cuisine, there were also quite a few who enjoyed this risky beverage. Many believed that if drunk carefully, it could even contribute to a long, healthy life, and it sold well as a gift.

Among the ingredients that went into Quelochet was a fluid extracted from monsters. In his previous life, Yuder had received a poisonous liquor as a gift that was based on this drink but had additional monster blood mixed in.

'I had expected something like this... but really, how cliché.'

"Lord Elle, do you know what this drink is?"

"...It's a famous liquor made by mixing poisonous ingredients. It's also known for containing the bodily fluids of poisonous monsters."

Ever asked Pruelle, whose expression had soured. The members, surprised by his answer, began to murmur amongst themselves.

"It has what from a monster?"

"So, is this poison alcohol?"

"Strictly speaking, it's not poison alcohol... but it's hard to see it as a graceful gift either."

Despite the prickly words, Baron Durmand showed no change in expression. He looked down at Yuder, who was quietly observing the liquor, and spoke with an oddly friendly yet arrogant tone.

"I thought there could be no more fitting gift for one who risks their lives to slay monsters. Of course, dangerous ingredients were used, but I've drunk it without a problem."

"..."

"As you may or may not know, the traditional way to reciprocate for celebratory liquor at a party is to drink it right away."

"Are you saying I should drink this right now?"

Someone protested sharply, and Baron Durmand chuckled.

"I didn't say that. If you're scared, then there's nothing to be done. But was it not Baron Aile who agreed to accept the gift?"

'As amusing as it is... he did use his brain.'

If Yuder were to reject the gift out of fear of poison, he'd effectively be insulting the giver. If he chose to drink it and something happened, he only had himself to blame. If a commoner like him suffered any harm from drinking the poison, few would take his side. Either way, it was a win-win situation for Durmand.

In such a situation where nobody knew what else was in the drink, they all would have avoided it.

However, Yuder was not in such a situation. He smiled faintly.

"Very well. I like it. Let's drink it now."

"Yuder!"

The members called out to him, their faces filled with anger and worry. Their unfamiliar yet familiar expressions seemed to not know what to do.

Amid the palpable tension, Yuder picked up one of the glasses on the table and effortlessly uncorked the bottle. He looked around and then called someone close to him.

"Kanna, would you mind pouring for me?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

Startled, Kanna seemed to realize something. Until today, she had always avoided Yuder with an odd expression, but now she seemed to have no intention of doing so. She hurried over and took the bottle.

As the purplish liquid flowed into the glass, a fine sweat appeared on Kanna's forehead. Close to her hand, an ethereal energy flickered, indicating she was using her abilities. To assist her, Yuder subtly summoned a breeze.

Now, even the subtlest sound from Kanna's lips could be heard loud and clear by him.

"Before coming here, someone tampered with this. It feels like something was added. Probably... a drug that induces stomach pain."

"..."

"Yuder, would it be okay if I pour just this much?"

Kanna emphasized the word 'okay' loud enough for everyone to hear, a worried look in her eyes. Yuder nodded his head, responding decisively.

"It's okay. That's enough."

"...Are you sure it's alright?"

"I might get a little drunk, but it should be fine."

"Alright, understood."

Kanna, who had seemed reluctant to hand over the glass, finally let go. Yuder took the glass and without hesitation, drained it completely. The Cavalry members clenched their teeth and murmured quietly amongst themselves.

Then, moments later, he set the glass down with a nonchalant expression.

"The alcohol seems fine, but it's not to my taste. Still, since you've offered it, I'll gladly accept."

"...Really? Are you alright?"

"Yes."

The expression of Baron Durmand subtly changed. Yuder raised his hand and called over a servant. After ordering a glass of water as a chaser, he asked for another empty glass, causing Baron Durmand's gaze to grow increasingly suspicious.

"Since you've offered such fine alcohol, it's only polite that I return the favor. I'd like for you to have a taste as well."

As Yuder poured alcohol into the new glass, Baron Durmand seemed to realize the shift in the situation and took a step back.

"No, I..."

"Why so?"

"My stomach isn't feeling well today. The drink was brought to celebrate, so there's no need for me to partake."

"Your stomach isn't feeling well?"

Yuder conspicuously directed his gaze toward the spot where the Baron had been sitting. Traces of alcohol and fruit remained, evidence that he had been eating before standing up.

"...It seems the food I ate may have disagreed with me."

"Getting sick from eating the food of the Imperial Palace? I would think that this is a serious matter that even His Majesty the Emperor would be concerned about. Exactly what did you eat? Shouldn't this require a thorough investigation?"

Baron Durmand was momentarily at a loss for words. As Yuder called the servant over again, the Baron scrambled to excuse himself, saying that as he'd gotten older, his stomach had become sensitive to certain foods.

It was painfully obvious that he was trying to backpedal, but no one present was inclined to let him off the hook so easily.

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"Isn't it strange? If the food is potentially harmful, wouldn't one naturally avoid it from the outset?"

Priscilla Van Tain, who had been silently observing the situation thus far, approached Pruelle and asked with a smile.

"Even with your age, it's hard to believe that someone who's attended gatherings like this multiple times would make such a mistake. It's quite worrisome. Anyway, for the sake of the other guests, shouldn't we examine the food as Baron Aile suggested?"

Her ability to speak in circles while appearing ignorant was truly remarkable. The eyelids of Baron Durmand, who could not treat her like one of the ordinary Cavalry members because she was the new successor of the Tain family, fluttered slightly.

Maintaining a far more polite demeanor than he'd shown when addressing Pruelle, but not entirely hiding his displeasure, he spoke.

"It seems the heir of the Tain family, who hasn't even been bestowed the title of Duke yet, is already very interested in external matters."

"Do you really think it's such a concern? Baron Durmand, your understanding of what constitutes 'interest in external matters' appears to be unusually broad. Is it because you frequently go falcon hunting and thus have expanded your horizons?"

The falcon symbolized the Diarca Ducal House. At her subtle dig connecting the Diarca and Durmand families, the Baron's expression turned sour.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"What meaning could there be? Words are merely words. Misinterpreting intent and harboring doubts is not advisable. By the way, Baron Durmand, I heard for the first time today that you are unwell, and you indeed don't look well. Are you sure you should remain here?"

Someone near Priscilla chimed in with a subtle smile. Yuder recognized him as a person from a family closely affiliated with Apeto Ducal House, someone he had often clashed with in his previous life as well.

Seeming to decide to side with Tain as tensions appeared likely to arise between the Diarca faction and Tain, he extended a supportive hand.

"The young and new hero from the West is not wrong, is he? If there is really something wrong with the food, who could eat it? Especially in the imperial palace."

"Didn't I say that's not the case? I never claimed that the food in the imperial palace is problematic. Nor am I so unwell that I need immediate treatment!"

