

Turning 48

Chapter 48

In the past, Yuder hadn't paid much attention to Kishiar's attire. There were occasionally members with unique abilities who wore odd clothes, so the fact that Kishiar often wore gloves wasn't particularly unusual. However, on reflection, Yuder realized that since his return, Kishiar had never once worn gloves.

As soon as he realized this, naturally, a dream from the night before flashed through his mind.

Could the Kishiar of his previous life have truly suffered the same injury as Yuder during the Red Stone retrieval operation? Could that be why he always wore clothing that covered his body, even needing to wear gloves?

'Come to think of it, whenever I had to meet Kishiar regularly, it was always in the darkness of the night.'

If he had been injured by the Red Stone, there would be a purplish bruise somewhere on his body. Yet, even Yuder, who might have seen Kishiar's body more than anyone else except for his wet nurse, had never noticed it.

Kishiar always appeared out of the darkness and disappeared before Yuder awoke. The fact that Yuder had never found this odd was because, before Kishiar's death, he had simply accepted it as a part of who Kishiar was, and after his death, he had tried to bury those memories in oblivion.

If he had realized something was amiss earlier, if he had taken an interest in Kishiar's condition, could things have changed?

"I said I didn't need any thanks, but isn't that expression a bit much? You're looking at me as if I'm a ghost."

Kishiar, having noticed Yuder's expression, asked him with narrowed eyes. Only then did Yuder manage to calm his shock and complex thoughts, shaking his head.

"No, it's not that... Thank you."

"When someone asks, say it's a reward I gave you for accepting the position of aide."

If Kishiar said it was a reward he personally gave, even if Yuder wore it every day, people around him wouldn't find it strange. Besides, it was even enchanted to be helpful, so not wearing it would be the odd thing.

As Yuder nodded, Nathan, who had been standing behind them, quietly spoke up.

"It seems we will have visitors soon."

"Must be the other members. Nathan, clear away the remaining food."

Kishiar nonchalantly ordered Nathan, one of the continent's top Swordmasters, as if he were a servant. There was plenty to say about such treatment, but Nathan simply followed his orders as if it were the most natural thing.

While Nathan quickly stacked the plates and disappeared into the inner room, Yuder put on the gloves he had received from Kishiar.

They seemed to be made of leather on the outside, but once worn, they felt slick, like a slightly cold liquid adhering to his hand. Even when he clenched and unclenched his fist, there was none of the stiffness characteristic of leather.

"Just as I thought, they suit you well. My judgment was indeed correct."

Kishiar proudly complimented himself with a satisfied expression. Yuder didn't respond. He felt no need to feign agreement with insincere politeness when honesty, however unpleasant, was preferred.

"By the way, did you confirm that none of the other members were injured?"

"Ah, yes. There were none."

Throughout his return journey, Yuder had taken the time to ask his companions individually about any injuries. While some had minor scratches or muscle aches from climbing the mountain, no one else had sustained injuries like his own. It was a relief.

At the time of the explosion, Yuder had been closest to the Red Stone. It was just a few steps away, and he had thought he shielded everyone, but that small distance had created the current outcome.

'Looking back, I should have put up the shield from the beginning.'

Regret filled his mouth with bitterness.

A while later, a knock on the door came along with the murmur of conversation from outside. Since Nathan hadn't yet returned, Yuder got up to open the door himself.

"Commander, I apologize. I was about to bring Yuder with me, but he wasn't in his room... Oh... Yuder!"

"Yuder, you were here? What happened?"

As soon as the door opened, Gakane, who had been apologizing loudly with his head bowed, was startled to see Yuder and shouted out in surprise. The other comrades were equally surprised.

Yuder gestured for them to come inside as he looked at their faces filled with betrayal and confusion.

"...Come in."

Once everyone had settled into the long chairs, Kishiar greeted them as if he had been waiting.

"Did everyone have a restful night? I called Yuder here for a personal matter. I apologize for not informing you earlier."

"Ah... I see."

Gakane finally collected his surprised expression and calmed down. The Eldore siblings wore expressions of curiosity about what might have transpired between the two.

"You all look curious. Would you like to know what you'll soon find out anyway?"

"Yes."

Between the firm responses, Kishiar gave a soft smile.

