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Chapter 51

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

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

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

Yuder also made a plausible conjecture amidst the silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good. Raise your heads."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why bring up such old stories?"

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

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

"We are humbled."

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

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

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

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

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

"We are humbled!"

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

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

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

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

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

"..."

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

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

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

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

"I want time."

"Time?"

The Emperor questioned back, puzzled.

"Yes. I want to examine this further."

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

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

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

Kishiar chuckled softly, provocatively retorting.

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

"..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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"Duke of Peletta, this is no joke. Answer my question."

"Very well. If something unsavory occurs while my Cavalry and I are investigating, I will take responsibility and step down from my position as Commander. Does that sound acceptable?"

His response was straightforward, but it only served to harden the Emperor's already grim expression. He stared at Kishiar for a long moment before letting out a deep sigh. That sigh bore down heavily on the shoulders of the Cavalry members, like a weighty burden.

"You have ten days."

"That's not enough time. If you're granting a favor, please extend it a bit more."

The Emperor's brows furrowed as if looking at a disobedient child. Yuder thought that Kishiar's audacity had finally tested the Emperor's patience, but he remained silent before speaking again.

"One month. Not a day more."

Only then did Kishiar turn to look at his men. It was a casual gesture, as if he wanted to gauge their reaction. His gaze met Yuder's, and his expression subtly changed.

Is this acceptable? His eyes seemed to ask. Yuder gave a tiny nod. Kishiar promptly straightened up and bowed.

"Your Majesty, I appreciate your understanding."

After smoothly ending the conversation, Kishiar rose from his place. The Cavalry members quickly followed suit, straightening their bent backs and legs.

"You may now leave. I have a few matters to discuss privately with His Majesty."

Kishiar's words were not surprising as they had been briefed before they arrived. The men did not panic and immediately bowed before the Emperor and withdrew.

"Follow me."

As soon as they left the Emperor's presence, Nathan, with his stolid expression, raised his hand to call them. Yuder and the other men quietly followed.

"Are we returning to the carriage to wait for the Commander now?"

After they had moved a considerable distance and were about to exit the seventh palace, Hinn finally decided it was safe to voice her curiosity and asked Nathan.

"We will return to the carriage, but we won't wait for the Commander there."

"Then where?"

"We're heading to the Black Pigeon in the Second Wall."

Nathan's response was concise and calm.

"The Black Pigeon?"

"What's that?"

"Do you remember going to the Blue Crown when you registered for the Cavalry test? It's similar but higher up. It's where all the affairs of the nation are processed."

In response to the curious Eldore siblings, Gakane kindly answered. True to his word, the Black Pigeon was one of the core institutions that upheld the Orr Empire. It handled administration and diplomacy, as well as all other minor affairs that needed to be dealt with in the palace.

Yuder surmised that Nathan was heading there because it was probably related to the palace's internal affairs, which dealt with the running of the imperial household.

'The Emperor's order will require administrative work, so the sooner, the better.'

"I see. Why is it named that way?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure about that....."

Gakane scratched his head and flashed an embarrassed smile. Just as Nathan, who probably knew the answer, was about to reply with an indifferent face, someone unexpectedly chimed in.

"...It's because they're constantly sending and receiving messages, working without rest. The name is an old joke that the pigeons worked so much, they didn't even have time to clean themselves, so they became black with dirt."

"Kanna?"

Gakane and the Eldore siblings turned in surprise. Kanna, who had been following silently with her head bowed until now, had spoken for the first time.

"How did you know that?"

"A long time ago, I heard it somewhere."

Kanna's response was soft and vague. Gakane and the Eldore siblings seemed to accept her answer, but Nathan closed his mouth with a peculiar expression. Yuder, too, narrowed his eyes.

'She heard it somewhere...'

Even if he had responded, his answer would probably have been just as evasive.

However, the reason Yuder knew the answer was because he had worked and lingered in the palace in his previous life, gaining all sorts of information. A commoner, growing up normally without a family name, wouldn't have known it even by chance.

Rumors associated with the name of the Blue Crown official could be picked up by the commoners living nearby. But the Black Pigeon official was different.

Even Gakane, who had grown up in a reputable family, was unaware of such minor and meaningless information. What was Kanna doing knowing it? What was he supposed to think?

Only then did Yuder realize that he knew absolutely nothing about Kanna's family circumstances or personal information. Thanks to his memories from his previous life, he knew at least a little about the information of the other Cavalry members, but Kanna was a person he met for the first time in this life. Unlike Gakane, she did not freely discuss her own information.

He had thought her a sociable person who got along easily with any colleague, but it was surprising to realize that she had this secretive side. If even Yuder was surprised, how had the others felt?

'The most likely possibilities are... she was related to someone working in the palace, or she hid her identity. It must be one of the two.'

The latter was less likely. Before the last name bestowment ceremony, Kisihar would have thoroughly checked the identity of each Cavalry member to be bestowed upon.

Kisihar La Orr, who seemed to be a carefree person who only knew how to laugh on the outside, was actually more meticulous and careful in his work than anyone else.

It was his nature to investigate again before the bestowment ceremony, even if it was a matter that had already been investigated when accepting them into the Cavalry. So if he had investigated Kanna and concluded she was a commoner, there was no need to doubt that.

Therefore, Yuder decided to put more weight on the possibility of the former.

'Those who work within the palace, or who have enough access to know the detailed internal affairs, are all nobles. But in the case of the Black Pigeon official, there are also middle-ranking managers and deputies who are chosen for their competence.'

In a few years, the Awakeners would break into key positions and receive titles, changing the situation, but so far, that was the structure.

So if Kanna was related to one of them, the likelihood was high that she was among those of the suspected status.

'It might be a completely different third possibility... Whatever the situation, I hope it's not a big problem.'

Yuder's gaze turned to Kanna, who wore a dark expression. Nathan, who had been leading them silently and skillfully crossing the paths between palaces, stopped at that moment and raised a hand.