As Baron Durmand grimaced at the situation not going his way, others behind him began to chime in, defending him.

Yuder quietly turned his head at the sight. He locked eyes with Priscilla Van Tain, who was speaking to Pruelle while holding her arm.

"..."

After a brief exchange of glances, Yuder slightly bowed his head first. A small smile crept onto Priscilla's lips. Initially, she had seemed far less warm and more pragmatic compared to Pruelle and Nipollen, but that smile clearly showed their shared lineage.

Even though the Tain family had publicly sided with the Emperor this time, it couldn't have been easy for someone who had not yet received even the Duke title to take such an official stance at an event like this. However, judging by the look in her eyes as she spoke to Pruelle, it wasn't hard to guess why she had stepped forward.

"Yuder, are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"Speak up if something feels off!"

"I'm fine."

As Baron Durmand conversed with other nobles, the Eldore siblings stealthily approached from behind and whispered in hushed tones. Yuder assured them he was fine, but worry still lingered on their faces.

"Really? You never say you're unwell even when you are. How can we trust you?"

"You should be honest, especially in a place like this."

"I am fine, truly. Do I look unwell?"

"...No, you look perfectly healthy."

"See? So relax. If you want to laugh, just laugh."

The Eldore siblings had been concerned when looking at Yuder but had also been suppressing smiles when looking at Baron Durmand. Finally, they covered their mouths and let out genuine laughter.

"To be honest, when Yuder drank that, the Baron's expression was so hilarious that it was hard to keep a straight face."

"I guess he thought Yuder would be too scared to drink it. There's a limit to how ridiculous you can be."

"He should have some of this drink himself."

Yuder had been planning to do just that. He looked down at the glass in his hand, gauging the atmosphere around him.

The disdainful glances directed at the Cavalry members remained, but the mood had changed significantly since Yuder had taken a sip. Whispered comments reached his ears, even from Baron Durmand, who had recoiled from the cup Yuder had extended, denigrating him as no different from ill-mannered commoners.

Raising one's voice against those considered lower was not considered ridiculous among them. However, showing even a hint of confusion or weakness was.

It was as though they were a pack of animals, all puffing up their fur to avoid showing their tender underbellies. Merely by accepting the invitation to share the drugged drink, Yuder had managed to drag Baron Durmand and Duke Diarca's entourage into his level.

'If I assure them once more that I'm fine, it'll be a good time to offer another drink.'

Baron Durmand knew the drink had been spiked with a stomach drug and would not touch it. Yuder planned to defiantly drink another glass in front of him and then summon those who would truly investigate the matter.

Just as he was relishing the capture of his prey, he felt a gaze crawling up the back of his neck. Turning his head, he saw Kiolle, fidgeting like a dog needing to relieve itself. Alternating glances between Yuder's face and the drink he had consumed, Kiolle's eyes were rolling frantically. It seemed as though he'd realized this was a trap set by his own father.

His continuously blushing face and incomprehensible mutterings were somewhat amusing, but Yuder decided not to bother deciphering them and shifted his gaze. Surprisingly, it landed on Prince Katchian, sitting on a staircase platform beside him.

"..."

Katchian looked at Yuder with a curious smile, his half-lowered eyes and tilted head revealing emotions he couldn't hide. Instead of displeasure, the Crown Prince showed blatant curiosity towards Yuder, who was rebelling against his own power base in Diarca.

A brief yet eternal moment passed, and Yuder averted his gaze. It was a natural move, as if he had never seen the Crown Prince to begin with.

"Enough."

Then, as if he had been waiting for this moment, Duke Diarca put down the glass he had been holding and spoke. Though his comment was brief and not raised in volume, there was an odd weight to his words. Instantaneously, everyone, including Baron Durmand, fell silent. Even the Cavalry members, who had been whispering insults under their breaths, clamped their mouths shut, startled by the sudden gravitas.

"What could be the point of a day meant to celebrate the Empire's escape from danger being so marred in my memory? Perhaps it would be best to put an end to things here."

A few people tensed their shoulders at the sharp sensation that discreetly yet effectively pricked their skin. Several nobles who had been pressing Baron Durmand began to retreat, tongues clicking in disdain. Durmand, however, seemed visibly invigorated.

It was just the opinion of one person, but it was as if everyone agreed. Such was the gravitas of Duke Diarca, something that the nobles of the capital had grown accustomed to acknowledging.

However, Yuder had no intention of letting the matter conclude as it stood.

"Does that mean, sir, that you're suggesting we halt the investigation into the food and drink consumed by Baron Durmand?"

The atmosphere among the nobles suddenly turned icy once again. Duke Diarca's gaze shifted to Yuder. The duke bore an appearance that could, if adorned with a long beard and aged a few more decades, seem sagely and even more personable.

With an inscrutable expression, the aging duke smiled.

"...I, too, was well aware that Durmand hasn't been in the best of health recently. There was assuredly no issue with the food."

Duke Diarca, who effortlessly confirmed the rumor about Durmand's poor health as something 'he also knew,' slowly lifted the corners of his lips.

"If we deem there to be a problem, we can always set the food aside and investigate later. It's not too late."

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It was as good as a declaration of "Let's not discuss this matter further." None of the nobles present dared to counter the statement. Sitting alone at the top of the staircase behind Duke Diarca, even the Crown Prince seemed to tacitly agree, as if he had heard nothing.

This was the power and influence that Duke Diarca held. At a time when other noble families were not faring well, his weight in the situation was incomparable to anyone else's. For the Duke to even converse with a commoner was already remarkable; it was only natural that anyone less would be treated as insignificant and ignored. Everyone thought as much.

'The Commoners of the Cavalry have made some impressive advances by involving an outsider... but we'll let this go.'

'It would be a relief if I don't hear news about that male escort being killed on his way home tonight.'

"The only person who can make that decision would be His Majesty the Emperor, don't you think?"

Therefore, when Yuder responded in such a manner, many doubted their own ears.

Yuder stood in his spot, his demeanor unchanged from earlier. No shift in his expression could be discerned as he faced Duke Diarca. It was as if, in Yuder's eyes, he was no different from Baron Durmand. The nobles present were shocked.

A few nobles looked at Yuder's face as if they were looking at a man who would soon be dead, whispering among themselves.

With a steely gaze, Yuder looked directly into the eyes of the aging Duke and continued.

"To speak frankly, the one who brought an unauthorized gift is also the person who abruptly rejected my proposal for a toast. We cannot simply overlook this inexplicable situation based on someone's word. This is because the safety of His Majesty the Emperor and all the attendees is at stake."

To dare refer to the Duke as 'someone!' Nobles loyal to the Diarca family glared at Yuder with faces flushed in suppressed fury and disbelief.