"Today, you all will accompany me to the Imperial Palace with the Red Stone. We will show the Emperor the stone, and receive our reward for completing the mission. It's a secret mission, so we can't celebrate in front of many, but please be satisfied with meeting the Emperor directly and receiving an award. And while we're there, I plan to appoint Yuder Aile as my Cavalry assistant."

Such enormous news came out all at once, the members were momentarily speechless.

"The Imperial Palace?"

"We're meeting the Emperor?"

"Yuder will be the Commander's assistant?"

Each member exclaimed the most surprising fact to them, and they all looked at each other. The Imperial Palace of the Orr Empire was not a place anyone could visit. Even those born into nobility sometimes never set foot in it in their lifetime.

Moreover, the current Emperor had not shown his face at official banquets for several years, citing health reasons. It was only natural that everyone's expressions froze in surprise at the news they'd be meeting such a person and receiving a reward directly from him.

Yuder had been in and out of the Imperial Palace countless times in his previous life, so he wasn't surprised for that reason. But the fact that they were going to the Imperial Palace before he could convince Kishiar not to take the Red Stone to the Pearl Tower, and that he would directly meet the Emperor, whom he had never seen in his previous life, was quite shocking.

The Emperor, Kishiar's only full sibling. In his previous life, he had died not long after this point in time, so Yuder expected his health to be extremely poor. But if he was well enough to give a commendation today, the known and actual conditions might be different.

'Well, I have to tell Kishiar not to send the Red Stone to the Pearl Tower... but it's going to be hard to find an opportunity like this. What to do?'

"If we're leaving today... when are you planning to set off?"

"Right now."

Kishiar's answer to Yuder's speculative question was clear cut.

"So, we don't need to prepare anything?"

"What's there to prepare? As long as you're in your proper uniform, that's sufficient."

Kishiar, who appeared to find the question amusing, rose from his seat with a smile. The members followed suit, getting up with hesitant expressions.

Yuder scanned the faces of his comrades, his gaze stopping at Kanna, whose face was unusually pale.

'...What's going on?'

Her face was as white as a sheet, too pale for someone simply nervous about a visit to the Imperial Palace. Even a casual glance told him something was very wrong.

Yuder approached Kanna slowly, lowering his head after seeing Kishiar head towards the inner corridor to fetch the box containing the Red Stone.

"What's the matter?"

"Ah!"

Kanna, looking as though she had been deliberately startled, stepped back a few paces, casting a glance at the others with sweat beading on her forehead.

"I'm sorry. I, I mean. That is..."

"Kanna?"

"Oh, well... I mean, if I go there... I mean..."

Kanna was trembling, stuttering, a far cry from her usual lively self. Her behavior was puzzling.

"What's wrong, Kanna? Are you not feeling well?"

Upon hearing Hin's worried question, Kanna stepped even further back. Her shaking head revealed a mixture of confusion and fear.

"I mean... do I have to go there?"

"Where do you mean? The Imperial Palace?"

The mention of the Imperial Palace drained Kanna's face of all color. It was clear that she was reacting excessively to the word 'Imperial Palace'.

"Why all of a sudden?"

"No, it's not... I mean... I apologize for talking nonsense."

"It doesn't seem like nothing..."

Finn, standing next to Hinn, tilted his head in confusion. But Kanna closed her mouth. Their conversation was cut short by the return of Kishiar and Nathan from the inner corridor, Kishiar wearing a splendid cape.

"Alright, let's depart now. We'll be riding in a carriage this time, so it'll be comfortable."

Kishiar, holding the box containing the Red Stone, led the way with a calm demeanor, unaffected by the tingling sensation penetrating his skin from the energy of the stone. Nathan and the members hurried after him.

The carriage they would be riding was already waiting at the rarely used back gate. The carriage, large enough to comfortably hold seven people, was emblazoned with the emblem of the Imperial Palace. Its opulence, including the lavish use of gold, was overwhelming.

Even the eight horses pulling the carriage had been replaced with Misty Wind Horse, possibly for fear that ordinary horses couldn't withstand the energy of the Red Stone. This sight drew spontaneous gasps from the members.

"Incredible..."

"Nathan, I'm counting on you to handle the coachman's role."