

Turning 51

Chapter 51

Inside the silent palace, the head attendant, who had stationed Kishiar and the Cavalry members outside the door, politely knocked before entering. This place was eerily quiet, void of even the typical sight of a guard knight.

Could this really be the residence of an emperor of an empire? A silent question sprouted in everyone's gaze.

'Considering Kishiar doesn't usually carry a servant around, having only Nathan Zuckerman by his side, it's possible there's something in common between the brothers.'

Yuder also made a plausible conjecture amidst the silence.

"His Majesty has granted an audience. Please come in."

Moments later, the door opened, and the head attendant reappeared. Kishiar strode into the room that the head attendant opened. The members all followed him, and only Nathan Zuckerman, who had been quietly following the group, naturally remained outside the door.

Walking just behind Kishiar, Yuder quickly surveyed the surroundings. The place seemed designed for maximum efficiency, allowing all work to be done within a single space.

Beneath a window pouring bright light, there was an office desk neatly arranged with pens of various types. Next to it, a stack of mixed scrolls and documents exuded a strong scent of dry paper.

Behind what appeared to be an arch-shaped partition installed to divide the space, a curtained bed was seen, and next to it, a table with black tea giving off a unique aroma. It seemed a place where eating, sleeping, and working could all happen at once.

And the owner of the palace, the emperor, sat in a high-backed chair placed not anywhere special, but under the wall, ready to greet them.

"You have arrived. I sense an unusual energy, it might be best not to come any closer."

Upon hearing the Emperor's voice, Kishiar halted, and all the members simultaneously bowed their heads. The emperor coughed a few times before slowly continuing.

"Under normal circumstances, I would have received you at the seventh palace and honored you in the most glorious way, but I hope you understand that I had to see you here."

"Being able to complete the mission you entrusted to us is honor enough."

Kishiar elegantly replied, taking a knee and bowing his head. The cavalry members, who were utterly surprised by the unexpected scenery, quickly followed suit, kneeling.

"Good. Raise your heads."

After a moment, the Emperor quietly commanded them to raise their heads.

Finally, Yuder got a good look at the Emperor's face. He seemed less like a ruler and more like a scholar who had been immersed in research for a long time. His features bore a striking resemblance to Kishiar's, but the atmosphere he exuded was entirely different.

While Kishiar was tall and solid, exuding an air of composure with his lazy smile, the emperor appeared sensitive, his thin figure hidden behind glasses, his eyes tired, and not even a trace of a smile.

He certainly wasn't as radiant as Kishiar. Nevertheless, he didn't seem to be so sick as to be incapable of handling state affairs, as was publicly known.

But why? While observing him, Yuder felt a certain premonition from his tired appearance.

'Seems like I've seen a similar sight somewhere...'

Ah.

At that moment, the Emperor slightly turned his head to briefly survey Yuder's face. In an instant, Yuder understood the nature of the sensation he'd felt. It was the same feeling he'd had from Kishiar in the dream the previous night, and now, the Emperor bore the same aura.

His hair and eyes, once lustrous, now lacked their sheen. His face, as white as a bonfire on the verge of being extinguished, had lost all of its light, leaving only ashes behind.

For a fleeting moment, the Emperor looked eerily similar to the dream's version of Kishiar, who had lost all his brilliance and was standing on the precipice of death. Why was that?

The moment Yuder opened his mouth to voice this peculiar sensation, the Emperor slowly began to speak again.

"Merely by observing your aura, I can believe that beloved Duke Peletta has completed his task perfectly. I'm overjoyed to finally hold what I've long sought."

Even as he spoke of joy, there was no trace of amusement in the Emperor's eyes. It was questionable whether his smile wasn't entirely stolen by Kishiar, his brother.

After finishing his speech, the Emperor took a long breath and scrutinized the faces of the five Cavalry members.

"I've wanted to get my hands on it since it fell two years ago, but no one was successful. Court mages, the valiant knights of the imperial guard, even secretly hired mercenaries all failed. But only one person, Duke Peletta, was confident of success. That is, if he was provided assistance in assembling those awakened by the power of the Red Stone into a cavalry."