"..."

"However, aside from the immediate need for an investigation, I have my suspicions. Perhaps the person who asked for trust in me and the Cavalry has no trust in us. Maybe that's why you're avoiding the toast despite no issues—"

Yuder directed a chilling smile and his gaze toward Baron Durmand. His slowly uttered words spread around like the chill of a winter wind.

"—Just a thought."

"What nonsense are you spouting?" Baron Durmand shouted. Even if it were true, he had to vehemently deny it here.

"Is it?"

Yuder spoke as he twirled the cup in his hand, just like Duke Diarca had done earlier.

"Then prove it."

Instead of flatly denying it, make everyone else see and believe.

Just as Yuder has done.

Baron Durmand's eyebrows twitched as if he had heard an unsaid implication.

"We have many capable members in our Cavalry. With their skills, there's no need to call for an outside investigation. If Baron Durmand would kindly lend us the food he consumed and his hand, we could solve everything."

Thud. As if struck by an invisible force, everyone's head seemed to lower. Baron Durmand clenched his fists, as if Yuder would grab his hands right there.

"What are you talking about? An investigation by the Cavalry? Are you threatening me? What do you intend to do?"

"Curious about our investigative methods? Then grant us permission to proceed."

Yuder had said nothing about how he planned to utilize the members of the Cavalry who had special abilities. This silence cast confusion and uncertainty into the minds of nobles who knew little about the Awakeners.

'Most of the Cavalry are like you, having only the power to destroy things, or so I heard. Was I mistaken?'

'You're bluffing by saying that difficult tasks can be easily accomplished even with magic tools.'

Yet, even while thinking this, a chill ran down their spines whenever they caught sight of the massive monster standing far behind Yuder. Could there be truth to his claims? Such were the thoughts that crossed their minds.

"Do you think you can insult me like this and pay for it when my innocence comes to light?"

Baron Durmand muttered, grinding his teeth. His eyes were quite menacing, but Yuder simply chuckled briefly.

"What is there that can't be repaid?"

"How dare you..."

"So, do you have an answer yet?"

"And what if I can't accept?"

To this question, laden with malice and anger, Yuder responded calmly.

"If Baron Durmand has no intention of cooperating with the investigation, then I intend to start by examining the wine I've been given."

"Why would you...!"

"Well, I'd like to know why you're so reluctant to drink this wine."

"I can't allow that!"

"It's already in my possession, so my examination doesn't require your permission."

Baron Durmand felt uneasy, as if Yuder knew something yet also seemed ignorant.

‘Could it be that he knows the wine was drugged? But that's impossible.’

The gifted wine had failed to produce any effects. It had been proven safe, so there was no cause for suspicion.

The drug added was potent enough to cause immediate reddening of the skin, severe abdominal pain, and vomiting—symptoms that could easily be mistaken for poisoning. It was prepared carefully to look like normal wine, and it was inconceivable that Yuder and his Cavalry were aware of it.

If they had known, they wouldn't have drunk it. But the ambiguous behavior and the lack of an adverse reaction raised suspicions. Confused thoughts ran wildly through Durmand's head, before suddenly coming to a halt.

‘Could there be a traitor among us who helped prepare this?’

It couldn't be. They had checked multiple times. It wasn't initially his responsibility, but he had gotten involved personally to please Duke Diarca. There had been no mistakes.

‘But what if there really was a traitor?’

He couldn't ignore the growing self-doubt, and neither would Duke Diarca.

Baron Durmand felt a cold chill at his back. Before he could determine its source, another noble standing next to Duke Diarca exclaimed loudly.

"Baron Durmand, why not simply drink it yourself then? To ease Duke Diarca's burden and keep the party going, it seems like the best option."

"If you're so eloquent, surely a sip of wine won't be an issue?"

These were the people who had prepared this event with Baron Durmand. They stepped in immediately to alleviate Duke Diarca's suspicions after witnessing Yuder's strange behavior.

If Baron Durmand drank the wine and remained unharmed, it would mean that there was indeed a traitor among them. But what would it mean if the opposite were true?

'No, even if I drank, could I ever truly escape the chains of this suspicion?'

Baron Durmand realized he had been cornered. He couldn't understand why things had turned out this way so suddenly, but he was too afraid to refuse. The gaze of Duke Diarca, who silently stared at him, was dreadfully intimidating.

"Very well... it seems you're not wrong."

Finally, Duke Diarca broke his silence. The words that came from his lips were as damning as a death sentence.

"Bring a new glass."

"Yes."

Those around immediately fetched a new glass. Yuder Aile courteously poured new wine into it. The sound of the liquid dropping seemed like the flowing of a river in Hell.

"Take it."

"..."

Durmand hesitated, unable to readily extend his hand. Duke Diarca urged him on.

"Durmand, drink."

"...Your Grace."

Durmand desperately called out to Duke Diarca, but the Duke's expression remained unchanged. Reluctantly, Durmand took the glass. Careful not to let his hand tremble, he brought it close to his lips. Instead of the sweet aroma typical of wine, a bitter, pungent smell wafted from it, almost rotting his nose.

The claim that no one had ever been harmed by drinking Quelochet was a lie. Baron Durmand had never once tasted this wine himself.

'...'

Durman's breathing quickened. Moments later, he braced himself and took a sip. Everyone watched as his Adam's apple bobbed.

And then, moments later,

"Ugh!"

A red rash spread across Baron Durmand's face and body, and he vomited violently. He collapsed right there and then.

Just before losing consciousness, the last thing he saw was Yuder Aile's unfathomably dark eyes.

Turning

Chapter 506

The fallen Baron Durmand was immediately carried away by his attendants. The servants swiftly cleaned up the vomit that had spattered in all directions, but a mishap had occurred; the clothes and shoes of numerous nobles close to him were soiled because he had suddenly vomited.

Among them was also Duke Diarca.

"My God, the Duke's shoes are ruined!"

"What are you all fussing about? Are the floors more important than His Grace's health?"

Amidst those who were making a bigger fuss than the person involved, the nobles who had just been encouraging Baron Durmand to drink were at a loss as to what to do next.

'What on earth happened?'

It appeared the poison had taken effect, but Yuder, who had drunk more before, seemed perfectly fine. It was hard to make sense of the situation.

And Duke Diarca felt the same.

'Why is that man perfectly fine?'

Was there a traitor among them, or was it the absurd notion that this man of common birth was immune to poison?

The situation was highly suspicious, but as they had to hide the fact that Baron Durmand had collapsed due to the ingested poison and not just an allergic reaction to Quelochet, further investigation seemed difficult. The priority was to distance themselves from Baron Durmand.

With a wave of his hand, Duke Diarca dismissed the nobles who were about to clean his shoes in a fluster. Those who caught his gaze immediately understood what he wanted.