"We are nearing the boundary of the wall. I will represent us during the inspection, so all you need to do is stay quiet behind me."

As they had been riding the imperial carriage until now and hadn't had to face an inspection directly, a slight tension swept over the faces of the members. As Nathan had said, the inspection post was soon revealed.

Inside the first wall, where only the imperial family resided in the palace, it was extremely quiet, with hardly anyone wishing to come or go. The expressions of the knights guarding the checkpoint were utterly relaxed.

"I'd like to head towards the second wall."

"What is your name?"

"I am Nathan Zuckerman, an adjutant of Duke Peletta."

The knights' gaze shifted from Nathan, who was clad in armor adorned with the duke's family crest, towards the Cavalry members wearing identical black uniforms. They merely glanced at the Cavalry members, not bothering to ask for their names.

"Understood. Please pass through."

The members of the Cavalry were surprised at how easily they were granted passage. Yuder realized from the knights' glances that they had assumed the Cavalry members were new recruits brought along by Nathan, but he decided to say nothing.

After all, Nathan had probably anticipated this and had offered to undergo the checkpoint procedures first. Being mistaken was actually beneficial for them as it expedited the checkpoint process.

Nathan courteously bowed his head in a gesture of acknowledgment before striding past the checkpoint without hesitation.

As soon as they passed through the checkpoint, the path widened dramatically, and the number of people passing by exploded. Huge buildings of various architectural styles were revealed.

The empire's court, built immediately after the founding of the empire, was clean and majestic with a single floor, while the new building of the Palace Magic Corps boasted a dizzying height of over ten floors. They were side by side, forming a harmonious blend that was typical of the second wall district.

'An area where all the institutions representing the empire gather...'

Yuder murmured the nickname of the area within the second wall as he looked around.

'It's been a while. With time, the Cavalry headquarters will appear among them.'

He turned his head towards the location where the Cavalry headquarters had been in his memory. Now, it was just an inconspicuous small auxiliary palace. In his previous life, that palace had been expanded and increased in floors to become the Cavalry headquarters.

The headquarters managed the operations of the Cavalry branches scattered throughout the empire and took on missions requiring coordination with other institutions. Yuder's official office had also been located there.

"Have we already crossed the wall?"

"I didn't see anything, how did that happen?"

Eldore siblings, who were distracted by the surrounding scenery, belatedly realized that they had fully entered the second district and were taken aback. Nathan, who had been walking silently, seemed to think he should answer their question, so he slightly slowed his pace and opened his mouth.

"We have already crossed the wall."

"When?"

"Just after we passed the checkpoint. The first wall is said to be in the form of a road paved with special magical stones, forming a circle and covering the entire area. They built a garden over it to deliberately conceal it, so it's natural that you wouldn't have noticed its existence."

"Ah..."

Only then did the Eldore siblings' expressions change, as if they had just remembered that the garden around the Sun Palace had been unusually long. Gakane, who had been quietly listening, also seemed excited by this new information, his cheeks flushing slightly.

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"If passing through is this simple, anyone could infiltrate the First Wall. Isn't His Majesty too exposed to danger?"

"No, that's not the case. The First Wall is more secure against outside intrusion than any other."

"How so?"

"Well..."

Nathan was about to answer when he closed his mouth, his gaze drawn to the massive gate visible in the near distance.

"We've arrived at the Black Pigeon. You'll gradually learn more about the walls as you accumulate experience."

The Black Pigeon was one of the more spacious institutions within the second district. Numerous visitors and officials scurried between the complex of buildings, and messenger pigeons, each with a small tube attached to its leg, flitted ceaselessly between the open windows and rooftops.

While they weren't black pigeons, as the name suggested, the constant movement of the messenger pigeons gave a clear hint to the origin of the name.

Nathan exchanged a few words with the guard at the entrance before he returned.

"We need to head to the Inner Palace, which manages the affairs of the Imperial Palace. Shall we?"

As Yuder had suspected, Nathan seemed to have come with the intention of delivering the Emperor's directive and receiving any necessary replies. The Inner Palace was one of the nearest buildings, so they were almost there.

"Wait, just a moment. Sir Nathan!"

Just as they were about to follow Nathan, Kanna suddenly raised her voice from behind. She stood rooted to the spot, stubbornly lowering her head as she continued to speak.

"I feel... my physical condition has suddenly worsened. If it's alright, could I rest here for a while? It's not necessary for all of us to go there, right?"

Kanna's pale face looked truly sickly, but Yuder didn't believe her. Given her peculiar behavior since before they arrived at the Imperial Palace, her words were almost certainly a lie. Nathan also seemed to think the same, tilting his head with a calm expression.

"...It might be dangerous to stay here alone."

"No, it won't be dangerous. We're in second district, who would harm me here? I just need to sit on that bench over there for a moment, and I should be fine. Still... is that not okay?"

Cold sweat glistened on Kanna's face as she shook her head. Nathan remained silent in response, seemingly pondering whether to directly ask Kanna about the reason for her strange behavior.

'He must be quite troubled about how to handle a newcomer from a different department.'

Nathan was merely an adjutant of Duke Peletta, strictly speaking, not a member of the Cavalry. Dealing with people outside of one's own department was always a tricky task, and Kanna was even a newcomer. It was quite reasonable that he would be unsure about how to address someone who might not even know the palace's rules.

'Besides, he can't afford to waste much time considering we have a place to visit immediately.'

Having thought this far, Yuder quickly came to a conclusion.

'It seems I should stay back.'

The Nathan that Yuder remembered was not particularly eloquent. Yuder was no different, but he had a better rapport with Kanna, thus he was less likely to upset her.

The reason was unknown, but seeing Kanna reluctant to go into the inner palace suggested that the cause of the problem might lie there. Therefore, it seemed much better for him to stay and converse with her, attempting to uncover the cause of her unusual behavior.

"I'll stay here with Kanna. Wouldn't that be acceptable?"

"..."

"No, no, it's fine Yuder! You don't need to..."

