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Chapter 481

Kiolle snatched the note from Yuder's hand and shouted. He seemed to have lost even the basic sense of caution that might prevent his voice from being heard outside.

Yuder calmly asked, committing the information he had gathered to memory, "What rumor are you talking about?"

"The rumor that you've been engaging in all sorts of disreputable acts with Duke Peletta in the West!"

'Ah, that rumor.'

It was a rumor Yuder had left to spread, but he hadn't expected Kiolle to bring it up. Still, it felt somewhat amusing to hear such an accusation from someone who didn't even know what true dishonesty was just because he had pickpocketed a bit.

Yuder considered ignoring the statement, but instead turned his head and countered, "Well, what do you think?"

"What?"

"Whether or not I've engaged in any unscrupulous behavior with the Duke, what concern is it of yours?"

"What concern? You touched my body, didn't you? Did you join the Cavalry with an interest in that sort of thing from the start? So brazenly rejecting my offer, too!"

"Enough. Listening any further will be challenging."

The delusions and exaggerations had reached a point that was nearly impressive. As Kiolle shut his mouth, stung by the firm response, Yuder calmly continued, "I'm not interested in anyone. I joined the Cavalry because I wanted to, and I stay by the Duke's side because I want to. Didn't I explain myself well enough when I rejected your laughable recruitment offer?"

"But that's—"

"If you're saying that my actions are disreputable, then fine, let's go with that. It doesn't matter what you say. And it has nothing to do with you, Kiolle."

The icy detachment in Yuder's voice was like an impenetrable wall that would not allow any encroachment. Kiolle found himself involuntarily frozen before erupting in a fit of inexplicable irritation, "You...you arrogant bastard! So, is it true or not!"

To think that after all this, the conversation would loop back to this point. Yuder sighed, sharing the frustration that anyone who had ever tried to educate this fool must have felt.

"Just figure it out for yourself. Haven't you reached an age where you can do that much?"

"You, da—"

Unable to contain his anger, Kiolle swayed with sudden drowsiness and collided with the wall. Clutching his swollen temple, he gritted his teeth and shouted, "I really despise you!"

"Good to hear something I actually appreciate. It's better than your previous aimless blustering."

"You...you..."

"Let's stop the uninteresting talk. Let's continue the conversation we were having."

Without changing his expression, Yuder shifted the topic and ignored Kiolle's red face, asking a final question.

"Kiolle, you'll be attending the upcoming party, right?"

"...What's it to you?"

"Meet me there again."

"You're planning another devilish scheme!"

"I just have a few questions to ask you, just like today. Simply cooperate."

"Talk sense! How could I, who will be attending the Crown Prince, meet you during the party? If someone were to catch us—"

"Figure out a way to slip away on your end. I'll give you an appropriate signal, so come out accordingly."

"You think I'll listen to you? You're just trying to use me to find out more about the Crown Prince's healers!"

"True. But you also think those guys are suspicious, don't you?"

At Yuder's response, Kiolle visibly flinched.

He was a guy who, unbecoming of a son from a house as noble as the Diarca Dukedom, was unable to hide his likes and dislikes.

People usually change after facing life-or-death situations, but this guy seemed immune to such transformations.

"Whether the treatment actually works or not, it's still suspicious. You can't tell me that you've completely trusted those healers on behalf of Duke Diarca, can you?"

"..."

"What if I were to investigate for you? Wouldn't that be a welcome gesture on your part? Especially if those people turn out to be frauds."

It was unclear how much Duke Diarca's side understood about the true nature of the healers. Multiple variables could arise depending on whether Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince were aware of the fact, especially if they turned out to be Awakeners, as Yuder suspected.

And Kiolle was an excellent source of information to reduce those variables.

'So, before the party begins, we should investigate these healers on our end. Based on that, I'll try to extract more information from him. From his expression, he seems to find the idea plausible.'

Indeed, Kiolle was thinking along the lines that Yuder had precisely anticipated.

'...If it turns out they are frauds... It does seem somewhat useful when I think about it.'

If his father and the Crown Prince were being deceived by these supposed frauds, Kiolle had a duty to expose the truth. Until now, he simply hadn't known how to go about it.

'But during the party, Father will also do something to the Cavalry... The true target might not be Yuder, but if my prediction is correct...'

Kiolle's gaze wavered subtly. Yuder quickly seized the opportunity.

"What I'm saying is, let's cooperate against a common enemy. Consider it a partnership."

"Hold on. I haven't agreed yet—"

"Or are you not going to?"

Dark, penetrating eyes stared at Kiolle as if to say, 'Speak now if you wish to join the eternal sleep.'
Kiolle found himself unable to utter a word, grinding his teeth in frustration.

"Don't wander around aimlessly like today, or act overly honest and expose our plans, until the party."

"When have I ever done that!"

"The way you reacted when we talked about our third oath, for example. Anyone could see that you were triggered. Have you recently had second thoughts about that particular point?"

"..."

Kiolle fell silent very quickly.

"If you don't want to talk, that's fine. I'll leave. Count to 30 silently before you come out."

"W-Wait."

Kiolle forced out a painful voice. Anticipating this, Yuder, who had pretended to walk away, turned back.

"The Cavalry member from the West who singlehandedly took down a massive monster... That was you, right?"

"It was."

"Is it not actually someone else?..."

"I had some help, but I was the one to deliver the final blow. So, what's your point?"

A conviction flickered through Kiolle's mind: indeed, Yuder was a monster, even more so than the creatures he hunted. After grappling with an array of negative emotions whose names he couldn't even fully identify, he clenched both fists and finally spoke.

"Are you really not considering joining the side of Duke Diarca?"

"No."

"After you receive the award at this party, my father will fully recognize who you are. Just my recommendation alone would earn you favor. After joining, you'll be treated differently. Are you really not interested?"

"Don't make me repeat myself, Kiolle de Diarca."

"Even knowing that Father will never forgive you if you stay there?!"

Kiolle, who had shouted in a sudden flare of anger, soon tasted a regret as intense as his rage, coupled with an ineffable sense of despair.

In the end, he had said it. The words had escaped him, a volatile mix of guilt towards his father and frustration with the man before him boiling over. Yet, the man who had stirred such emotions in Kiolle merely blinked a couple of times before donning a spine-chilling smile on his pallid face.

'Aha... So that's why you've been so restless. I was wondering what you were trying to say.'

Yuder grasped the underlying motives behind Kiolle's words with just that one sentence.

"So, Duke Diarca has decided to show the Cavalry what he's made of? Did he say he was going to make an example of someone?"

"No, no, that's not it."

Kiolle's reply lacked the usual strength in his voice.

'So that's why he was so uneasy. Afraid of violating the third vow. To think there'd come a day when this guy would genuinely be of help to me.'

The methods they would use were obvious. Even if no specific target had been chosen, knowing their intentions was enough to create a solution.

'If he truly considers me a target, that would be simply splendid.'

The saying that the greatest enemy always lies within must be true; even Duke Diarca would never have imagined Kiolle would undermine his plans in this way. Delighted by the prospect of the wily old Duke faltering, Yuder wore a smile like a predator who had found satisfying prey. He brushed past Kiolle and opened the door.

"It doesn't matter what happens. You and I will meet at the party. Just remember that."

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In the waiting room to which he had returned, Kishiar was elegantly sprawled on a sofa. He had set up a small drink table and was engaged in animated conversation with a few merchants.

"So, as I was saying, my assistant bravely dashed forth and used his power. With a mere flick of his hand, reminiscent of a butterfly's wing flap, the cliffside crumbled and—"

Curious about the story, Yuder paused and listened. Realizing that he was the subject of the conversation, he made his presence known without hesitation. The merchants, who had been sitting politely by Kishiar's side, shot up from their seats the moment they noticed him.

"Ah, there, there, your assistant has arrived, Your Grace!"

"...assistant?"

"Why are you so late! No, no, please have a seat!"

The merchants, as if meeting long-lost relatives, flocked to Yuder, offered handshakes, and pushed him towards Kishiar. This was a stark contrast to their initial indifference when they first met Yuder.

"Your Grace, we shall take our leave now."

"The alterations to the garments you've entrusted us with will be completed soon. Please wait a little longer!"

"Oh, how time has flown. We haven't finished our conversation yet, are you sure you can't stay?"

"As much as it pains us not to hear your valuable words to the end, we must go now to complete our tasks. We apologize."

"Yes, us too."

"Very well, be on your way then."

The merchants simultaneously bowed and retreated, disappearing as quickly as if they doubted their primary occupation.

Yuder took a seat beside the man who was smiling sweetly.

"It seems you've had a good time while I was away."

"The fun starts now, for me at least."

With a slight tilt of his head, Kishiar changed his position to rest his head on Yuder's lap. He looked every bit the accomplished drunkard, though Yuder knew that there was no actual inebriation in those red eyes.