"Your Grace, Duke Diarca, how distraught you must be."

"It's just that I had stepped in to help an old acquaintance, and to think this would happen... My heart feels like it might stop if I think about how shocked you must be. Shall we leave for now?"

"Yes... perhaps it's best."

"Are you leaving then?"

It was then that Yuder spoke calmly. Although the Duke didn't respond, Yuder continued nonchalantly.

"Isn't it a bit early to leave? I thought you might be curious as to why Baron Durmand collapsed while I remain unaffected."

"..."

At those words, Duke Diarca, along with most of the others, turned their heads. Yuder casually shook the wine bottle he was holding.

"Do you happen to know why I was severely injured while dealing with the monster in the West? It was due to the poison it carried."

People's eyes shifted toward the giant head of Pethuamet behind Yuder. Could that terrifying monster not only be enormous but also venomous?

"Having been heavily affected by the poison and then recovering, I seem to have developed a significant resistance to poisoned substances. I suppose I have the Emperor, my Commander, and my excellent comrades to thank for my fortunate survival."

Of course, half of this was a lie. But the modesty paid off, as the faces of various nobles twisted in displeasure.

It was better to hide the weakness of being vulnerable to monsters, while only half-revealing the strength of being resistant to most poisons. After all, the term 'significant' is inherently subjective.

The more the enemies found it difficult to gauge Yuder's limitations, the less likely his comrades were to be in danger.

"Thank you for involving me," Yuder said.

"The reason why Baron Durmand, who was said to never had any side effects from drinking Quelochet, yet immediately vomited and fainted after this sip, and why I'm still perfectly fine—no doubt, they all share the same answer," he added.

If Yuder hadn't been resistant to poison, he would have been the first to collapse and vomit. His icy eyes said as much.

The faces of those who had prepared the drinks and medications along with Baron Durmand turned pale.

"Resistant to poison? That's absurd."

"No, it has to be a lie. This is clearly an inside betrayal."

"Does this mean that the Cavalry will continue to investigate the matter?" A noble, neither from Diarca's side nor friendly toward Yuder, asked with interest.

"Yes. We plan to thoroughly investigate any secrets hidden in this drink, including the person who gifted it."

"..."

"What does this have to do with Duke Diarca? If you suspect Baron Durmand, do as you will. If you're going to investigate, let the Cavalry handle it!"

"Such uncouth manners."

Voices rose in protest from behind the silent Duke Diarca.

Suddenly, the Duke, who had been standing quietly, raised his hand to silence everyone after someone whispered politely in his ear.

"Do as you wish."

"Your Grace..."

"I too am deeply disappointed in Durmand. I'm tired; let's honor the Crown Prince and retire for the day."

Straightening his back, Duke Diarca brushed past Yuder. Following him, many nobles also disappeared, as if they had no more business there. When the Duke mentioned that he would pay his respects to the Crown Prince before leaving, the prince showed a faint smile, tinged with regret.

"So soon? That's unfortunate."

The nobles from the side of Duke Diarca felt that the expression on the Crown Prince's face was somehow a bit different from before, although it was hard to pinpoint exactly why.

'Is he still holding onto a grudge? Normally, he would leave as soon as the Duke departs.'

Was there still a problem between Duke Diarca and Crown Prince Katchian, even after everyone thought the relationship had been mended? What impact could this have in the future? With the Cavalry making significant strides and their newfound fame, this subtlety was not a good sign for those aligned with Duke Diarca.

While thoughts raced through many heads, members of the Cavalry gathered around Yuder as soon as Duke Diarca had left.

"Yuder! About earlier... was it okay to speak so bluntly? Won't there be some sort of reprisal? Especially since..."

"Yuder, you kept it a secret from us that you had a resistance to poison! We were really worried when we thought you got hurt! It's good that you didn't, but..."

"Don't worry. I'm truly alright," Yuder reassured his comrades with a brief reply, brushing off their concerns. Then he turned his head toward someone who had been quietly standing in a corner.

"Gakane."

"..."

Gakane hesitated, lifting his head before lowering his eyes again. The other members seemed to understand why Yuder had called Gakane and subtly cleared the space around them.

"...Ah, should we go dance again? Want to join me?"

"Sure."

"I want to eat some fruit. It looked delicious earlier."

"You still want to eat that after seeing someone throw up? You're truly worthy of being in the Cavalry."

"And yet you already have a fork in your hand."

"I had no choice. That's a separate matter. I didn't get to eat breakfast because of all the preparations."

Yuder moved through the space left open by the retreating members and grasped Gakane's shoulder.

"Thanks for earlier."

"..."

Gakane broke his silence, lifting his head once more. His eyes, tinged with a shade of green, shimmered with complicated emotions.

"I feel like I haven't done anything to deserve your thanks. I wasn't any help to you at all."

Turning

Chapter 507

Gakane's words might not have been entirely wrong. Despite stepping up to help Yuder, he hadn't been much of a help, that was true.

But that didn't mean he wanted to admit it had been a pointless endeavor.

"Your judgment that you were of no help is your own. Not everything in the world can be assessed solely by its outcome."

"Right... if you're saying this out of pity for me, thanks, but it's okay. You don't have to worry. The matter has been resolved... that's all that counts."

A bitter smile briefly touched the corners of Gakane's mouth before vanishing like a mirage. He didn't seem to take Yuder's words to heart. The following conversation was no different. His face remained vacant, as if his thoughts were elsewhere, and he emanated a deep sense of melancholy.

'...His condition seems more severe than I thought.'

Yuder suddenly recalled what Enon had once said. Wasn't it that people like Gakane, who are sensitive, should not talk when others are around?

If Yuder had been in Gakane's position, he wouldn't have cared one bit. Yet, he understood how difficult it could be to discuss family matters, especially under the malicious scrutiny of others, given the circumstances. Talking further would not change the situation.

Yuder broke the silence and called Gakane's name.

"Gakane."

"..."

"Shall we dance?"

"What?"

"Follow me."

Gakane looked around, puzzled. Before he could step back, Yuder quickly grabbed his arm and led him away. Members of the Cavalry who were preparing to dance and enjoying their conversations glanced at them with mild surprise but said nothing.

Soon, the music began. The loud instruments drowned out any conversations from others. Yuder tightly gripped Gakane's hand, enough to cause slight discomfort.

"Ah."

"Focus on the dance, not on anything else."

"..."

"Do you understand?"

"...Yes."

As Yuder spoke firmly, the tension in Gakane's eyebrows seemed to soften. His tightly sealed lips appeared to tremble slightly. As he had claimed to know all the dances, Gakane danced quite well. Despite clearly not being in the mood for dancing, he moved seamlessly, a testament to years of experience in such arts.