"Kanna, it's dangerous to leave an unwell comrade alone, no matter where. But if there are two of us, even Nathan would worry less."

Confronted with Yuder's meaningful gaze, Kanna fell silent.

Quick-witted as she was, she realized it was better to compromise and heed Yuder's words rather than persist stubbornly. However, seeing her reaction, other squad members stepped up as well.

"Hey, if we don't have to go, I'll stay here and protect Kanna too."

"Me too. If all we need to do is quietly wait here, right?"

"I want to help, too. I won't move an inch from here."

As the squad members quickly grew louder, Nathan furrowed his brow.

"Your camaraderie is impressive... but I can't leave everyone here. If you really need to rest because you're unwell, it would be best to ask the Commander's assistant for help. I'll leave it to you."

Nathan was not a fool. He had roughly understood the hidden meaning in Yuder's words and seemed to judge it better to leave Kanna with him.

If all the Cavalry stayed, a tense Kanna might not open up, but with only one person, her guard could be considerably lowered, especially if it was a familiar comrade.

Furthermore, by mentioning the role of the Commander's assistant as a reason to leave Yuder alone, he had cut off any chance of rebuttal. There was likely no room for further discussion.

"I understand."

As Yuder had predicted, the remaining three members, although disappointed, soon accepted the situation. Leaving words of care for Kanna, they followed Nathan inside.

"We'll be back soon, so wait quietly over there!"

Yuder watched their retreating figures until they disappeared from sight, then turned his head. Kanna's face was still full of anxiety. A brief glimpse of extreme fear could be felt in her eyes as she surveyed the passing people.

"Now that it's just the two of us, can you tell me honestly what's going on?"

"What? What are you talking about? Nothing's wrong. I'm just not feeling well....."

Startled by Yuder's words, Kanna lowered her head, but no one would believe her words. Yuder, looking at her in terror, sighed softly.

'I wouldn't have cared in the past.'

But now was different. He was the one who brought Kanna into the Cavalry. Therefore, he had to take responsibility for this unusual situation.

"Did you betray the Cavalry?"

Staring at her quietly, Yuder suddenly asked a question. Kanna's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

"What?"

"Or did you kill an innocent person?"

"No!"

"Then there should be no problem for you, Kanna. The reason I remain here is to help you. Don't tell me you think nobody noticed your peculiar behavior? The sooner you reveal it, the more time we'll have to devise a plan. No matter what you say, I'm certain I won't be surprised, so I wish you'd speak up."

Kanna could only look at Yuder's composed face, lost for words. From the moment Yuder hinted he'd stay with her, she'd anticipated he would say something, but she hadn't expected to hear such words.

Yuder's voice was always calm and cool, yet it held a peculiar power, as if imbued with strange magic. Upon hearing about going to the imperial palace, even the thoughts that had been tormenting her seemed ready to fly away momentarily.

But if there really had been no problem... such an event wouldn't have occurred. Kanna bit her lip and lowered her head, temporarily wavering. She regained her composure just as she was about to open her mouth.

Her anxiety being discovered was embarrassing, but this wasn't the sort of issue that could be improved by telling others.

"Really... it's nothing... it's not even something worth getting help for."

'Saying it's not worth getting help for, it must be related to her personal affairs.'

Yuder could clearly see what was going through Kanna's mind. If it had been like before, he would've had his underlings investigate the troubled individual and solve the problem, but now, being alone, he couldn't. However, that didn't mean there was nothing he could do.

"Who is it?"

"Huh?"

"Seeing as you don't want to enter the palace, I guess the cause must be there. Who is it? Family? Relative? Friend?"

"What, what are you talking about, Yuder?"

"The most likely is family."

The awkward smile that had been on Kanna's face vanished in an instant. Seeing her tightly clasp her pale hands and look lost, he knew he had hit the mark.

"I really don't know what you're trying to say. Stop talking nonsense. We told Sir Nathan we'd be waiting quietly on the bench. I, I'll sit."

"Kanna, a problem of a Cavalry member soon becomes a problem for the whole Cavalry. Sir Nathan has noticed the anomaly too, so it's only a matter of time before the Commander finds out and asks. Is that what you want?"

"..."

Kanna's steps faltered.

"We can end it quickly before the Commander finds out if you tell me now. Who is it in this place that's causing you to act like this?"

The two figures, noticeably dressed in black uniforms and raising their voices, attracted quite a bit of attention at the entrance of the Black Pigeon, where many people were coming and going. Of course, Yuder had intended for this to happen, though the response came quicker than expected.

"But I told you, it's nothing...!"

"Kanna?"

Hearing the sudden voice behind her, Kanna froze and clenched her jaw.

Yuder saw a middle-aged man and his servant standing suspiciously behind her. They had apparently just arrived, their carriage still behind them.

'That's him.'

In an instant, Yuder sensed a blood relation between the man and Kanna. The neatly groomed, slightly greying hair at the temples, the overall golden-brown locks identical to Kanna's, and the highly similar facial features.

Crucially, the man was dressed in the uniform worn by the palace's internal managers. He might have appeared gentle and elegant like a noble gentleman on the surface, but his eyes were as cold and arrogant as the winter wind, leaving an unfavorable impression.

"Kanna. I didn't want to believe it, but it really is you. I can't believe it."

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The man lifted his staff, embedded with a transparent magic stone, and moved slowly. With each soft sound of the staff's end meeting the ground, the color drained from Kanna's face.

Having ascertained this, Yuder reached for the hood hanging on Kanna's uniform and pulled it over her head. The moment the large hood concealed her face, Kanna gasped and swallowed.

"Don't say a word."

Yuder murmured softly, just loud enough for her to hear, then stepped forward towards the approaching man. This position naturally allowed him to shield Kanna behind him.

"What's going on here?"

"Who are you?"

Despite not knowing Yuder's affiliation or status, the man talked down to him. This meant he was looking at him in a belittling manner.

"I am Yuder Aile, affiliated with the Cavalry. And you are?"

"The Cavalry?"