"Your late return suggests you've uncovered something."

"Yes, I had an unexpected encounter."

"Did someone you know come by?"

"Kiolle da Diarca was here, on a mission from Duke Diarca, no less."

Kishiar's eyes narrowed.

"Interesting. Do tell me more."

Yuder summarized his conversation with Kiolle. He mentioned the absence of the supposed healers infiltrating the palace, Kiolle's intense dislike of them, the information in the Duke's note, and finally, the warning, or rather the non-warning, that Kiolle had given him.

After listening to it all, the first thing Kishiar asked was:

"Kiolle da Diarca issued a warning? He's not intelligent enough for that... Could it be a double trap from their side?"

"...No."

Had Kiolle heard that, he would have fainted all over again.

"So your certainty means you can still employ the 'method' you've used in the past to keep him quiet."

"..."

He was right.

"Well, as I said before, I leave it to you and won't worry about it anymore."

Kishiar didn't press for more details about that "method," accepting it with a nod. His expression was no different from when they had discussed the same topic after Yuder's earlier manifestation.

"But how did you acquire the information that was supposedly in the Duke Diarca's note?"

"Excuse me?"

"If he had used the excuse of running an errand, the information would not have been simply written down, and the person who brought it would have obviously not known what it was about based on the current story, naturally. That's what I'm getting at."

Yuder hesitated for a moment, caught off guard by the unexpected question that seemed to pierce through the conversation. He had somewhat glossed over the details about the information from the note, not expecting it to be caught in such a short span of time.

Indeed, it was Kishiar who had caught it.

Feeling an admiration that felt out of place in this awkward situation, Yuder deeply exhaled.

"...I had a way to personally discern the information within it."

He might have felt more awkward or distressed in such a situation before. Normally, giving such an answer could lead to a breakdown in trust with Yuder, or something of a similar scale.

But not now.

"Why? Did Kiolle know that you had deciphered the information?"

"No."

"Is there a chance someone else might find out later?"

"There is none."

After his emotionless voice flowed through the air, Yuder looked down at the man who was still lying on his lap. He stared into his face, which looked deeply contemplative, sensuous, and profoundly wise.

And the moment their eyes met, a thrilling sensation raced toward Yuder's heart as if it had been waiting for just this.

"... I see. Understood."

There was neither anger, doubt, nor confusion in Kishiar's eyes.

It meant he wasn't content with answers one might typically come up with.

As he had declared before, he was still actively thinking, striving to find the 'answer' himself.

Silently, simply gazing in this direction.

Yuder felt a peculiar emotion in the eyes of the man who was chasing something beyond what was visible, something true. It was a feeling that was both fiery, akin to the moment he felt the living Kishiar, and also faintly aching in his chest.

And so, Yuder suddenly decided to disclose one piece of information he had yet to share.

"Commander."

"Hmm?"

"The reason I am so confident about Kiolle da Diarca is actually quite simple."

His red eyes blinked slowly, as if trying to comprehend the abrupt statement.

"I have an oath pact with Kiolle da Diarca in Hartan. Unless he becomes smart enough to free himself from the oath without exposing how it came to be with the Duke of Diarca, he has to assist me. So there's no need to worry going forward."

"..."

"It's not anything particularly grand."

At first, he had kept quiet about it, thinking it would be a hassle if Kishiar knew. Then, he simply chose not to mention it because the question had never come up directly.

But now, he wanted to offer this information as a substitute for answers he couldn't provide.

And as if understanding the implication perfectly, Kishiar finally broke into a remarkably bright smile.

"I see. So that was the secret to handling him."

"Yes."

"It might have been enough to just threaten him, but you went as far as making an oath. Did my assistant suffer unnecessarily?"

"No, the terms of the oath are threefold, and the burdens of compliance lie solely on him."

Yuder silently lifted a finger and recited the three vows. First, Kiolle da Diarca must not reveal to anyone the events that took place in Hartan. Second, Kiolle da Diarca could not issue unilateral commands, duel requests, or disrespectful speech to Yuder Aile or any other person henceforth.

Lastly, the third vow, Kiolle da Diarca would assist Yuder Aile to the best of his ability.

Hearing all this, Kishiar was genuinely delighted.

"I had heard rumors that he had been growing more mature since that time, so I sort of guessed he would have done something like this. But hearing it now, it's even more interesting than I had expected."

"Those rumors had spread?"

"Yes. To extract such an oath from him in that situation, it's something no one but you would have thought of. It's very much like you, Yuder Aile."

Smiling once more, Kishiar grasped Yuder's hand and pulled it towards him. The loose ring on his finger met the soft lips of the one who wore an identical ring.

"...Thank you. This is the best news I've heard today."

The kiss traveled from the fingertips to the palm, and finally to the wrist concealed by the sleeve. Kishiar, who pressed his lips softly to the skin others could not see, looked up at Yuder with a twinkling eye.

If it was humorous, it was a funny thing indeed; but the body that had become accustomed to touch over the past few days responded quite easily.

"Hmm... Shall we discuss the rest when we get back?"

In a place much cozier and warmer than this. His voice, already sultry, resonated even lower and more seductive than before. Though surprising every time, in this moment, neither the schemes that Duke Diarca may be plotting nor the true identity of the suspicious healers seemed important at all.

Slowly, Yuder nodded.

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As the furnace crackled and blazed, Yuder's once-hazy mind gradually cleared.

Lifting his sweat-soaked eyelids, Yuder took a deep breath, exhaling the remnants of lingering pleasure that still resided in the pit of his stomach. While this didn't completely remove the sensation from his lower half, it definitely subdued the heat to some extent.

"Aren't you thirsty?"

The man embracing Yuder while they lay face to face softly asked.

"...Yes."

As he replied, a wave of tension unconsciously traveled down to his lower body. Concurrently, a snug and tingling sensation coursed from the point where they remained connected. Their hastily discarded

clothes lay in a heap, thrown aside after what felt like at least three rounds, but the object between his legs felt as unyielding as ever—never once losing its vitality.

The moment he felt that sensation, his inner lips grew moist again and some part deep within him tingled with greedy yearning. His body, which had so passionately quenched its thirst only moments ago, still seemed insatiable, despite his muscles feeling lax now.

Recognizing that Yuder was experiencing this, Kishiar began to gently move while holding him closer. It wasn't an intense movement that would make everything soaked like before; it was a leisurely motion, just enough to scratch where it itched.

"Ah..."

Swaying his hips to match the movement, Yuder thought about how much his body seemed to have changed in just a few days. The sensation was overwhelming the first time, but each subsequent experience seemed to become denser.

At first, the immense emotions and sensations felt overwhelming to the point that everything else became secondary. Now, however, he was growing accustomed to this peculiar internal sensation. His acceptance also deepened, so much so that they had been deeply connected earlier.

But now, every motion was gentle, making the sensations smoother and calmer. It felt as if he was submerged in comfortably warm water, a pleasant feeling that stimulated his lower body and back in a rhythmic pattern before fading away.

He felt like he could easily drift off to sleep in this state.

"Soon the vacation will be over," came the voice from above him.

Yuder lifted his head. Kishiar playfully penetrated deeper as he spoke.

"For the first time in my life, I dread the end of a holiday. Even more so because I know our time for this will lessen once we return to our daily lives."

"..."

Yuder felt no different. He had never lamented the end of a vacation or holiday in his previous life, but hearing those words now filled him with an odd sense of regret.

"After the vacation ends, this place will become chaotic again. We'll have to deal with matters we've temporarily put off, and moreover..."

Pausing briefly, Kishiar finally spoke as he lowered his hips slowly.

"We'll find out how far we can go with this new key of change we hold. Are you okay with that?"

The key of change. Its meaning was clear, without needing to be questioned.

Kishiar was signaling to Yuder his intention to carry out the very reason he had told the Emperor he had no plans to suppress the rumors—people still knew nothing about the Awakeners, and even less about those who had manifested second gender.

It was a ridiculous affair, but after the trial notes of Bertrail Shand Apeto's horrifying experiments had been widely disseminated, the public's awareness of individuals with second gender had somewhat increased compared to their past lives. However, that was all it amounted to.

Those who had manifested their second gender had long been treated like a thorn in the public's side, even in his previous life. The heat cycles they experienced, the changes in their scent, and even the objects of their affection were all difficult to reveal naturally. Within the Cavalry, where many individuals with second gender were present, such traits were accepted more openly; but outside, it was a different story altogether. Even Yuder's power could not easily change this.

Yet, there was still an opportunity to enact change in this regard. The best way was for influential individuals to openly reveal themselves and inform the public about their natures.

And Kishiar La Orr had resolved to do precisely that.

'Ridiculously risky,' he thought.

No one who cared about Kishiar would welcome this. Even his fellow Cavalry comrades might not.