How long did they dance in silence?

Suddenly, a soft voice reached Yuder's ears.

"You seem really strong."

"..."

"How wonderful it would have been if I could be like that too."

Repeating his murmurs, Gakane took a spin and then, as he returned, spoke again.

"Even when you told me not to come, I went ahead anyway, and hearing about my family choked me up. I was paralyzed, unable to think. Just... ashamed of everything."

"..."

"Everything Baron Durmand said wasn't entirely wrong."

A bitter emotion seemed to rise over Gakane's face, as if chewing and swallowing a bitter herb.

"The truth is, my family has nothing left but its name. We tried to arrange marriages with merchant families who desired it. And for that, we suffered all kinds of humiliation in the South. I didn't expect people in this far-off capital to know about it as well."

Gakane began to ramble disjointedly. When Yuder pieced together what he was saying, it revealed a story of a fallen noble family, more impoverished and miserable than Yuder had remembered.

"Hey, Yuder, do you remember when I said I once tried to join the knights?"

In his younger years, Gakane had aspired to be a knight and a general, to make a name for himself like the ancestors who had brought fame to his family. On the strength of his name, he had managed to join a couple of renowned knightly orders as a young apprentice, even as a squire. However, no matter how hard he persevered, he could not rise through the ranks.

It was an era where having money and a fine sword mattered more than passion when it came to becoming a knight. And Gakane had neither. He didn't possess overwhelming swordsmanship skills that could compensate for his impoverished background. There was simply no mentor willing to fully train someone who had neither money nor talent.

Eventually, as he reached the age limit for apprenticeship, Gakane accepted the reality that he could not become a knight. He returned home to help uplift his family and began to look for his own way to survive. The easiest path seemed to be accepting various matchmaking offers that came his way.

Though his family had fallen into ruin, there were still plenty of wealthy individuals who were interested in the Bolunwald family's castle. Putting aside his sword and training clothes for formal attire, Gakane started to attend matchmaking events. His parents and siblings told him he didn't have to, but he couldn't stand the thought of doing nothing and being a burden.

"I saw a lot of matches back then. But since I had nothing to offer, and wasn't particularly cooperative either... I was never a priority in that market," Gakane's eyes subtly reddened.

"I received quite a few offers, you know, for secret relationships if not for marriage."

"Did you just ignore them?" Yuder finally spoke up. Gakane let out a bitter laugh.

"What choice did I have? What could I do?"

There was a social expectation that those inheriting a castle should marry someone of equal standing. Especially for a house like the Bolunwald, which had a history of glory, engaging in such affairs would only invite scorn. Furthermore, Gakane's good looks had only fueled malicious rumors, which took on wings and spread dramatically, becoming more embellished among the southern nobility.

"But back then, I thought it was okay. I figured I'd never associate with those people again, and that I'd just marry someone—anyone—and that would be the end of it."

But life seldom goes as planned. A few months later, Gakane heard that a vacancy had opened up in one of the knightly orders he had once served as an apprentice. And he met every qualification to fill it. It was a miraculous opportunity.

"But they rejected me. Said they couldn't let someone who'd forgotten the weight of his own name and lineage into their ranks. Just like that, I was cast out. Ha."

The order wasn't willing to accept someone with a bad reputation. Despite attempts to correct the distorted rumors by reaching out to influential people among the southern nobility, he failed. There was no one left to stand up for Gakane.

"If I hadn't Awakened miraculously back then, and if there hadn't been a recruiting notice for the Cavalry... it would have been truly bleak."

Yuder recalled the run-down inn in the capital where he had first met Gakane. He had known even then that Gakane was the scion of a fallen house, but he had never truly felt the weight of it, given Gakane's cheerful demeanor.

But the reality was that Gakane had nowhere else to go; his circumstances were that dire. He had pinned his last hopes on coming here.

In the festive season of harvest, when everyone was happily dressed in formal attire, Gakane was the exception; he never seemed quite pleased. Even in dancing, something he claimed he was so accustomed to that practice was unnecessary, his expression was rather gloomy. These memories came flooding back.

"Yuder. That's why I hoped you wouldn't have to go through what I did. You were the first to bring light into my life when I was on the edge of the abyss, and you're my first real friend since I got here."

"..."

"Even though my advice might be useless... My desire to be of help to you has always been sincere. I wanted to be strong like you and worked really hard for it. I was truly happy when you proposed working together this time..."

Muttering, Gakane let out a sigh.

"But it seems like I really can't be of any help. It's ridiculous. I'm just... I'm so ashamed of everything. The fact that we're having this conversation right now... and that people are watching us..."

"Gakane."

"Knowing you could solve everything better on your own, and still unnecessarily stepping forward, that's what I'm most ashamed of right now."

"Gakane!"

Yuder interrupted, calling out Gakane's name before the shame could deepen on his face.

It was the first time Yuder had seen the usually cheerful guy appear this downcast, and he didn't know what to say to break the ice. He was at a loss for words.

'If I were Kishiar, I wouldn't have to worry about this... I'd rather fight ten guys like Baron Durmand.'

Yuder exhaled deeply. Even in that sigh, he could feel Gakane's shoulders flinch.

Turning

Chapter 508

Gakane often said that Yuder had shared his light with him, but the truth was that Yuder hadn't helped him out of any extraordinary benevolence. It was merely his first attempt to take a different path from his previous life, and the presence of past experiences and memories gave him a bit more certainty in his decision. That was all there was to it.

'And yet...'

Yuder glanced at his loosely held hand, collected his thoughts, and opened his mouth.

He wasn't gifted in offering comforting words, so he felt he should take another approach.

"Gakane, I didn't help you out of some grand intention, contrary to what you think."

"I know. To you, there's no great difference between helping Kanna and the others, and helping me."

"No, what I want to say is that my being strong and my personality are two different issues."

Yuder replied firmly, locking eyes with him.

"I'm someone who doesn't care what others say as long as it doesn't interfere with what I have to do. It's not because I'm strong; I've been like this even before my Awakening. I've suffered losses due to this trait, but it hasn't changed and probably never will."

He had even faced execution due to this personality. A fact Gakane was likely unaware of.

"..."

"This isn't strength. It's just having an incredibly stubborn and unpleasant personality. If you were like me, I think it would be difficult for us to get along."

Gakane Bolunwald, being stubborn and having an unpleasant personality, was an unimaginable combination.

"You say you're embarrassed for not being of any help and about your past. But if we're measuring shame, shouldn't I be the more ashamed one? I nearly ruined the party's atmosphere, and one person even fainted and had to be carried away."

"That's not..."

"Yet, I'm not particularly ashamed. I did what I wanted to do, and if I could go back, I would do it again."

Upon hearing Yuder's unsettlingly calm words, Gakane blinked a few times.