The man tilted his head as if hearing the name for the first time, then let out a sound of realization a moment later.

"Ah, right. That group collected by His Grace, Duke Peletta..."

He left the rest unsaid, but the underlying tone was clearly negative. Yuder coldly looked at his face while subtly glancing down at his gloved hand.

'He dares to ignore my question twice. In the past, I would have immediately forced him to his knees...'

Not that he couldn't do it now. His hand itched to act, but the sound of shaky breaths from the hooded figure behind him held him back.

"There's no need for pleasantries. The woman behind you is from my household. She committed a crime recently and ran away. We couldn't find her until now. Step aside, so I can take her."

Kanna's trembling breaths abruptly stopped. Yuder briefly glanced back at her before returning his gaze to the man. Seeing Yuder's nonchalant demeanor, the man commanded with a ruthless attitude once more.

"Didn't you hear me? I said to step aside."

"Heh, don't you hear the Count's words? Step aside!"

The servant standing next to the man also raised his voice. Nevertheless, Yuder remained stationary, not budging an inch.

"Are you deaf?"

"There's no need for you to deal with these lowly beings yourself, Master. I will go..."

"Can you prove it?"

Finally, Yuder spoke.

"What?"

"How can you assure that the person behind me is the one you've been looking for?"

The moment Yuder's deep, gloomy voice echoed through the air, everyone who had been watching felt a chilling intensity that made them shiver uncontrollably.

The man who introduced himself as Yuder Aile felt incongruous, like a single incorrectly placed piece in a perfect puzzle.

Two pitiless eyes under jet-black hair. The dark shadow cast beneath them was terrifying, as if merely meeting his gaze could steal away one's soul. His ghostly pale face was equally unnerving.

Yet, this ominous and intense emotion made it impossible for anyone to look away from Yuder. No one had paid him any attention until now, but once recognized, everything about him appeared different.

Despite being right in front of them, he seemed like a shadow with no presence - appearing inconsequential yet, upon closer inspection, swallowing something terrifying like the darkness. Someone unconsciously swallowed their saliva.

Who on earth was this person? Many who hadn't heard Yuder's self-introduction simultaneously wondered.

"Sir...You cover her with a hat to hide her, and now you want to argue?"

The servant who had been confidently trying to drag Kanna from behind Yuder stuttered, barely managing a response. He didn't even realize he had unconsciously used honorific language.

"You came out of nowhere and tried to take her without even confirming whether she's the person you're looking for. I didn't know that a nobleman of the palace, like yourself, could just take anyone within the imperial palace without even revealing their name."

Yuder didn't show the slightest sign of fear or confusion. His chilly words caused a murmur to spread among the crowd.

"A nobleman from the palace?"

"A nobleman was trying to take someone? Who is it?"

Realizing that the attention of the crowd was focused on his master, the servant's face turned pale.

"Ma... Master."

Contempt and anger dwelled in the eyes of the Count, who resembled Kanna. If there had been no witnesses, he would have simply ignored the situation and done as he pleased. Unfortunately, this was in front of the Black Pigeon, one of the busiest places in District 2.

Once the attention had been drawn, he had to act considering his status and dignity.

"It seems there's a misunderstanding. My servant must have misspoken, but he didn't mean it. I am Hank Gallon, a Second Class Official of the palace."

He was still condescending, but his tone had changed to a somewhat polite one, seemingly mindful of the onlookers. Yuder searched his memory for the name Gallon.

'Gallon... Gallon. Right. He was a Count, that much is certain.'

To perform all sorts of secret missions close to the emperor, one had to be well aware of the political landscape both inside and outside the empire.

Remembering all the influential families in the empire was part of the necessary preparations for this. Yuder ransacked his memory before speaking.

"So, you are Count Gallon."

"I apologize for the sudden request, but that woman you saw earlier is undoubtedly a member of my household that I lost. If you allow me to confirm her face, it will quickly become clear whether my claim is correct."

The only information about Count Gallon that remained in Yuder's memory was that his family had lived quietly in the capital for a long time. Even if they had never been at the center of politics, they had neither taken the initiative to cause trouble. They seemed to have conducted themselves wisely.

Moreover, the palace was a place where only nobles with at least five generations of confirmed lineage could enter, as they directly handled imperial affairs. The power they could wield was limited, but it was good for elevating their honor.

'He didn't refer to her as a blood relative, but specifically as a member of his household. This means their relationship isn't something that can be openly discussed.'

Considering Kanna's reaction, it was clear that she had been acting strange since arriving here, perhaps fearing she would encounter this person. Yuder made up his mind and shook his head with a brazen expression.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"Excuse me?"

"My companion comes from humble origins, and has just recently received a last name and recognition from His Majesty. Why are you so sure that she belongs to your family, Count? Our Cavalry verifies the

identity of all its members, so it's hard to believe there's a criminal among us. What is this crime you speak of in the first place?"

"...There's no need for you to know."

"Then naturally, I cannot hand over my companion. To doubt my companion is to doubt our Commander, Duke Peletta. ...Did you come to us with some ulterior motive, Count?"

The people around them murmured as he let his words flow without hesitation. His argument seemed logical and hinted at various meanings.

Was the person implying that the Count had an ulterior motive, that this was a family issue, or was there a hidden intention against Duke Peletta? Or was this just some lustful scheme targeted at a woman who had caught his eye? Tension crept into the hand of the Count, clutching his cane, as curious eyes watched.

"How dare you question my master's intentions!"

"You stand back."

Count Gallon waved his servant away. But his seemingly gentle façade had long since hardened with anger.

"I tried to be respectful, but the way you speak is utterly vulgar. Does your audacity stem from the foolish belief that you're backed by someone of great power?"

"Then why not answer my question? How could my companion behind me possibly be a criminal who has slipped through your fingers?"

"I've already told you. If you remove the hat and reveal the face, all will be clear."

"Answer me first. How will I know the truth if you only speak after you've seen?"

The firm response from Yuder, hinting that he couldn't trust the Count, drove Count Gallon to the brink of fury.