The pretend relationships in the West had been enjoyable because everyone knew they were false. But if this became a reality, everyone would be disconcerted. Now he had to face not only the entire Empire but also the whole continent.

Still, for the sake of future Awakeners, someone had to do it, now or later.

"Like I've said before, I'm okay with it," Kishiar finally spoke.

"Even though this could be our last chance to keep this relationship just between us?"

"I never wished for that in the first place. I don't mind if you announce it to the entire Cavalry right after the vacation ends. After all, I've promised to follow you wherever you go... Hmph."

His speech broke off suddenly as a wave of pleasure swelled within him.

Pausing for a moment to catch his breath, Kishiar shifted his position, lifting one of his legs and placing it below his knee, supported by his arm. Like Yuder, his eyes, which had lost their laughter in an effort to control his pleasure, laid bare his true emotions.

"Sorry to interrupt, but could you focus a bit here?"

As the space between his legs widened, the penetration deepened instantly, making his nape tingle.

'Ah...'

Yuder tensed his abdomen involuntarily as his head leaned back. Breathless due to the extreme depth, he felt an unparalleled pleasure.

He moved reflexively like a nimble hunter, chasing that path of pleasure ruthlessly. As his hand slipped from Kishiar's shoulder and grazed his chest, the sound of damp skin parting accelerated. Lips that repeatedly tasted his collarbone and chest area heated up the corners of his eyes. Unconsciously, a moan escaped his lips.

Soon, a large hand grabbed Yuder's sensitive part, rubbing it firmly until all thought ceased.

In the end, greedy to the last sensation, the space between his legs became wet once again shortly after.

"..."

Pleasure spread like water between the intermittently trembling connected parts, dripping down. After several such experiences, it became difficult to determine which stimulation—front or back—was greater.

He was so breathless that he couldn't speak, yet even so, he didn't want to lose sight of the man in front of him.

Yuder felt the strong fragrance emanating from Kishiar's body as he embraced him tightly, without the slightest gap between them. The manly scent enveloped him, intertwining deeply with Yuder's own aroma. The two scents had been blending for so long that they had long lost their original distinctiveness.

Despite being wrapped in a scent that was now a tangle of the two, Yuder didn't find it unpleasant.

It simply felt natural, as though they were always meant to be mixed together like this.

"Ah... I wish we could rest for just one more week."

"You're modest. I'd go for a whole month."

The week-long vacation granted by the Emperor and the Cavalry Commander had finally come to an end. The members, who had gathered at the training ground for the first time in a while, were warming up, shaking off the remnants of their days off.

Among them, several members wishing for additional days off showed their faces, still clearly bearing the effects of a week soaked in alcohol. Beside them, a young man with clear, shining eyes cheerfully shouted.

"We absolutely cannot take more time off! I've been dying to train!"

"You say that because you're young and full of energy."

"Yeah, I felt the same when I was your age..."

"Who was it that said they wanted to rest more? Who?"

"Yuder!"

The member who had been about to speak, quickly closed his mouth when he heard the question from Yuder, whose head suddenly popped up. With a face colder than a mid-winter wind, Yuder seemed unchanged, as if he had not been on vacation at all.

'If anyone shows reluctance in the upcoming training, it'll be intensified at least threefold.'

As if they read the warning in Yuder's dark eyes, the members suddenly sprang up and started running.

The only one who seemed pleased to see Yuder was the young man, Jimmy.

"Yuder! Where were you the entire vacation? I went to look for you in your room several times but you weren't there, so we just had fun amongst ourselves!"

"Sorry. I had some matters to attend to."

"What matters? You should've taken me with you."

"Um... it wasn't the kind of thing to involve others in."

While the boy tilted his head in confusion, not grasping the hidden meaning in Yuder's words, other colleagues who were close to Yuder appeared. There was Gakane, who looked like a withered rose possibly due to a hangover; Steiber, whose complexion seemed bright, suggesting he had a pleasant time with family; and also Ever and Kanna, who greeted Yuder in unison.

"Yuder! Did you have a good rest?"

"Uh, Yuder. Oh, hello."

Unlike the cheerful greeting from Ever, Kanna seemed to have trouble meeting Yuder's eyes. Jimmy looked puzzled as he watched Kanna hurry away, hobbling awkwardly.

"Why did Kanna act like that? Is she unwell?"

"Who knows..."

"Gosh, it's not the manifestation of second gender, is it?"

"That's unlikely. If she keeps acting like this, I'll go ask her later. Don't worry."

"Alright..."

"Thank you, everyone, for assembling so promptly."

Just then, Kishiar made his appearance and began speaking, drawing the attention of all the members. Jimmy and Yuder's conversation came to an abrupt halt.

"Did everyone have a good vacation?"

"Yes!"

"I see some faces that seem like they wanted more time off."

"Heh heh heh..."

An awkward laughter rippled through the ranks of the Cavalry members.

Check out the new project:

Surviving as a Mage in a Magic Academy

Graduate student Yi-han finds himself reborn in another world as the youngest child of a mage family.

– I'm never attending school, ever again!

'What do you wish to achieve in life?'

'I wish to play around and live comforta-'

'You must be aware of your talent. Now go attend Einroguard!'

'Patriarch!'

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

Turning

Chapter 484

"Before returning to our regular routine, there are a few matters I must inform you of."

The atmosphere, which had been lightened by a joke, suddenly grew quiet. Kishiar scanned the faces of his attentive Cavalry members, his eyes brimming with a confidence that was incomparable to before.

"Firstly, our Cavalry has two new temporary members. Those of you who have been to the West will already be familiar with them. Additionally, we have one more person who will be working on various studies alongside our medical unit within the Cavalry. Will the three of you please step forward?"

As soon as he finished speaking, Pruelle, holding a cat in her arms, and Hellem walked out from the back door. Unlike Hellem's relaxed face, Pruelle looked slightly tense behind his smile.

"I am the mage Hellem. Originally, I resided in Peletta, which is the territory of our Lord. I joined the Cavalry in light of our recent journey to the West."

"My name is Pruelle Van Tain. I possess the ability to transform into other people. This one here is my younger sibling Nipollen, who can turn into a cat and usually stays in that form."

When the members heard Pruelle's name, a somewhat bitter smile flickered across his face.

"Yes, it's understandable to be surprised. However, I have no intention of using this name within the Cavalry. You may simply call me Elle."

The murmur among the members grew louder at his request to be addressed as if he were a commoner. However, the members soon quieted down, having already witnessed the case of Revlin Shand Apeto, and seemed to accept the situation.

As the initial surprise began to settle, Kishiar resumed speaking, as if waiting for that moment.

"Lord Pruelle—or rather, Elle—sought us out, inspired by Revlin. Had it not been for the genuine help he gave us in Tainu, we would not have been able to wrap up matters so smoothly."

Kishiar objectively narrated the deeds Pruelle had done in the West. Emotion welled up among several members as they heard the tale of Nipollen, who had grown up hidden from even their parents due to an innate condition, and Pruelle, who had risked danger to aid the Cavalry in order to save his siblings.

"Nipollen prefers to stay in his cat form, as he feels more comfortable that way than as a human. However, he says that he can be fairly comfortable in front of other Awakeners, as long as he's with his siblings. So, let's make sure we all get along."

"Understood!"

"Very well, the three of you may take your places."

After the greetings, Hellem, Pruelle, and Nipollen stood beside the squadron members. Eager eyes stretched out here and there, longing to get a closer look at the small kitten cradled in Pruelle's arms.

"Secondly, what I'd like to inform you of concerns the second round of Cavalry recruitment, set to happen soon."

The members gasped at the news, even more shocking than the new temporary members.

"You have all shown tremendous results, deserving of your efforts and expectations. However, the truth is, with upcoming regional branches starting from the West, 300 members are not enough. Therefore, though a bit earlier than planned, we've decided to begin the second recruitment before the winter passes."

"So... do you intend to recruit from each region right from the start this time?"

Steiber raised his hand and asked.

"Yes. East, West, North, South, and potentially Central as well. We plan to recruit from these five regions in total. Details on the locations and schedule for the entrance test will be confirmed and announced soon."

"Commander, you're not planning to personally go and select recruits from all these regions, are you?"

Kishiar grinned at the question from a member who looked slightly concerned.

"Good question. Of course, I can't be everywhere at once. I plan to take charge of the central region, and the western region will be overseen by its local branch. The rest will be delegated to a selected few among you. Our Deputies and assistant will likely be busier as well."

Kishiar explained the plan with an attitude that suggested he'd been preparing it for a long time.

Excluding the central and western regions, the second round recruitment tests for the Cavalry in the northern, southern, and eastern regions were slated to be managed by outstanding first round Cavalry members familiar with the respective local conditions.

Those who become examiners will conduct the primary tests for the Awakeners applying for the second round of Cavalry recruitment. Their duty would also involve bringing the selected candidates to the capital. Kishiar would then have the opportunity to assess these recruits from across the nation one last time.