"Think about it. If you could go back in time to earlier, wouldn't you still come forward to help me, surrounded as I was?"

"..."

Gakane, who had said he was embarrassed for stepping in even though he knew Yuder could handle it himself, couldn't readily answer. Yuder felt a faint strength enter the fingers of the hand Gakane was holding and asked again.

"So, what will it be?"

"If I could go back to earlier, I think I would still step forward to help you. But... I wouldn't be as foolish as I was. Like that gentleman earlier, I would try to do it more... skillfully."

The words that finally came from Gakane were not unexpected for Yuder. He was a person of such nature: considerate, attentive, and in some ways, inexhaustibly persevering.

There was no need for someone already endowed with his own strengths to become just like Yuder.

Yuder nodded and the corners of his lips faintly rose.

"Good. Then do it like that next time."

"Next time?"

"It doesn't seem like these kinds of situations will end with this one event."

"Do you think I could step forward again, even after what happened today?"

"Why wouldn't you be able to? I do as I please, so you can do as you please too."

"What are you saying? You told me not to intervene earlier."

Gakane furrowed his brows, his expression hovering between a smile and a frown.

"I did say not to intervene, but I also thanked you for doing so, didn't I?"

Yuder replied brazenly, then added a moment later.

"I've lived alone for a long time, unlike you, and I'm used to taking initiative on my own. When I told you and the others to stay back earlier, it was not only because I was confident I could handle it alone, but that was also a big part of it."

Yuder was accustomed to thrusting himself to the front lines when facing enemies, leaving others behind. Solving problems himself was not only quicker and more reassuring, but also due in part to his lack of trust in others.

This trait was even exhibited when playing games. One of the phrases that Kishiar had repeatedly said while teaching him strategy games in his previous life was to stop relying solely on one tactic against opponents.

So naturally, he thought it best to throw himself into the fray alone this time as well, facing off against Duke Diarca and Baron Durmand.

However, when Gakane disregarded his silent command to stay back, and when Pruelle intervened, followed by Priscilla's aid, and finally when a throng of Cavalry members arrived, Yuder felt something different than before.

Objectively, the situation hadn't particularly benefited him, but the enthusiasm of the people that had gathered felt like some sort of protective shield around him. It was a sense of responsibility he hadn't felt when facing multiple enemies alone, a suddenly clarified reality, and a certain fervent energy that circled his fingertips before dissipating.

"I told you earlier, I don't care what others say. I'm going to thank you anyway, and I already forgot what the unconscious guy said. If you're bothered by his words, I am prepared to threaten him to keep his mouth shut until he dies."

Gakane's eyelids trembled slightly, knowing full well that Yuder could indeed do so.

"Why... would you go so far? Do you pity me?"

"Do you really see me as someone who would go that far just because I find someone pitiable, even after our conversation?"

"Then?"

Gakane Bolunwald was an irreplaceable Cavalry member and a colleague. But that reason didn't seem persuasive enough for him at this moment. He wanted something different, something that wouldn't apply to other colleagues like Kanna or Ever.

Yuder closed his mouth for a moment and then opened it again.

"When I first came to the capital for the Cavalry recruitment test."

What he finally dredged up was a vague, very old memory from his past life.

"To be honest, I didn't have a good first impression of the capital. It was a bit scary, and I didn't want to talk to anyone. I was planning to just take the exam and leave if I failed."

Gakane blinked awkwardly. The Yuder he knew now had changed since then, making it difficult to understand, but it was true.

"I know that I'm not someone people easily approach. I'm not sociable, and my personality isn't exactly winning. Most people who meet me for the first time find me intimidating or unpleasant."

"..."

"But you spoke to me without hesitation, didn't you?"

There aren't many people who can speak to Yuder without hesitation upon a first meeting even now. Although the Yuder of his past life had brushed off Gakane's friendly approach, the fact that it remained in some corner of his mind even after death and resurrection indicated that it had left a significant impression.

And also, the meaningless death of Gakane, who had shown such effortless kindness.

The conversation he had with him at that time was, from Yuder's perspective, a conversation with another person after a very long time.

Based on his previous life, it was a conversation with a peer stranger after several years, and in this life, it was the first proper conversation Yuder had since coming back from the dead.

Yuder looked at Gakane, who seemed lost in thought, and spoke.

"I'm glad the person I talked to at that time was you. That's all."

Gakane remained silent for a while. When he finally spoke, there was a slight flush around his eyes.

"...Does that mean you consider me a good friend as well, Yuder?"

Instead of replying, Yuder simply nodded.

Suddenly, a strange feeling crept in, oddly stirring his insides.

Back then, he had no idea that Gakane would become such an important and close comrade, nor did he foresee doing something he'd never done before—comforting another—for the sake of Gakane, even after achieving his initial goal of saving him.

'I probably wouldn't have kept hearing such words in the first place.'

From the moment he decided to save Gakane right after coming back to life, up to now, many things had happened. Yuder had always been focused on the changes in others, but for the first time, he partially realized that there had been changes in himself too, excluding areas related to Kishiar.

Odd as it was, the feeling wasn't unpleasant.

"Gakane. I'm not good with words, so I don't know what to say, but I know one thing. Whatever happened today won't affect your growing skills or the things you'll be capable of doing in the future. Just remember that."

Whatever rumors Baron Durmand spread about Gakane, whether he was born into a fallen noble family or had tried to sell his honor—none of it had any bearing on what he had achieved so far. The future would be no different.

"...Understood. Thank you."

With Gakane's brief response, the conversation came to an end.

Turning

Chapter 509

Yuder's eyes, as vivid as a road wetted by rain, no longer avoided the gaze that met them.

"You know, Yuder, one of my goals since joining the Cavalry was to be acknowledged as your closest friend."

"Is that so?"

The sentiment he'd just felt vanished in an instant, replaced by the notion that it was a truly peculiar aim. Gakane, catching Yuder's expression, probed, "You find it hard to understand, don't you?"

"I was confident in my tenacity, but it still felt like a challenging goal. But hearing what you said just now made me feel even happier than achieving that," Gakane said, his usual shyness and brightness slowly returning to his expression.

Seeing that Gakane looked much better than before, Yuder simply nodded in agreement without saying a word. Gakane also refrained from adding anything more on the subject, and instead turned his head, as if he had noticed something.

"Ah, it seems the Commander has arrived."

Yuder's eyes followed immediately. The entrance area had become somewhat noisy, and soon, a tall man stepped inside. Kishiar, whose height made him stand out like a majestic tree amidst a meadow, drew everyone's attention as he re-entered.

Whether they held him in esteem or not, everyone's eyes were on Kishiar, even Katchian La Orr. Yuder was sharply reminded of how Kishiar could commandingly capture the attention of others.