If it were up to him, he would have immediately summoned the palace knights to accomplish his goal. However, he had no choice but to hesitate as more and more eyes turned towards them.

"What did you say? A Count of the palace is eyeing a woman? Targeting someone who works here? How bold, under the watchful eye of the Sun Palace."

"No, they're from the Cavalry. You know, the place that Duke Peletta established a few months ago that caused quite a stir."

"But why is someone from there in a confrontation with the Count?"

"I think he mentioned something about a family issue, but I don't know the details."

Every noble values their reputation and safety above all else. Even if the emperor's health wasn't the best, everything that happened within the palace would reach his ears. The four major ducal families were even more cautious.

The House of Count Gallon had managed to stay unscathed and cleverly navigate through the politics without allying with anyone. It wasn't their intention to stir up unnecessary controversy and expose their weaknesses.

They couldn't afford to reveal their family's secrets to everyone over the pursuit of a young runaway girl.

In the end, Count Gallon decided to take a step back.

"You said you're from the Cavalry, didn't you? Today is not the day, but I will pay a visit there soon. Once I speak with Duke Peletta, the truth will be crystal clear."

Even at the veiled threat, Yuder's expression remained calm. His indifferent and arrogant demeanor, as if such words were no concern to him, made the Count grind his teeth in frustration.

"I'll remember your name."

Turning

Chapter 55

"Do as you will."

In his previous life, there were many who vowed to remember the name of Yuder. However, none among them could lay a finger on him.

"That... that man until the end... Master! Please wait!"

The servant cried out with a horrified face and then dashed after the Count, who had turned his body, stirring up a cold breeze, towards the palace interior. Those who had been spectating lost interest and dispersed when Yuder showed no reaction.

However, a few of them remained, observing Yuder and Kanna with interest. An old man who approached Yuder was among them.

"Do you know this? The Count Gallon's family has held their title for seven generations, and their main house is within the fourth wall, powerful enough to be in the inner sector."

Kanna, who was behind Yuder, stiffened. A weak-looking young man, seemingly accompanying the old man, was watching them, not knowing what to do. Yuder gazed at the old man's face for a moment, then slowly smiled.

"And what does that have to do with me?"

"You're not afraid of making a powerful enemy by hiding your comrade?"

"If I were to put it bluntly, I'd say it's the other way around."

"The other way around?"

The old man, his long white beard giving him an imposing air, evoked the image of a dignified noble family head in his traditional attire. Anyone else might have been intimidated by his presence, but there was no change in Yuder's expression.

"You see, he has made a formidable enemy in me."

"Ha! Such confidence. May I ask what gives you the nerve to say such a thing?"

Why wouldn't he? Yuder opened his mouth with a cool smile.

"Of course, it's the power I possess."

"..."

The old man's eyebrows twitched. A moment later, he burst into hearty laughter, full of admiration.

"Power that transcends status and influence! I'd like to witness this formidable power myself. I hope your words aren't empty promises."

After saying this, the old man patted Yuder's shoulder and headed towards the young man, who had been waiting anxiously.

"Master. You always say that watching a fight is the best, but why did you get involved here? I'm utterly embarrassed...! Do you realize how late we are? By now, everyone else would have gathered...!"

"You fool. What does it matter if I'm late? I've seen the most interesting thing here. How could I simply walk away from that?"

"But...!"

"Quiet, and lead the way, boy."

Yuder quietly watched the young man and the old man bicker and disappear, then turned his head. As if she had been waiting for this moment, Kanna spoke up.

"Yuder. Why did you do that?"

A small voice came from behind Yuder. Kanna was clutching his clothes tightly with her trembling hands. Yuder turned to face her.

"That's why, isn't it? The reason you didn't want to come here."

"Why would you do something like that? You have no idea how tenacious and terrifying that man is! How are we going to handle this...?"

Instead of an answer, a deep sense of despair returned. It was as good as any answer.

"I... I'll speak to the Commander. I'll tell him you're not at fault, Yuder. And I can resign before he comes... Yes, that might work..."

"Resign?"

Yuder turned toward Kanna, who was making an absurd claim, and spoke firmly.

"Why are you trying to quit the squad?"

"But you heard him. He said he would come to the Cavalry...! Aren't you worried?"

Kanna retorted, seemingly unable to understand.

"Didn't you hear what the other person said earlier? About what kind of person Count Gallon is? He's a terrifying person. Really, truly terrifying."

Kanna's fear of Count Gallon seemed to run quite deep. What had she experienced? Yuder lightly tapped on her trembling shoulder, redirecting her gaze back to him.

"It's okay. If he doesn't come, I'd be more disappointed. I introduced myself hoping for that."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter at all what power his family holds. All I'm curious about is your story. Kanna, what is your relationship with that family?"

"Right. I'm quite curious about that situation too. I wish you would tell us soon."

A soft voice interrupted from behind Yuder. At that moment, Kanna retreated in surprise.

"Co-Commander?"

Yuder saw Kishiar, wearing a large purple robe typically worn by court mages, slowly emerging from the shade of the trees.

His striking appearance and outfit suited to conceal his white uniform were one thing, but the surprise was something else. Kanna mumbled with her mouth agape.

"When did you...? No, rather, why are you dressed like that...?"

"Haha. Don't worry about it."

"Have you finished your conversation with His Majesty? Where did you leave the box and the carriage?"

Kishiar shrugged with a smirk at Yuder's sharp question, who, far from being surprised by his appearance, was rather unflustered.

"You're never surprised, which makes things quite boring. The carriage is where it was left, and His Majesty is briefly examining the box. But more importantly, wouldn't you like to discuss this interesting information about a squad member's secret that even I was unaware of?"

Seeing Kishiar's laughter, Kanna's face turned pale again.

"I...I..."

"Hold on. If we talk here, we might draw attention. Come this way. There's a perfect place to talk inside there."

Kishiar leisurely led them and entered the Black Pigeon office through the main entrance. Given the large number of people coming and going, no one recognized or stopped them.