"Preference will be given to those who apply first, so if you're interested, inform the Deputies or the assistant ahead of time."

The eyes of the members sparkled at the mention that the selected examiners, once a branch in their region is established, will have priority to apply. Also, depending on the mission's success, they would be

rewarded with bonuses and vacations. Yuder faintly smiled, feeling the burning determination all around him.

'Anyone would want to apply after hearing such an offer, especially when they've just had a taste of a delightful vacation and yearn for more.'

Kishiar had likely mentioned the vacation beforehand to elicit exactly this kind of reaction. It was an astute understanding of human psychology.

"And lastly, the third point is about the party that will soon be held at the Imperial Palace."

Kishiar shifted the atmosphere to discuss what the members had been eagerly anticipating.

"I believe you all sensed that His Majesty the Emperor is pleased with our successful mission, as he's personally welcoming us. Originally, we would have only received honors, but this has escalated to a grand party at the palace for the same reason."

The party would not only include members of the Cavalry but also many influential nobles from the capital. The members couldn't contain their surprise and delight upon hearing they'd be the guests of honor at a party in Cantameria Palace, renowned for having the most beautiful banquet hall in the Imperial Palace.

"However, there is one difference between this upcoming party and the previous Harvest Festival you've attended."

Kishiar continued, smiling amid the excited atmosphere.

"This time, there will be a designated period for dancing. While I'm not sure about those who don't intend to dance, the first dance will certainly be ours, as the party is being held in our honor."

Silence fell. The members looked at each other, still uncertain what to make of Kishiar's softly spoken but firm words.

"I don't plan to restrict dance partners solely based on gender, as has been the custom."

Another silence followed. The members cautiously met each other's eyes. Most of them had not yet fully grasped the significance or implications of what they'd just heard.

Finally, Gakane, who hailed from a noble family traditionally inheriting their rank, raised his hand and spoke.

"Commander, are you saying that... we're not strictly required to pair men with women according to traditional rules?"

"You've understood correctly."

Only then did a buzz swell among the unit members.

"Hmm, is this really okay?"

"It might be different if we were just drinking among ourselves and dancing however we like, but we're in the imperial palace, of all places."

Even though they spoke thus, when it came to choosing partners, everyone would likely move according to familiar criteria. That's what they all thought.

And just at that moment, as if timing it perfectly, Kishiar opened his mouth.

"Which is why I intend to have Yuder Aile as my partner for that occasion."

"..."

The training grounds, where the atmosphere had been far from serious despite the buzz, suddenly fell silent.

The members said nothing, diligently processing the shocking statement they had just heard.

'Uh... The Commander is going to partner with Yuder?'

'Does he mean to continue the act we started in Tainu?'

'Is there a need to keep doing this here?'

Yuder maintained a quiet silence in the face of the scrutinizing gazes directed at him. His eyes were fixed solely on Kishiar, who stood at the front.

'As expected, nobody is taking it too seriously at first.'

Changing the traditional criteria for choosing a dance partner at the party to include Yuder had been Kishiar's idea even before today arrived. Seeing it as an appropriate first step to clearly convey his intentions, Yuder had nodded without a word.

Changing the standards for picking a dance partner at a mere party might seem trivial, but it was not a simple matter for those who would experience it firsthand.

Ignoring the confused gazes of the members, Yuder calmly opened his mouth.

"Yes, I look forward to it."

In that instant, the training grounds turned upside down in utter silence.

Turning

Chapter 485

"Yuder, do you really intend to go through with it?"

"We're talking about the imperial palace, of all places... Could this be one of your usual jests?"

"Even if it's under the Commander's orders, the situation here is different than in the West..."

Yuder found himself trapped among the swarm of members who rushed to him as soon as Kishiar had left. Although they spoke in hushed voices, the atmosphere was far from quiet; with each one chiming in, their concerns accumulated like a burgeoning cloud.

The members should have been rejoicing at the news of a party, yet their faces betrayed no joy. Yuder watched them with a curious feeling, their faces worried and their chatter passionate.

Although they didn't seem to be taking the news entirely seriously, their worried expressions were genuine.

"Yuder, if you couldn't refuse because it was hard to say no, we'll go with you..."

"No, I was not coerced into agreeing."

Before the atmosphere could take a turn toward suspicion that Yuder had been pressured into his decision, he spoke up to stop any hasty conjectures.

"Do you think the Commander would force me into this as some sort of joke?"

"..."

"I accepted the offer, and that's that. There's no official problem since they said the standards are being changed. It's just a dance, after all."

"But that's not the issue... the problem is the gossip and ridicule that you'll have to endure!"

"Sure, Commander Kishiar is an Alpha Awakener, and you've emerged as an Omega, but even so... can you really do this? Like in the West, we don't know what kind of people might show up!"

"Oh, stop bringing that up!"

Yuder was taken aback by the stronger-than-expected backlash. He had thought that by this point, out of consideration for Kishiar if nothing else, they would back off. He was wrong.

The answer lay in a facet he had not deeply considered.

During their time in Tainu, while their fake romantic drama unfolded, those in the Cavalry who had been dealing with maintaining security had grown weary of the malicious rumors and insults. Rumors and insults always circulated more when the subjects weren't around to defend themselves.

Even if they knew the truth was different, it was deeply unpleasant for them to see one of their own—representative figures at that—being treated in such a manner. When faced with a situation that might bring back memories of those unpleasant times, their reaction was reflexive.

When a group senses an external threat, it tends to grow tighter. The Cavalry members, who had just completed a challenging mission in the West, had long since become a tight-knit family. Issues like the nuanced differences between first gender and second gender and the reason Kishiar had specifically chosen Yuder were secondary compared to the potential dishonor that Yuder might suffer. This was yet another strange shift brought about by their fake romance.

As the voices of the excited members began to grow louder, Yuder's gaze met with familiar faces in the crowd. There was Ever, who had not entirely concealed her awkward expression, the Eldore siblings who were openly intrigued, worried Jimmy, even more worried-looking Gakane, and Kanna, who looked unsure beside him.

The moment their eyes met, Kanna clenched her fists and suddenly stepped forward.

"Hold on! Everyone, just calm down."

It was exceedingly rare for Kanna Wand, the Jung Division Deputy Commander who was normally on good terms with everyone, to take the lead like this. As the surprised crowd fell silent, Kanna spoke with an expression that seemed so tense it almost felt composed.

"Let's all just take a breath here."

"So, to summarize, the Commander has decided to change the criteria for the dance partners in this upcoming party. There's nothing we can do about it; it's already been decided. Yuder has also accepted this."

"..."

"And, Yuder, are you really okay with this?"

As she spoke, the look she gave Yuder was almost too cautious. Was it his imagination? Yuder simply nodded.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"No, but still—"

"I haven't finished speaking."

Kanna raised her hand, interrupting another member mid-sentence.

"I've never really thought deeply about this... but when I do think about it, isn't this really a party for Awakeners? I mean, considering the Awakeners with second gender."

"..."

"The Commander may be playful, but he has never done anything harmful to us. I believe it will be the same this time. So Yuder must have accepted it because... What I want to say is—"

"...If you want to help Yuder, rather than trying to overturn a settled decision, we should participate as the Commander suggested?"

It was Ever who spoke, taking over for Kanna, whose ears and cheeks were gradually turning red.

"Exactly! That's what I mean. If only one pair participates in this new way, it would naturally look odd, but if several do... it would be much better."

The Cavalry members looked at each other's faces.

"...Is that so?"

"At first it seemed strange, but hearing it now, it makes sense. The commander said he was changing the criteria, not that he would be the only one participating in this manner."

"Right. If Yuder can do it, so do we. We are all part of the same Cavalry!"

The same Cavalry. That invincible phrase ignited a fire in all of their hearts in an instant.

"Fine! Since it's decided, let's all get criticized together! We've slain monsters; what's there to be scared of!"

"If I was afraid of criticism, I wouldn't have come here to take the entrance test after hearing that I'd have to sever ties with my hometown!"

"Anyone who has manifested second gender here, raise your hands!"

"Hey, isn't this going to be historic? Hahaha."

Watching the group that had suddenly become passionate, Yuder remained quietly silent. He had hoped things would move in this direction, but he never expected it to happen this way.

Yet, the zealous voices saying they would take criticism so that Yuder wouldn't have to face it alone didn't sound bad to him, probably because he was already a part of this Cavalry.

It was a strangely unfamiliar feeling.

He turned his head and mouthed a silent thank-you to Kanna. Seeing this, Kanna, whose face was still slightly flushed, vigorously shook her head. He would have preferred a private conversation, but once again she moved away from Yuder with an awkward gesture.

'...Does she have some kind of issue with me? I should ask her why she's acting like this.'

Yuder turned back to the enthusiastic members and spoke.