Having always been by his side, seeing him from a distance was a rare experience for Yuder. Watching him quietly, he saw Kishiar turn his head and scan the surroundings after exchanging a few words with the chief steward.

His gaze stopped precisely where Yuder was standing. Upon locking eyes, Kishiar waved his hand in a grand gesture, his demeanor overtly cordial. The few remaining retainers of Duke Diarca, who had yet to leave their seats, muttered amongst themselves, their brows furrowed. However, they were now clearly in the minority.

Their complaints and anger, their insults and slanders—all failed to affect the evening's celebration.

Suddenly, Gakane spoke up. "Yuder, you mentioned that today would present an opportunity you've been waiting for."

"That's right," Yuder murmured, without breaking his gaze from Kishiar.

"Now I think I understand what you meant."

Gakane grinned in a way he hadn't in a long time. He patted Yuder's back a couple of times, gently, before heading back to where the other members were.

Yuder began walking toward Kishiar.

"You've arrived."

"Yes. The hall has become quite clean in my absence."

Kishiar greeted Yuder and whispered with a smile

Yuder answered calmly, looking around at the seats, which had emptied by more than half after the departure of Duke Diarca and his followers.

"I did put in some effort in cleaning. Though there's still some dust left, it should be enough for everyone to enjoy."

"I heard that even from where His Majesty is, my assistant is diligently cleaning."

Kishiar's eyes, which had been leisurely until then, changed slightly at that moment.

"I wanted to hurry back and help with the cleaning, but it seems the dust moved faster than I did."

"..."

Was Kishiar implying that Duke Diarca's departure ahead of his return was no coincidence? Yuder recalled that just before Duke Diarca had announced his departure, someone had rushed over to whisper something in his ear.

Ah, it was around that time that news reached him that Kishiar had detached himself from the Emperor's side.

Even Yuder, who was Kishiar's closest aide, and the Cavalry had only heard that he was going to meet Emperor Keilusa. They had not been told when he would return. Such movements of the royal family were inherently supposed to be secretive. Yet, Duke Diarca acted as if it was only natural to immediately hear such news and act upon it.

This essentially meant that everything happening within the palace could directly reach his ears.

Yuder felt a chilling realization that the influence of Duke Diarca, including Crown Prince Katchian, extended like a network of veins deep into the palace.

This palace, supposedly the home of the Emperor and the imperial family, was now a place where none of them could freely roam.

'So that's why he made the unusual excuse that he was tired and retreated so easily.'

Suppressing the uncomfortable surge of emotion as if he'd been struck on the back of the head, Yuder quietly asked,

"...Did your visit to His Majesty the Emperor go well, Commander?"

"It went as well as it could have," Kishiar responded with an ambiguous answer.

"He was rather surprised that I used the relaxed rules concerning the second gender as I did. He seemed quite flustered, but he understood eventually. Still, he'll probably want to see the face of my assistant once more soon."

So, in other words, although it was okay to dance Avitan for the first time in the history of the imperial palace, the fact that Kishiar danced with Yuder, a man and omega, was a more shocking event than expected for the Emperor and Empress.

'It's not like I didn't consider the possibility.'

Plans involving people don't always go as thought. Yuder knew the Diarca family's future and the nobles gathered here, but like them, even the doting Emperor and Empress would have parts hard to convince just by Kishiar's words.

Yuder nodded, keeping his facial expression unchanged.

"I see. Understood. So, will you proceed with the next steps now, Commander?"

Dealing with Duke Diarca and Emperor Keilusa didn't mean their tasks were over. Yuder's gaze drifted toward the steps where Katchian La Orr sat. There stood Kiolle, his eyes half-gone as if he couldn't endure the shocking events any longer.

Now that Duke Diarca had left, the time to snag him for a conversation was perfect. Yuder planned to signal Kiolle while Kishiar was busy holding the attention of Katchian and the others.

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I said I've been drinking."

Yuder's mind, spinning with tasks to come, momentarily halted at the unexpected answer. He closed and opened his eyes, staring at the smiling face looking down at him. Kishiar gently leaned his head toward Yuder's ear, adopting a more sultry and gentle demeanor than before.

To any outsider, it would seem as if Duke Peletta was simply fixing the messy hair of his assistant, but the red cloth wrapped around his arm skillfully concealed Yuder's presence from anyone's view.

"The Quelochet liquor is dangerous enough on its own. If something's been added to it, there's no need for further discussion. I've never even heard that you developed a tolerance to poison after recovering from a monster-inflicted injury. Can you explain?"

Yuder was quietly surprised at the level of detail being discussed about the events that had transpired here. It seemed that not only Duke Diarca was adept at knowing what happened within the imperial palace as if it were in the palm of his hand.

"...I once mentioned that I don't get easily intoxicated by most alcohol. Do you remember? The reason is the same."

Yuder made eye contact with Kishiar, aiming for a brief and clear explanation.

"To be precise, it's not a tolerance developed after being injured by a monster, but something I've had since my Awakening. Unless it's related to my 'weakness,' nothing makes me drunk."

"I understand that Quelochet contains some elements related to that 'weakness'?"

Not a trace of amusement could be seen in the vividly glowing red pupils. Kishiar's keen eyes seemed to pierce through everything, making sure not to miss even a small detail in Yuder's words.

"Yes, I'm aware. However, I judged that the amount was too small to have any effect. And indeed, it didn't, did it? I'm fine."

"Your body temperature is higher than usual. Even so?"

"It would only have an effect similar to being slightly tipsy."

"..."

In the ensuing silence, the fingers that had been slowly running through Yuder's hair finally came to a halt.

"It seems my assistant already knew about that drink."

"...Yes."

"Did you also know that drink would be served today?"

Yuder didn't answer. Although he wasn't entirely certain, it had been within the realm of his expectations. To answer clearly on this point seemed difficult, as it would start to involve details from his past life.

"I thought you seemed more confident than usual."

Kishiar closed his eyes briefly and then opened them again. Moments later, he relaxed his shoulders, reverting back to the same Duke Peletta he had always been.

Turning

Chapter 510

"Even on a joyous day like this, overindulging in liquor isn't wise. You should take a brief rest in the lounge."

Though they pretended not to watch, the onlookers pricked up their ears at the booming voice of Duke Peletta.

"I'll be sending Enon and Lusan after you soon. If you want to dance some more, do it there. This is an order."

Facing a gaze that seemed teasing yet serious, Yuder let out a soft sigh.

Telling him to dance there likely meant first confirming he was in good health before handling the matters with Kiolle. It was a typical Kishiar la Orr method of dealing with issues: not obstructing your goals but expressing concern all the same.

"Understood."