Kishiar, who was walking amidst the crowd, suddenly slipped into a very narrow space between two buildings.

From the outside, it seemed too narrow for anyone to pass, but as they followed him, a path wide enough for a person to walk appeared as if by magic. The narrow gap they'd seen was an illusion created by the overlapping building and shadows.

Upon exiting, surprisingly, a very small open space appeared.

"When buildings are continually constructed and inserted over a long period of time, occasionally unnoticed gaps like this are created. No one will come here, so feel free to talk."

Even Yuder, who was quite familiar with the palace's geography, had never seen this place. It was astonishing.

"How did you know about this place?"

"Forgot, did you? I was born and raised here. Exploring the palace was my favorite pastime as a child."

The Imperial Palace extended to the Second Wall, but the palaces where the emperor and the imperial family resided were mostly within the First Wall. It was unthinkable that a young, noble prince would venture beyond the First Wall for exploration and play.

It was a staggering answer, but it seemed all the more surprising because it was plausible, considering it was Kishiar.

"I'm really sorry, Commander. I didn't mean to cause any trouble for the Cavalry or you. I just... I needed a place to hide."

In the quiet courtyard, Kanna finally removed her large hat with trembling hands and revealed her face. The first thing she did was to bow deeply in apology.

"A place to hide. From Gallon House?"

At Kishiar's question, Kanna nodded difficultly.

"Yes. I don't see any point in hiding anything anymore. As you've probably guessed, I lived in Gallon House. Count Hank Gallon would have been my... father, but I never called him that."

Kanna's story wasn't too different from what Yuder had anticipated. She was born to a maid with whom Hank Gallon had spent a night. The Count did not give Kanna a name or a surname. It was a statement of his complete refusal to recognize her as his own flesh and blood.

Her mother, with a bit of money she received when expelled, rented a small house in the Seventh Wall and raised her daughter. However, three years ago, when her mother died of illness, Kanna had to return to her birth house, where she lived a life of contempt, treated not as a daughter but as a maid.

"I thought that kind of life was better than living alone. But... my thoughts changed after I awakened a year ago."

Kanna's ability was to read the information of objects. One day, while cleaning, she accidentally discovered the dark intentions of Count Hank through the objects she touched. He intended to hand her over to another noble, at any age.

That noble was known for his vicious and despicable personality, and even though Hank knew that Kanna would likely die if she was given to him, he didn't care. The political gain he would receive by doing so was his priority.

The moment she read that terrifying intent, she shivered. From that moment, Kanna began to plan how to escape from the Count's house.

"At first, I planned to flee to a foreign country. But then the Cavalry recruitment announcement came out... I decided to try out, and if I failed, I would change my plan and head abroad."

But, to her surprise, Kanna passed. Thanks to Yuder's advice.

"I knew the Count worked at the Imperial Palace, and I was scared that I might run into him if I went there. If I was found, he would definitely recognize me and try to take me away immediately. But... considering how things turned out, I think it would be better for me to resign before he comes looking for me in the Cavalry. ...That's all."

After Kanna finished speaking, silence fell among the three.

Turning

Chapter 56

Yuder recalled the moment he first met Kanna, seeing the bitterness in her expression.

When he first met her at the front of the Blue Crown for the Cavalry's entrance test, Yuder thought of her as a rigid and angry person. He simply thought that she was the type of person whose face would show such an expression when she was overly nervous, but that was not the case. After hearing her current story, he finally understood why her expression was so severe.

For Kanna, that moment was a once-in-a-lifetime choice and challenge.

After telling her entire story, Kanna's eyes conveyed more unease and sadness than the refreshing feeling of someone who had spilled her secrets. She bowed her head silently in front of Kishiar, like a criminal waiting for her punishment.

"What were you planning to do next if you left the Cavalry?"

Kishiar's first question was very succinct. Kanna blinked blankly, perhaps taken aback by his unexpected response, and finally opened her mouth.

"As I originally planned... I'm thinking about going abroad."

"With your abilities, it won't be easy to become a mercenary, will it?"

"I was thinking of joining a wandering theater troupe. I think I would do well as a fortune teller."

"I see. That would have been fine. You've thought hard about it."

"...Pardon?"

As Kanna asked with a puzzled face, Kishiar's voice suddenly turned cold.

"But Kanna Wand, don't you think the members who have known you will miss you a lot if you suddenly leave the troop?"

'Kishiar La Orr, why does he keep saying such strange things?'

Kanna's abilities were essential to investigate the Red Stone. Her abilities were much more promising than she thought.

How could a wandering theater troupe dare to compare with the safe and glorious Cavalry? Even if she really committed a crime and was dragged away, they had to stop it at all costs. Yuder was not pleased with what Kishiar was saying.

As Yuder's eyes secretly sparkled, Kanna opened her mouth with a look of determination.

"If they miss me, I would be really grateful and sad. I was really happy while I was in the Cavalry, and it was fun to meet good colleagues. I owe a great debt to the Commander who accepted me and to Yuder, who helped me in many ways, which I can never repay. However, for that reason, I think it's right for me to leave the troop for the Commander, Yuder, and my colleagues. If I have to be punished for lying about my background as an orphan with no family when I joined, I am willing to accept any punishment."

Her eyes were filled with sadness, but her face was incredibly calm and dignified when she said it was right for her to leave.

"You are willing to accept any punishment?"

"Yes."

"If you're willing to accept it, there's no need to refuse."

"Commander."

Yuder called Kishiar, frowning. However, the moment their eyes met when Kishiar turned his head to his call, Yuder realized that he had misunderstood something.

He didn't realize it because his voice was so serious, but there was a mischievous glint in his red eyes that he was facing.

"My members are strange. I've worked so hard for two years to build the Cavalry, but the talented ones who have passed through numerous competitors all seem to have no attachment to the Cavalry."

"..."

"I don't know whether my eyes are strange, or the members are strange."