"Everyone, one moment. If we're done exchanging opinions about the party preparations, there's something I'd like to say before we move on."

"Uh, what? What is it?"

"Are you touched by our loyalty?"

The members grinned awkwardly, anticipating thanks from the mouth of the Commander's ever-silent assistant. However, what came from Yuder's lips was entirely different.

"I've been thinking during the break, and starting today, I want to change the types and intensity of our training. I've already received the Commander's permission. The new schedule is right here, and I'll put it up now."

Without hesitation, Yuder unfolded the neatly folded paper he had taken from inside his uniform and affixed it to the wall where the previous training schedule had been. The new training schedule was already much more densely packed than the previous one, which had hardly any empty spaces to begin with. It also included several new training exercises they had never done before.

The color drained from the faces of the members as they read it.

"Wait... Yuder! Did you forget that today is the first day back from vacation?"

"What is this? I appreciate the separate time for dance practice, but magic and magic tools response training? Magic bomb disposal? Why are we training for this stuff?"

"Anyone who went on the recent mission to the Great Sarain Forest would understand the need for such training without it needing to be said."

At the calm response, a few people timidly nodded their heads.

"If anyone thinks this training is unnecessary, try beating me first. If you can, I'll acknowledge it and remove it."

"As if that would ever be possible!"

Indignant voices filled the training ground. Yuder's lips twitched upward ever so slightly as he walked past them.

...

"Do you think all the members are convinced?"

"Yes. Kanna's help was instrumental."

"Good."

Upon entering the Commander's office, Yuder faced Kishiar, who was in his Commander uniform after a long time. Next to him was Nathan Zuckerman, who had returned after his vacation.

"Then, shall we get started on our agenda? Are you ready?"

"..."

"Nathan. Pick up the violin."

Turning

Chapter 486

Following Kishiar's solemn yet playful command, Nathan Zuckerman hoisted the violin he had been holding onto his shoulder. One would not expect someone who usually wielded a sword to look at ease with a musical instrument. Yet, he appeared surprisingly stable and proficient.

Upon seeing this, Yuder looked on pensively, prompting Kishiar to break into a smile.

"Surprised? I asked Nathan to accompany me because it seemed the most convenient."

Yuder responded with a slight nod of his head, saying nothing.

"Don't worry about it. I taught him, so there's no need for a lot of direction. I asked him to accompany me in practice because he plays better than most musicians, even though he doesn't usually perform."

"You personally taught Sir Zuckerman the violin?"

"Yes."

"You claimed it would help with sword training?"

At this, Nathan Zuckerman, bow in hand, quietly sighed before responding. "As it turns out, he only taught me because he didn't like practicing alone."

"What kind of grumbling is that? Playing the violin helps build arm strength and fine-tunes the pressure you exert with your hands," Kishiar replied, unashamedly.

In truth, Yuder was not particularly surprised that Nathan Zuckerman had come to help with the music. Something similar had happened in his past life when he was learning to dance from Kishiar. However, the atmosphere then had been far less amicable, and he had never learned why Nathan Zuckerman had been taught the violin. He hadn't had the luxury to be amazed that Nathan could play.

'And for some reason, Nathan seems less troubled now than he did then.'

Although Nathan had just found out that the man who would be his Lord's dance partner was in good health, his expression seemed surprisingly stable. His gaze, though a bit complicated, was just that and nothing more.

'Did he hear something from Kishiar before I arrived?'

"Shall we take our places then? Take off your overcoat and come this way."

Having already shed his overcoat, Kishiar stood in an empty space he had cleared by pushing aside a sofa and table. Yuder removed his overcoat and took a deep breath.

The purpose of today's gathering was not primarily for dance lessons. Kishiar had asked him if he could dance to some extent after mentioning a plan to change his dance partner at the party, to which Yuder had responded that he could do as much as was needed.

'As much as is needed, huh? I wonder what that entails.'

Kishiar hadn't asked whether Yuder had learned to dance before, from whom, or to what extent. He had simply arranged this session to gauge Yuder's 'as much as needed' level of dance.

"Traditionally, nobles prefer dancing to 'Rancha,' a four-beat style of music at their parties. It's slow-paced, so many people can dance at once without creating a cacophonous atmosphere."

Facing Yuder, Kishiar assumed a dance posture as if with an unseen partner and demonstrated a few simple steps. Even dancing alone, without music, he looked adept enough that the notion of it being ridiculous never entered one's mind.

"But I've chosen a piece in the 'Avitan' style for our first dance. Can you guess why?"

Rancha was a dance form traditionally favored by nobles, while Avitan was a style that originated and developed among commoners.

In a time unimaginable now, but years later seemingly eternal, the popularity of Rancha would wane. The young nobles, weary of the repeated natural disasters, would find greater stimulation and pleasure in the allure of Avitan.

But for now, choosing Avitan even before such a time had come...

"Is it because of the origin of the dance? I assume it's easier for the members to learn than Rancha."

"That's part of it. But the reason I choose Avitan is that it originally includes a dance form performed by two men."

Kishiar shifted his posture. Unlike during Rancha, his arm that held an invisible partner had risen much higher. At his subtle gesture, Nathan Zuckerman lifted his bow onto the violin.

As the music started, Kishiar began to dance. His movements were much faster than before, but there was not a hint of faltering. Yuder, who was quietly observing him, suddenly realized who the invisible partner dancing with him was.

It was himself.

"What do you think?"

The dance ended all too quickly, leaving Kishiar seemingly unfazed as he asked. Yuder responded, slower than usual.

"It's different from the Avitan I knew."

"Well, it's a form danced by two men, so it would be."

Kishiar chuckled.

"The history of Avitan is longer and broader than you think. Hundreds of years ago, the dance that became the prototype of Avitan was performed in the imperial palace. The name isn't explicitly stated in the records, but it's a pretty credible guess that the dance the Emperor performed in the early days of the Orr dynasty was based on this form."

And so, Kishiar had arranged for Avitan to be performed at the imperial palace party based on such historical records.

"Anyway, Avitan is more favored in other countries right now. Even in the northern part of the Empire, unless it's a large-scale party, Avitan is usually the dance of choice. There's no reason for the palace to consider it taboo. Especially when we've been granted the first song choice."

"..."

"So, are you up for it?"

Yuder looked at the hand extended to him with a smile.

In his past life, Kishiar had taught him both Rancha and Avitan, but only the dances for men. He had never mentioned that there was a form danced by two men.

'I wouldn't have bothered to learn it even if I'd known then...'

Dances between people of the same gender typically happened among commoners who had become boisterously drunk. Even then, it was just random, unstructured movements for the most part. It was unimaginable to dance such a dance at an elegant party of nobles.

"Where did you even find out that this exists?"

"When I first learned to dance, my teacher was quite the eccentric."

Kishiar replied in a mischievous tone.

"After mastering all the female dance forms in just one day, I impressed the Emperor... well, he was the first prince back then. He was so pleased that he taught me this form as well. Apparently, it used to be danced among close friends, but it had almost disappeared, preserved only among those learning it."

"..."

"The late Emperor and Empress were quite astounded, of course."

His added comment was astonishing in its own right.

Although he had said he could do as much as necessary, this was unexpected. Yuder let out a small sigh as he grasped Kishiar's hand.

"...I suppose I'll have to learn this anew."

Kishiar responded with a satisfied smile, having gotten the answer he wanted.

"Is that so? What a shame. Then shall we start from the beginning?"

Yuder took Kishiar's hand and placed his other hand between his back and waist, as instructed. Kishiar assumed the same position.

Nathan Zuckerman began to play once more, following Kishiar's eye signal.

"Fundamentally, it's the same as the conventional Avitan. It's just that the sensation of two people's movements interlocking is somewhat different."

Kishiar moved his foot, pulling Yuder's hand. The basic steps were similar to what he had already known. The main difference was that when both moved together, many parts had to mesh equally.

If both had executed the traditional male steps at the same time, their bodies would have continually clashed. However, moving as Kishiar led and taught, those moments were surprisingly smooth. It felt like two blocks, which you wouldn't have expected to fit, meshed incredibly well.

Moving like this, the sensual and stimulating atmosphere that the traditional Avitan held vanished, replaced by new sensations that hadn't been there before.

This was possible because Kishiar was leading Yuder so well.

"See? It's not as difficult as you thought, right?"

After circling the office a few times and Yuder's movements had become somewhat smoother, Kishiar whispered in his ear.

Unconsciously, Yuder looked up at Nathan Zuckerman, who was in the midst of his performance. The dutiful knight was emotionlessly focusing only on the tip of his bow.

"...Yes. It is easier than I thought."

"If you had only learned the male steps before, this will be a unique opportunity. Enjoy it."

Yuder almost stumbled for a moment before asking softly,

"...Couldn't I have also learned the female steps?"