Yuder obediently nodded and headed towards the exit. As if by coincidence, he stopped to ask Kiolle, who was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"May I ask you something?"

"What, what?"

Caught off guard, Kiolle stumbled back as if he had discovered a bug under his feet. The ornamental sword at his waist clanged against his kneecap. Grimacing in pain, he clenched his teeth but didn't make a sound.

"Do you know which lounge is currently empty?"

Kiolle was standing right in front of the hallway that led to the lounges. Whipping his head in that direction, he seemed to gasp excessively, as if he had just realized this was a signal from Yuder. To any other onlooker, it would have seemed as if Kiolle was appalled and enraged at being questioned by a commoner. But Yuder clearly saw the fear in his eyes.

'He's making a fuss because he doesn't want to look suspicious.'

"I-it's all empty!"

His voice cracked as if he were grinding his teeth while speaking.

"Then any room will do. Thank you."

Without hesitation, Yuder headed into the first lounge. He felt two piercing gazes on his back. One was undoubtedly from Kiolle, and the other was...

'Katchian La Orr.'

Yuder sat down on a luxurious sofa in a lounge spacious enough for about ten people to comfortably rest. The scrutinizing gaze disappeared, but Katchian's visage, which had been watching him throughout the evening, lingered in his mind.

Usually, Katchian was quite outspoken at formal events. However, considering today's gathering was for belittling the Cavalry along with Duke Diarca, he had been exceptionally quiet.

He wasn't engaging in oily banter with the young nobles as he usually did, nor was he busy with anything else. Instead, he sat alone—the young Crown Prince.

Ever since the turmoil surrounding Quelochet had unfolded and Baron Durmand had fallen, Katchian had been overtly observant of Yuder. That gaze weighed heavily on him.

'His expression didn't seem filled with the wrath that would come from a grudge dating back to the Harvest Festival... Could his heightened interest in me be due to my abilities?'

Frankly, he didn't care what Katchian thought. However, considering that the Star of Nagran and the Sage were close to Katchian, that part unnerved him slightly.

'Well, I'll get to ask Kiolle about that soon enough.'

At that moment, someone knocked on the door and entered. It wasn't Kiolle but Enon.

"Where is Priest Lusan?"

"He's in the bathroom; he'll be late."

Enon spat out the words curtly and began to roughly untie the tie that wrapped around his neck. With a grim face, he spoke.

"It seems we can't even have one peaceful day. Just when I thought today might be different, suddenly a solo performance appears..."

"..."

"What's this about developing a resistance after recovering from monster injuries? I don't recall ever saying that."

Yuder calmly explained once more, hearing Enon say the same thing that Kishiar had.

"Half of it was a lie. It's better to say that than to admit I'm unaffected by poisons and drugs other than those from monsters."

"..."

"However, there was some byproduct from a monster in that drink, so I do feel a little drunk. The Commander said my body temperature has risen."

Hearing this, Enon pressed his forehead and let out a deep sigh.

"A little drunk? Is that all?"

"That's it. Nothing else is wrong, as you can see."

"Why would you drink it in the first place? Weren't there other ways to deal with it?"

Of course, there were other methods. They would have been much more complex and slower compared to the confusion and fear Yuder could sow among the enemies by drinking it himself.

Seeming to read the answer in Yuder's face, Enon cursed silently and clicked his tongue.

"Right, this was much more effective and faster. Knowing you would be fine after drinking it anyway, there's nothing to fear. And since it's not me who would be shocked by it, I can be at ease, right?"

"I didn't say all that."

The only response was a heavy hand slapping against a furrowed forehead.

"Ugh."

"Yes, you do seem to have a slight fever."

Enon calmly checked Yuder's temperature and examined his eyes and hands a few more times. Not finding any other abnormalities, he scowled.

"Don't eat or drink anything else until we get back."

"What about water?"

"If you must drink, make it yourself! You know how to make water!"

Enon roughly handed Yuder an empty cup.

"It doesn't seem like you need divine energy, but just in case, receive some from Lusan when he arrives. And close your eyes and rest."

"Alright, I understand. But I do have one favor to ask."

"To find out what was in that drink? That's obviously something an apothecary should do."

"No, that's not the only thing..."

Just then, another knock was heard on the door. This time, it was Lusan, clothed in ornate ceremonial robes, peeking his head inside.

"Yuder, I apologize for being late. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine."

"Just give him a bit of divine energy and let's go."

At Enon's indifferent tone, Lusan's eyes widened as he quickly approached.

"Ah... is that really all? On my way here, the members all secretly asked for an honest update on your condition. It's good to hear that there's no problem."

With visible relief, Lusan infused Yuder's head with divine energy and began recounting how surprised he had been.

"I was shocked, but when Enon suddenly tried to dash toward you, you wouldn't believe how my heart almost dropped... That's partly why I went to the bathroom, to calm down."

"When did I ever do that? Stop talking nonsense and leave once you've given him the divine energy, kid."

Enon raised his voice to interrupt Lusan's words. But Yuder had already heard enough to guess what would come next.

"...Is that so?"

"No, I said it's not."

"I'm sorry, Enon."

Muttering what sounded like curses under his breath, Enon wore a fierce expression. Lusan, letting out a small laugh, gradually reduced the amount of divine energy he was channeling to Yuder. "Ah, now that I think about it..." he began.

"When I was about to come in here, a knight who was standing next to the Crown Prince was in front of the next lounge. He looked at me menacingly, so I wondered... Did the Crown Prince secretly send him to check on Yuder's condition?"

"Is that so? That's fortunate."

"Fortunate? What do you mean?"

"Enon, what I want to ask of you is directly related to that."

"What now!"

Enon shouted, but Yuder had no doubt that both he and Lusan would fulfill his request.

"On your way out, could you leave the door ajar and both of you pretend to leave but come back and wait in the adjacent lounge?"

"..."

"If I want to invite someone who doesn't even have the courage to open the door, I think I need to do at least that much. Will you do it for me?"

"...Hey!"

A few moments later, Kiolle Diarca carefully opened the door, which had been left just loose enough for anyone to easily open. His eyes filled with extreme anxiety as he whispered in a stifled voice.

"Are you in here? Huh?"

"If you're going to come in, come in quickly. Just sticking your head in and leaving your body outside looks even stranger."

Upon hearing Yuder's voice, Kiolle took a deep breath, quickly closed the door, and entered the lounge. Only when he realized no one else was in the room did he let out a sigh of relief and rub his chest.

"Do you know how hard it was for me to sneak away from the Crown Prince? And to summon me on a day like this, at a time like this..."

"That's none of my concern."

It was clear from Kiolle's face that he found it unbearable not to curse at Yuder's audacity. However, there was nothing he could do. Yuder gestured toward the sofa opposite him.

"Sit down. There's no point in wasting time."