Kanna, who had been hanging her head, slowly rolled her eyes upward, seeming perplexed by the odd remark. Kishiar looked down at her with languid eyes, a leisurely smile on his face, and opened his mouth.

"So, Kanna Wand. Your punishment is to become the Deputy Commander of Jung Division."

"... Pardon?"

"To be frank, one who has not received the last name can't be considered a family, so you didn't tell a lie. Regardless of what Count Gallon says, you can't leave the Cavalry. But you asked for the punishment yourself. You tried to leave the supposedly blissful Cavalry so easily, so you have no choice but to work hard and pay for your sins."

"But, but Commander. What does that mean? I..."

Kanna was about to retort with a startled expression, but Kishiar cut her off with a decisive wave of his hand.

"That's the end of it. No more words are necessary. Go back."

Yuder finally let out a sigh of relief. As he followed Kishiar, who turned without hesitation, Kanna shouted in confusion from behind.

"Commander. How did you understand my words just now? Me, a deputy, absolutely not. Yuder! Say something!"

"It's better than being an assistant."

"What?"

"What are you saying?" Kanna shouted, but Yuder did not answer.

He didn't want to admit that he had spoken of leaving the division like Kanna, refused Kishiar's offer, but ended up becoming the Commander's assistant.

'Well, that aside... appointing a deputy in Jung division wasn't something I recall from my previous life.'

In Kishiar's time as the Commander, he didn't appoint a deputy in the Jung division, which had a critically low number of members. Later, when Yuder took over the position and the Jung division grew, a deputy position was added. However, he didn't expect it to happen again now.

The reason Kishiar made Kanna the deputy of a division with only ten members was probably not because the role was genuinely needed.

It was more likely an act of consideration to lessen her burden and make her stay in the Cavalry more comfortable. But this again changed the future Yuder knew. It was a positive result.

"Yuder Aile."

"Yes."

"What were you planning to do with that power of yours when Count Gallon came to the Cavalry?"

While contemplating, Kishiar suddenly started talking. Yuder kept silent for a moment, then briefly glanced around to check where Kanna was. She was slowly following from quite a distance. It seemed safe enough to respond.

"I was planning... to give him a bit of a hand."

"How much is 'a bit' in your terms?"

"Enough for rumors to circulate that anyone who messes with a member of the Cavalry won't be able to leave in one piece."

Hearing Yuder's response, Kishiar tilted his head with a peculiar smile.

"Who do you think will clean up after that?"

"Didn't you say you would take good care of your assistant, sir?"

He boldly retorted, implying that surely he couldn't handle even that much. Laziness, like a well-fed beast, shimmered above Kishiar's red eyes.

"That's right. I did say that."

The Cavalry needed a strong presence and reputation now more than ever. Even with all kinds of praise from the Emperor, it would still only be known to those in the know.

To make the existence of the Cavalry widely known across the continent, it was necessary to create a few noisy episodes.

In his previous life, the event that had marked the beginning of that saga was when Kishiar announced he was the owner of the divine sword. However, in this life, that incident had not occurred. But what if an incident involving a malicious nobleman being soundly beaten and chased away by the Cavalry members trying to protect a comrade occurred?

Even if it couldn't match the saga of the divine sword, the world would be profoundly shocked by the fact that commoners could dare to do such a thing to a nobleman and face no repercussions whatsoever.

'And they would never forget the name of the Cavalry.'

It seemed that Kishiar, too, had already done that level of calculation, hence his amusement.

What would the nobleman's pretentious face look like after experiencing a disgrace that would forever stain his history? Yuder felt a rare sense of satisfaction and silently curled up the corners of his mouth.

"Then, I take it you approve."

"Don't keep all the fun to yourself. Invite this onlooker too. Is there anything more entertaining than watching a fight?"

A fight to watch. Upon hearing those words, Yuder remembered the old man and the young man he had met earlier. He had recognized who the old man was, a man who loved to watch fights, the moment he saw him.

'Thais Yulman, one of the elders of the Pearl Tower, an Archmage. I didn't expect him to be visiting the imperial palace at this time.'

Unlike other mages who had been honored with the title of Archmage, Thais wasn't proficient in attribute magic. He had gained his fame solely due to his diverse research results aimed at piercing the essence of the world through magic.

He had proven that air and magic were different, and he had researched the differences between materials created by magic and real nature.

Even though he couldn't use attack magic, it was well-known that nobody was better than him when it came to breaking down magic.

Why would Thais Yulman, of all people, have come to the imperial palace? Moreover, why was he dressed like an ordinary noble old man instead of wearing the robe exclusive to mages of the Pearl Tower?

'Well, considering his timing and his expertise, the conclusion is obvious.'

Simply put, he may have just wanted to visit quietly without revealing his identity and meet the court mages of the Orr Empire.

However, an Archmage who specializes in magic research appearing in the imperial palace as soon as the Red Stone was retrieved was a clear sign of his objective, wasn't it?

Thais Yulman probably rushed here from the Pearl Tower the moment he heard the news of the successful retrieval of the Red Stone. He must have been unable to bear his desire to immediately take the stone and study it. His will could be considered the will of the entire Pearl Tower.

'Kishiar must have secretly reported the retrieval to the Emperor alone, but for some reason, it feels like the news has already spread across the entire continent.'

In his previous life, when he investigated the Red Stone, he could not find out who had refined the stone in the Pearl Tower. The information within the Pearl Tower was top secret.

Moreover, by the time Yuder had started his investigation, several years had already passed since the collapse and ruin of the tower. Even whether Thais Yulman was dead or alive by then was unknown.

'Thais Yulman... I'll have to remember that.'

Turning

Chapter 57

"...I'm glad that your taste aligns with mine. It makes me feel that the effort to bring you on as my assistant was worthwhile."

"Pardon?"

Yuder was preoccupied with thoughts about Thais Yulman, and had missed Kishiar's comment. He turned his head a little too late to ask again, only to find that Kishiar was also looking in his direction with a slight tilt of his head.

Their faces had stopped at a very close distance.

"..."