Turning

Chapter 487

"...Couldn't I have learned the female steps as well?"

"Ha-ha. Like me?"

"Yes."

Kishiar's eyes swirled, sensing the implied meaning behind Yuder's words that he seemed so certain even without hearing anything other than the fact that he could dance.

"Well, I doubt that. If we dance together, you can quickly tell that much. Dancing reveals more about your partner than you'd think."

Finishing his sentence as if singing a song, the man put force into his hands around Yuder's waist and spun him around. The instant their bodies came into full contact, a mysterious, dizzying sensation brushed against them.

Yuder clenched his teeth to suppress the feeling and spoke again.

"So, from what you've seen, I've only learned the man's dance... What else did you observe?"

"Hmm... It seems like you learned it quite a while ago. Or perhaps you haven't danced much since you learned. The evidence is that you remember the basic moves well but you're consistently a little slow in following."

"..."

"Shall I go on?"

It was so accurate it gave Yuder chills.

But on the other hand, he was curious how far Kishiar had deduced. Raising the arm that held Kishiar's hand high, Yuder met Kishiar's scrutinizing red eyes defiantly.

"Yes."

Kishiar chuckled softly, as if he had expected this response. He immediately lifted one leg, hooking it behind Yuder's knee, and pulled, spinning their connected bodies. He then whispered into Yuder's ear while shielding him from Nathan Zuckerman's view.

"Some of your movements are strikingly similar to the way I've learned. Considering that even the same dance can differ in subtle ways depending on the teacher, it's quite an intriguing discovery."

The moment he finished speaking, their bodies completed one full rotation, returning to their original positions. The move was flawlessly executed, as if he had predicted it from the start.

Though Kishiar continued dancing as if nothing had happened, Yuder's mind was full of a baffling impact.

'... Similar movements?'

Of course they'd be similar. Yuder had learned the dance from the man in front of him.

Yet he couldn't figure out what exactly was similar, and that was the problem.

'Do I not get it? Doesn't everyone else dance like this too?'

Kishiar looked at Yuder with the eyes of someone who already knew he was correct. Confronted with this gaze, Yuder's heart pounded, and then an empty laugh escaped his lips.

"...I really don't know, but I see."

"Yes."

Kishiar replied with a sly smile.

As the violin melody that had been rushing passionately toward its climax finally reached its peak and began to recede, they ended their practice and stepped back to exchange pleasantries.

"That's enough for today. Good work, Nathan."

Kishiar lowered his bow and complimented Nathan Zuckerman, who had managed his instrument well despite not playing for a while. Yuder also bowed his head in gratitude toward Nathan.

"Thanks to Sir Zuckerman, I was able to learn well. Thank you for your time."

"...You're welcome."

Nathan Zuckerman's gaze seemed as if he wanted to say something but didn't; however, he quickly packed his instrument and left. Yuder watched him go and then spoke.

"Did you tell Nathan everything?"

"I guess I should say so. He's quite perceptive, so it seemed he had figured out most of it without me even having to tell him."

"Is that okay?"

"Seems like it."

"It's alright. The fact that he accepted the performance request without saying anything means he has his reasons. Don't worry too much. If he really opposed it or disliked it, he would never have responded the way he did."

Kishiar grumbled with a smile, as if asking how much Nathan understood about how anxious and stubborn he really was. To Yuder, Nathan Zuckerman was a knight who would accomplish any seemingly impossible task if Kishiar commanded it. However, Kishiar's assessment of Nathan's personality seemed slightly different.

"In that case... understood."

Although he replied in agreement, Yuder thought he would need to meet Nathan personally to discuss matters soon.

Dressed in his usual attire, Yuder briefly explained the day's agenda and plans to Kishiar.

"Once the morning training is complete, I plan to trace the source of the information we obtained from the letter of Duke Diarca. Therefore, please understand if I don't return until late in the afternoon."

"Are you going alone?"

"No. I think it's time to use the authority you granted me before."

Before leaving for the west, Yuder had received from Kishiar the right to choose five members to work directly under him. So far, only candidates existed, but now that he had returned to the capital, it was time to officially use that authority.

"Upon consideration, it seems necessary to train specialists within the Cavalry who can collect information. I've almost finalized the list of possible aides."

"Good. Who are you thinking of partnering with?"

"In the west, Gakane demonstrated exceptional leadership, and Finn and Hinn showed excellent abilities in infiltration and catching the enemy off guard. Also, if it's alright to include someone from the medical unit, I'm considering Enon. I'm still contemplating the last spot."

Jimmy was also an outstanding choice in terms of ability, but he was still too young. His face might look young like the notorious Eldore siblings who boasted of being the best in the Cavalry, but he was an extremely innocent and straightforward child. He didn't seem like a good fit for intelligence gathering.

Kishiar nodded approvingly.

"Consider Devran Hartude as well. He was in charge of gathering information in disguise alongside Steiber while staying in the capital this time."

"Is that so?"

"It wouldn't hurt to listen to his story in detail and make a decision."

"Understood. I will do that. Oh, and..."

Yuder also brought up another matter he had been contemplating since his time in the west.

"Sir Zuckerman and the Peletta Knights are still tracking the missing Nahan and southern merchants, correct?"

"Indeed. Do you also want to take charge of that aspect?"

There was no need for a lengthy conversation with this man.

"Yes. Actually, during Finn's time in Tainu, he checked their lodgings at my personal request. Although no evidence related to the events at the time was found, there was something that caught my attention. Specifically, I want to investigate that."

"I wasn't aware you were involved in such matters; quite intriguing. Care to elaborate?"

Kishiar's eyes sparkled.

After explaining the conversations he had with his colleagues about selecting aides through his authority, Yuder spoke of the information Finn had found.

"Among their possessions was an emblem featuring a shooting star, a horizon, and a sword. Based on the sketch that Finn showed me, my own investigations revealed that there is a tribe in the south that uses this emblem."

'Indeed, personal research also involved delving into my own memories,' Yuder thought.

"Interesting. Do you think you and your team of five can really trace any connections or flows related to that tribe?"

"Given that Finn and I alone have uncovered this much, I don't think it's impossible," Yuder responded, maintaining his composure. After a moment of silence, he spoke again. The words he was about to utter required caution, as they concerned a more immediate future.

"Finding out who is behind them is crucial for foiling another plot, but I also think it's absolutely necessary for what comes after."

"What comes after," Kishiar echoed, seated at his office desk.

"As you've previously mentioned, the plan they were trying to carry out was a complex operation that took a lot of time and effort. Had they succeeded, they could have brought down the entire Empire. Even if the current operation is disrupted... I have a premonition that they will not back down."

The southern merchants initially appeared to be mere lackeys of Duke Tain, vanishing when things turned sour. But in Yuder's eyes, it almost seemed as if the puppeteer of that operation had been their naive puppet.

Even if one were to question and investigate the merchants through Duke Tain, it would likely be difficult to extract any substantial information.

'What can you possibly learn from someone who didn't even know that the southern merchants he had been freely manipulating were actually Awakeners with tremendous power?'

"So, you're saying that, in your view, the ones we are currently tracking seem to be much more formidable and dangerous enemies than Duke Tain himself?"

"Put simply, yes."

Kishiar tilted his head, lightly tapping the edge of the desk with his fingers. Moments later, he looked up and flashed a cold smile.

"Very well. I trust you with this."

Turning

Chapter 488

The decision was swift. Kishiar trusted Yuder's abilities and told him that there was no need for frequent reporting in carrying out his activities.

"There's nothing more foolish than wanting a detailed report for every little thing in an intelligence-gathering operation where speed and secrecy are essential. Minimize interim reports and feel free to request support where needed."

"Understood."

"It's fine to make mistakes, just don't get injured."

There was no denying that the person Kishiar was referring to was Yuder. After a moment of silence, Yuder nodded.

"Will do."

Only then did Kishiar's flawless smile soften slightly. Before Yuder left, Kishiar seemed to remember something and shared an additional piece of news.

"There was another update earlier. Do you remember the assassins you captured in the Great Sarain Forest?"

Of course he did. They were the ones who had targeted Prince Ejain of Nelarn but had miscalculated and were captured instead.

"Yes. What happened to them?"

"The investigation into their backers is complete. The results aren't particularly surprising."

As expected, the assassins hailed from Aerial, the homeland of the mother of Ejain's biggest rival, the third prince. Circumstances indicated that they had undoubtedly received support from there.

Normally, they would have transferred the captured assassins to Prince Ejain's side long ago, but there was a reason they had continued investigating them.

"We succeeded in identifying people within our own Empire who aided them when they entered. It seems some powerful noble families are assisting the third prince, facilitating their illegal entry and providing them with information."

"That's hardly surprising."

"Indeed. We couldn't determine their exact identities, but knowing this much is sufficient for now."