"Why bring up such old stories?"

Kishiar chuckled lowly, pretending to chide the Emperor. But the Emperor ignored him and continued his tale.

"I didn't believe it at first. But now, after two years, today, the Duke really brought it before me. You all must have contributed to this, no doubt."

"We are humbled."

On behalf of everyone, Gakane responded with a slightly trembling voice. He was genuinely moved by the situation.

"I do not forget those who have worked for me. I will grant each of you five the title of 'Knight', award ten high-grade magic stones of North Mountain, and establish a training ground for the Cavalry."

Even those who were not knights could receive the title of 'Knight'. The youngest court mages usually started from this title and gradually received higher ranks.

But to not only grant a last name to all the Cavalry members but also bestow titles upon those who brought the Red Stone, it was indeed an unprecedented honor.

Even Kanna, who had been so tense since arriving at the imperial palace that she hadn't been able to lift her head, couldn't hide her surprise at the moment.

"We are humbled!"

"Your Majesty, the reward you have given my subordinates is extremely generous. But you have forgotten the most important thing. Shouldn't you also give a reward to me, who took responsibility for the beginning and end of everything?"

Kishiar, who had been quietly listening, smoothly interrupted as soon as the awards were over. Even though they were brothers, it was audacious of him to speak so lightly to the Emperor.

The Cavalry members were worried that the Emperor might get angry, but that didn't happen. The Emperor, pushing his glasses, made of silver and lapis lazuli threads, up the bridge of his nose, only slightly furrowed his brow as he looked at the smiling duke.

"Duke Peletta, you have already received much help from me over the past two years. Isn't that enough?"

"It is not enough. Did you not hear the report of over ten unidentified Awakened beasts storming into my residence? The report that the Red Stone had exploded?"

"..."

"I risked my life to bring this here. So, give me more."

Gakane swallowed hard at the audacious tone. The Eldore siblings subtly sent looks of admiration. Kanna, tense, bowed her head, and Yuder quietly observed Kishiar's bewitching smile.

The Emperor, who had been glaring at Kishiar, sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Fatigue had further accumulated on his face.

"Very well. Tell me what you want so badly that you're begging so shamelessly."

"I want time."

"Time?"

The Emperor questioned back, puzzled.

"Yes. I want to examine this further."

Yuder's heart beat rapidly for a moment. Kishiar maintained the most composed expression, looking only straight ahead. The Emperor opened his mouth, indicating his incomprehension.

"Haven't you already observed it more closely than anyone else during the recovery mission? Your task was to retrieve it, not to investigate it. Such a task should be given to the mages. It's too risky to entrust it to someone who has never done such work."

"Oh, Your Majesty. I thought you had read all of my report from last night, but it seems you haven't finished it yet. Do you really think those who can't even approach this box properly can investigate it well? Truly?"

Kishiar chuckled softly, provocatively retorting.

"It's the same as when you entrusted me with the recovery mission. Ultimately, the only ones who can truly perceive the power it holds are those Awakened by its power. The Cavalry has many with unique abilities, certainly they'll yield far more meaningful results than the avaricious mages. I guarantee it."

"..."

His flowing, unyielding argument had taken the breath away from the listeners. It felt as if anyone who didn't believe his confident proposition would be the fool.

"...And if something dangerous happens during the investigation, what then?"

"If that happens, which it won't, I will take full responsibility."

"Even if you have to give up your position as the commander?"

At the Emperor's slow question, the breath of the Cavalry members hitched. Even the abundant sunlight pouring in through the large windows seemed to freeze in that moment.

Yuder also furrowed his brow, not having expected the Emperor to go so far. He had assumed that as his only sibling, he would receive some leniency, but that wasn't the case. The Emperor was a much tougher opponent than he'd thought.

But Kishiar alone burst into laughter as if the Emperor had just made a humorous jest.

"Are you that worried about me? I hardly know what to do with such concern at my age."

Concern? It sounded more like a threat to everyone. The same thought flickered and passed through everyone's minds in that moment.