The reason the assassins could so easily track Prince Ejain within an Empire foreign to their own was that the power and position of their helpers were notably high.

There were only a few people capable of this, and even fewer with the motive.

'One of the four Dukes, most likely. To be specific, one of the three, excluding Apeto who wouldn't have the nerve.'

It was unlikely that Ejain's enemies in Nelarn didn't know the real reason he had ventured to the Orr Empire under the guise of attending the Harvest Festival. Just as Ejain sought a way to resolve his crisis in the Empire, his enemies must have also extended their hands to influential nobles in the Empire to thwart him.

Whoever had accepted that overture had clearly calculated the odds. It was a win-win for them—help eliminate a prince without solid backing in another country and curry favor with a likely future king.

'They probably thought it would be trivial, just helping to remove a prince from another country.'

However, the second prince returned safely to his homeland. Though the Cavalry had assisted in his safe return, no one noted that the prince's return and the cavalry's monster-hunting mission in the west coincidentally occurred at the same time.

And the shocking news that the prince had awakened before returning to his homeland was still a secret, known to no one.

A message had recently arrived at the imperial palace, reporting the safe return of Prince Ejain. "Though the situation is still dire and he can't move freely yet, things will be different this time around. The powers he's awakened will greatly assist him in protecting himself."

Moreover, as he had secured the support of Emperor Keilusa, he shouldn't face as much resistance as before.

Yuder nodded, pondering the future of Prince Ejain.

"Yes, that's good to hear."

"Is that the end of it?"

Kishiar's question seemed to hint at a desire for a different answer. Yuder blinked a few times before asking, "Is there anything more you'd like me to say?"

"I just thought you might be more curious about his well-being, now that you and he have become close."

"I never asked for this position. I find the news of the Prince's safety to be sufficient."

With his Awakener powers considered among the best for self-protection, it was likely that Ejain would no longer face the same dangers as before. Perhaps it was now more constructive to think about how quickly the prince could end the struggle for the throne of Nelarn and stabilize internal affairs.

Kishiar smiled gently at Yuder's response.

"Alright, I understand."

"Then, I'll take my leave."

Yuder bowed and turned to leave. Just as he reached the door, he heard his name.

"Yuder."

He turned his head and saw a man standing near a window, radiant in the sunlight filtering in.

"Don't forget, the doors here are always open."

"..."

"Always."

Yuder suspected that this might have been what Kishiar most wanted to say.

"...Yes."

Yuder slowly nodded and stepped out of the room, feeling a warm sensation rising within him.

...

Back at the training ground, Yuder singled out the individuals he was looking for and told them to follow him. Gakane and the Eldore siblings didn't seem surprised, likely suspecting why they had been called, but Devran appeared quite anxious.

"What's going on? Why did you call me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, it's not that."

Yuder reassured him and led them toward the medical unit.

"I have to bring one more person, so wait here for a moment. We'll discuss everything in detail afterward."

"There's another person to fetch from here?"

Ignoring Devran's uneasy voice, Yuder knocked on the door of the medical unit.

"Welcome! Did you get injured during training?"

A cheerful Lusan greeted him.

"No, where is Enon?"

"If it's Enon you're looking for—"

"Why am I being sought?"

A curtain was pulled aside to reveal a gruff face lying on a patient bed.

"Why are you lying there?"

"I'm recovering from fatigue after being forcibly taken on a long journey. Is there a reason I can't lie here?"

"Let's talk for a moment."

"Who are the other people you brought outside?"

"They are here to hear the same thing as you."

At these words, something seemed to click for Enon, who shook his head vehemently.

"No. I won't do it."

"I haven't even said what it is yet."

"I can smell that you're going to ask me to do something tedious. I'm already tired enough from working here; I won't do any more."

"Sir Enon, at least listen to what Sir Yuder has to say before making a decision. You came all this way," Lusan interjected with a chuckle. It seemed he had come to know very well that Enon's grumbling wasn't out of genuine anger. Yuder exhaled softly as he looked at Enon, who had turned his head away.

"Here, catch."

Enon reflexively caught the object Yuder threw at him. Upon realizing what it was, he let out a sigh. A lemon, bright yellow and aromatic, glistened in his hand.

'I did well to grab a lemon from the cafeteria before heading to the training ground.'

"Eat it, and we'll go."

"You little—since returning from the West, you've grown crafty."

Enon grumbled and showed irritation, but eventually, he sat up and took a bite. His once furrowed brows relaxed, and his expression softened.

"Ah, fine, I'll go. Just know that if it's not important, I'll leave right after hearing it," Enon said as he approached, a trace of an indistinct expression aimed at Yuder's face.

"By the way, what did you do during your vacation?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Something seems—"

Enon paused, seemingly noticing Lusan who was eavesdropping on their conversation.

"No, let's talk after this is done."

Yuder and Enon exited the medical quarters. Outside, the four waiting people watched Enon chew on the lemon and exchanged a variety of expressions.

"Now that we're all here, let's go up."

Yuder led them to the break room and took a seat. Since all the members were in the middle of training, the place was empty.

"First, let me explain why I've gathered you all here. Some may already know, but some may not."

Yuder began explaining, gauging the expressions on Devran and Enon's faces.

Turning

Chapter 489

The expressions of those who had heard about the authority granted from Kishiar, its contents, and the intention to establish a new intelligence department within the Cavalry, were varied.

There was Gakane, with his sunken face; the Eldore siblings, who couldn't conceal their excitement as they exchanged glances; and Devran, who couldn't hide his bewilderment at the sudden proposal.

Among them, the only one showing no change in expression was Enon, who spoke first.

"Intelligence, huh? You must have a very specific need if you're planning to start this now. What information are you after?"

"I'll tell you once you've definitively agreed to be a part of this."

"Of course we're in!"

"We've been waiting for today!"

The Eldore siblings exclaimed, raising their voices. Gakane, who was expected to agree as well, hesitated oddly.

"Gakane. What about you?"

"Uh? I... "

Only then did Gakane lift his head, rubbing his temples as he sighed.

"Uh, yeah. I want to participate. Of course."

He accepted, but his response was peculiar. Yuder narrowed his eyes subtly and began to scrutinize Gakane's face more carefully than before. The Eldore siblings also wore similar expressions as they threw a question.

"Gakane. You've been going on and on about wanting to do this with Yuder. Why do you sound so hesitant now that the time has come?"

"Are you still hurting from that injury? We saw your shadow flickering during training earlier!"

"No, it's not that. Did I... really say that?"

"You did! Repeatedly!"

"Uh, honestly, you did seem to make a lot of mistakes today."

Devran, who had been silent until now, also agreed. Faced with this, Gakane turned his uneasy eyes toward Yuder. Yuder observed Gakane's face, which looked paler than usual, before speaking.

"Gakane. I initially asked you because I thought you'd be suitable for this, but if you're feeling burdened or have difficulties participating, it's okay not to. I won't hold it against you."

"No, I really wanted to. I'm glad you formally proposed it. But... well..."

Gakane trailed off, his head lowered as he mumbled, seemingly overwhelmed by the gazes upon him.

"Ever since I heard what the Commander said this morning, I've been worried... and I couldn't focus because of it. I'm sorry."

"The Commander's words?"

"..."

Yuder wanted to ask specifically what he was referring to, but he sensed that pushing further would only make Gakane more uncomfortable. It was an intuition gained from his long-standing experience as a Commander.

'Anyway, he seems to want to participate in the intelligence unit. I'll have to talk to him later about why he's so down.'

"Alright, understood. It seems your intent to participate is clear."

Yuder decided to move on at that point. Devran, upon making eye contact, slightly hunched his shoulders but then straightened up assertively.

"Devran. There's something I'd like to ask you before I hear your answer."

"What is it?"

"The Commander actually recommended you for this. He praised your performance in the recent mission with Steiber, saying you did an excellent job gathering intelligence."

"Oh, really? The Commander... I see!"

Finally, Devran seemed to understand why he had been summoned, his face brightening up.

"I'd like to hear more about that mission if you don't mind."

"In comparison to you all who've been flying around in the west, what I've done isn't particularly noteworthy. But if you want to hear it..."

Devran was among the small group of members who had stayed in the capital, including Steiber. Originally, their role was to guard the Cavalry headquarters and only head west when a request for reinforcement came in. Therefore, they didn't have much to do on a regular basis.

However, the situation changed one day when Steiber received a letter containing a secret mission directive from Kishiar. Kishiar had selected both Steiber and Devran for an undercover job at a high-end gambling establishment frequented by a particular nobleman.

"A high-end gambling establishment?"

"Wow, that must have been fun. How was it?"

"Fun, my foot. The nobles had all the fun, and I was left cleaning up their trash and serving drinks! But they did pay well, so it was bearable."

Steiber and Devran took jobs at the establishment and waited for the nobleman and his Southern foreign companion to make an appearance. After a period of diligent waiting, they finally succeeded in observing the nobleman and the foreign merchant who accompanied him.

"Because Steiber was too old to get a job that allowed access to the main hall, he went in as a chef. I was the only one who could keep an eye on those people. So, I thought I should scrutinize anything even remotely suspicious."

Drawing on his accumulated experience, Devran studied the relationship between the nobleman and the Southern merchant. He noticed that their relationship was somewhat peculiar for what should have been a typical patron-client interaction.

"From what I saw, it was a bit strange. A noble of that rank relying so heavily on one person's advice? Asking him about what games to play, how many chips to bet, even how to move in those games? I got the impression that the foreigner was suspicious."

Devran grinned as if recalling the moment.

"So, I consulted with Steiber and said that since the guy seemed sketchy, I would discreetly follow him. But whether he sensed it or not, he slipped away. Never saw him at that place again."

"Hmm."

Kishiar clearly had good reason to recommend Devran. The ability to quickly recognize suspicious activities and decide how to act was not a skill easily acquired.

'He could be useful with the right training.'

"Thanks for sharing. Now I see why the Commander recommended you. So, are you willing to join us?"

Caught off-guard by the unexpected compliment, Devran's face registered surprise. Quickly, he tried to mask his pleasure.

"Sure. If Yuder values my skills so highly, how could I refuse?"

"Devran. If you're happy, just show it."

"Fine. My nostrils are practically double their normal size, I'm so thrilled. Shall I shout it out for you?"

"What are you talking about! When did I—"

The Eldore siblings, who had been tormenting a downcast Gakane, had found a new target for teasing in Devran. In the meantime, Yuder turned his head toward Enon, who was sitting with a somewhat haughty posture, his arms crossed.

"Now it's just you left."

"..."

"Since you haven't left, can I take that as consent?"

"...Sigh."

Enon let out a deep sigh and finally spoke.

"Let me ask you one thing. Do you think I'm really necessary? I'm not an Awakener."

"You know a lot about that world. It's good to accept help when it's offered."

"I have medical duties and other responsibilities. I can't follow you around full-time like these guys. Is that still fine?"

This was almost like permission. Since Yuder had no plans to move with the other members in the first place, he quickly responded, "That's fine."

"You belong to the intelligence division, but I intend to give you the freedom to operate separately. I'll inform you of what needs to be investigated, but you're free to pursue it in whatever way you wish, just like before."

"And I'll share the results, I presume?"

"..."

"You really know how to make good use of me."

How did I end up stuck with this bothersome guy? The complaint that Enon had voiced several times before once again slipped quietly from his lips.

Nevertheless, in the end, Enon accepted Yuder's request.

"Fine. I got it. But don't expect me to attend annoying meetings like this again. If you have anything to tell me, just contact me directly."

"Understood. Thanks, Enon."

"..."

Instead of responding, Enon aggressively chewed on the last remaining piece of lemon peel.

"Then it's decided that everyone will participate. Thank you for accepting."

"So, can we now hear what our first task for investigation will be? Tell us quickly!"

At Hinn's eager request, Yuder scanned everyone's faces once before sharing their first assignment.

"A while ago, we acquired some information. Our job is to follow where that information leads, find our target, and gather whatever intelligence we can."

"Information?"

"Yes, specifically this."

Yuder pulled out a piece of paper that had a decrypted note from Duke Tain's message that he had remembered.

"Um... this alone doesn't tell us what or who the target is. I can't even guess."

"Is it an address? A time?"

"I have a rough idea of where we need to go. And who we need to find. I'll inform you of that shortly. And one more thing."

Yuder continued cautiously.

"The investigation isn't just one thing. Aside from this, there's something else I'd like you to look into personally."

Turning

Chapter 490

"Another one here?"

"You'll know when you see it, Finn."

Yuder flipped the paper, revealing the emblem sketched on the back. It was the emblem of a Southern tribe that Finn had discovered.

"Ah! That's the one I found!"

"What is it?"

"It's the emblem inside the lodging of the Southern merchants who came to Tainu! I sneaked in and found it on Yuder's request!"

In response to Devran's question, Finn proudly answered and then slightly tilted his head.

"But why? You never said anything about it after everything was over. So I thought it wasn't a big deal..."

"After personal investigation, I found out that this is the emblem of a certain tribe in the South."

The Southern merchants who had fled Tainu were currently being pursued by the Tainu Knights. Upon hearing that Yuder thought it best to conduct further investigations unique to their own Cavalry, the Eldore siblings and Devran's eyes sparkled to the point of being uncomfortable.

"That's true! They're Awakeners too, so it's good for us to take on this job!"

"It's a perfect start!"

"Did you do all this alone during your vacation, Yuder? You should have called us!"

Although what he had done during his vacation was a different matter, Yuder made no mention of it. Instead, he cautioned against making their investigation too flashy and reminded them not to neglect their training for this.

"Move in pairs or groups when conducting investigations. Except for Enon, everyone should be accompanied by either me or someone else. If you must leave alone for some unavoidable reason, leave a signal you learned during training."

"Wow... I've only learned it but never got to use it. This will be fun."

"Don't just think it'll be fun. This is the real deal."

"I know! I was just saying it's exciting, Yuder!"

Finn raised his hand and grinned.

"Don't worry! We'll start with the library!"

Although slightly worried, Yuder knew the Eldore siblings were incredibly reliable when it came to completing tasks, despite their mischievous demeanor in their past lives.

It wouldn't be much different in this lifetime.

Yuder exhaled softly and flipped the paper back over. Information from Duke Diarca's note was revealed again.

"Now, everyone, focus. I'll explain more about the parts written here."

He pointed to a line of numbers and text, capturing everyone's attention.

"It may look complicated with all the numbers, but the meaning is simple once you understand. This indicates the day this month when the water of the Sixth Wall's fountains will change, this is the time, and this is the address of the 148th building located on the 4th Knight's road in the Fifth Wall. The last number is the amount: 500,000."

"So, it's the details of a transaction?"

"Exactly."

Devran proudly shrugged, having guessed correctly.

"So who's conducting this transaction?"

"The sender of this transaction promise is Duke Diarca, and the recipients are unidentified healers who are busy treating the Crown Prince, whose health is not good these days. The ones we need to investigate are those healers."

Eyes widened in unison among the members, surprised at the gravity of the source of the information.

"Diarca? The Duke?"

"The Crown Prince?"

"The day the fountains of the Twelve Sages in the Sixth Wall change their water is tomorrow. In other words, if we go to this address at the time indicated here, we will surely see them conducting the transaction."

"Uh... so we're going there too?"

"Yes."

"What do we have to do? Raid the deal and catch them?"

"No. What we're doing is surveilling the scene and following the healers. If I'm right, they're likely Awakeners, making it hard to track them. Don't underestimate the job."

A tense silence fell, punctuated by someone loudly swallowing their saliva.

"We'll meet after lunch tomorrow at the entrance of the Imperial Knights headquarters. Make sure you slip out without drawing attention. You can bring anything helpful, but do it discreetly."

"We'll wear civilian clothes, right?"

"Yes."

"Great! See you then!"

The members got up from their seats. Yuder tried to detain Gakane to ask about a concern he had, but just then, Enon spoke up.

"Don't you have something to talk about with me?"

Although Eldore siblings and Devran momentarily showed curious expressions, they courteously made themselves scarce. Gakane, who also wore a grim face, did the same.

'Darn, I missed my chance.'

As Yuder was watching his back, Enon clicked his tongue and spoke.

"If you're concerned about the redhead, catch him alone later. People like him get shy under public scrutiny. It would be counterproductive to talk now."

"How did you know I wanted to talk to Gakane?"

"Kids your age are an open book."

No point arguing about being called kids; it would never have made sense to Enon. Yuder decided to give up on detaining Gakane and sat back down.

"Alright, what did you want to talk about?"

"First, give me your hand. Take off your glove."

Enon straightened his posture and examined Yuder's hand, measured his forehead temperature, and scrutinized his face earnestly. Yuder could only speak after Enon finally let go of his hand.

"Is something wrong?"

"Your soul, actually."

Enon responded with a furrowed brow.

"It's in far better condition compared to before your vacation. What exactly have you been doing?"

'My soul is in better condition?'

Considering Enon had always warned about his soul's instability and possible dire consequences, this was unbelievable news. But something must have changed during the vacation.

'There's only one factor that comes to mind.'

Yuder hesitated briefly before speaking.

"The only unusual thing was spending time with the Commander."

"Commander? But you two shouldn't have been together for the entire vacation. You weren't working. Even if you shared a room in the west... this is too much..."

"..."

Seeing Yuder's silent face, something seemed to click for Enon. His eyes twitched as if sensing something, then scrutinized Yuder once more with a piercing gaze.

"Wait. Could it be... you..."

"..."

Enon abruptly stood up from his seat.