In that instant, Yuder's gaze was seized by Kishiar's face. Kishiar, too, blinked, staring back at Yuder.

After a short pause, it was Kishiar who first broke away from the gaze and flashed a smile.

"We almost bumped into each other."

"Oh, yes."

Yuder finally regained his senses and turned his head away.

"Did you fall for my face up close? You were looking rather passionately."

The unfamiliar short pang Yuder had felt shattered instantly.

"No, that's never happened."

Despite his immediate, firm denial, Kishiar persisted as if he had a winning hand.

"You didn't? Weren't you just looking?"

"I never did."

"I should have just bumped into you. It seemed like a perfect angle for a kiss."

Yuder felt a sudden chill in his spine and inadvertently looked back again. Fortunately, Kanna seemed to still be following from a distance, seemingly engrossed in her own pleasant thoughts.

"Making such comments to anyone could lead to unnecessary misunderstandings. Please refrain. I am your assistant."

What was the point of making such a joke to Yuder, who had yet to awaken his second gender?

Although he had accepted the position of assistant, there was clearly nothing more than that. The future would not be like the past.

"Anyone? That's a bit hurtful. Are you 'anyone'?"

Kishiar, who didn't care about other people's feelings, couldn't suppress a small chuckle, shaking his shoulders as he slowed down and quietly fell behind Yuder. It seemed he just wanted to tease.

"Alright, I won't do it anymore. Don't purposely distance yourself. Weren't we just happily discussing plans together?"

"...."

"Choosing you as my assistant seems like a good decision. I think we'll make a great team, don't you think?"

Kishiar had an extraordinary talent for expressing the same phrase in a strikingly different manner. As Yuder sighed lightly, Kishiar laughed once more.

Looking at his laughing face, Yuder thought about the indescribable feeling he had just experienced. It was a face he had seen countless times, in his previous life and in this one he had returned to.

But something was different this time.

Was it the man with such vibrant eyes? He had always thought of him as someone whose smile concealed a world-weary blade and suppressed fatigue, but Kishiar's face up close showed none of that.

It should be natural, given that he had returned to a past where nothing had happened yet, but this ordinary fact was shocking.

The image of Kishiar in his dream, who had joked with a lonely face, empty as if it had been hollowed out, reemerged. It seemed as if he had just seen what that Kishiar, who had been facing death, had lost.

Yuder instinctively raised his hand to his chest and pressed it lightly, then quickly pulled it away.

He still did not know how to express the feeling he had just experienced.

That day, Kanna shared her past with her comrades in the carriage, briefly but confidently. The members, who had been deeply worried about her, all felt a strong resentment towards Count Gallon. They comforted Kanna and pledged to keep everything she had shared a secret.

Kishiar returned holding the Red Stone in the box, just as he had when he first arrived at the imperial palace. The next day, he appointed deputy commanders and an assistant in front of all the members.

"Shin's deputy commander, Ever Beck. Sul's deputy commander, Steiber Rendley. Jung's deputy commander, Kanna Wand. And the Cavalry assistant, Yuder Aile. These four people will divide the duties of the commander and help each other."

Among the three deputy commanders, the only one who didn't have a close relationship with Yuder was Steiber of Sul. However, Yuder already knew what kind of person he was through the memories of his previous life.

Steiber was the oldest among the current members. He was a simple bakery owner and the head of a household, who was over 40. He had exceptional ability to handle water and was well-liked.

In his previous life, Yuder had been the deputy commander of Sul, hence Steiber was a regular member without any special duties. However, the members of Sul respected Steiber more than Yuder.

Yuder thought that Steiber Rendley would make a good deputy commander, and he once again admired Kishiar's insight. Kishiar seemed to know how the dynamics among the members flowed, and who stood out in what area, although it seemed like he didn't.

With the exception of Ever from Shin, all the deputy commanders were different from the previous ones. It was a good start.

And quite swiftly, that afternoon, a carriage bearing the emblem of Count Gallon arrived in front of the Cavalry's barracks within the grounds of the Imperial Knight's quarters.

As he watched the arrogant nobleman and the soldiers he brought with him enter, Yuder grinned ominously along with Gakane and the Eldore siblings.

The nobleman who had tried to sell off the unawakened Kanna from the Cavalry without even conducting a proper ceremony ended up in a terrible state just an hour later, which caused a huge shock within the capital.

The disgraced noble family, who had become a laughing stock, belatedly protested to Duke Peletta and the Emperor, but nobody listened to his complaint.

Are they supposed to believe and punish based on just one person's words about an event they didn't witness themselves? According to the complainer, dozens of robust soldiers couldn't handle just four Cavalry members. It was the complainer who had first declared he would attack and kill. Wasn't this a case of self-defense? If the opponent was a Swordmaster, could they have acted the same?

The written reprimand that the Emperor issued to the protesting nobleman served as an evaluation of the Cavalry members' skills that had been shrouded in mystery, and it was incessantly discussed among the people.

The nobles, who hadn't even known the name of the Cavalry until then, felt an unpleasant fear creeping up their spines for the first time.

The news spread rapidly beyond the capital to the empire, and eventually to the entire continent.

Everything was going exactly as Kishiar La Orr and Yuder had anticipated.

"Your Majesty. The Empress has come to visit."

The Emperor sat at his desk, rubbing his weary eyes, the paper he'd been grappling with for some time finally set aside. Through his spectacles, his fatigue-laden eyes concealed, he didn't feel like the Emperor of the immense Orr Empire that had spanned a millennium.

"Let her in."

The door promptly opened and a woman with pale blonde hair entered under the guide of the chief attendant. After surveying the room, littered with empty tea cups, papers, and books, she sighed heavily as if to signal her readiness to hear more, then approached the Emperor.

"Whilst I understand you can't leave this place, didn't I tell you to at least clean up more often?"

"You're nagging the moment you arrive?"

Despite his words, the Emperor's expression was incredibly gentle. A faint smile, one he wouldn't even show his brother Duke Peletta, rose to his face. Seeing this, the Empress moved behind him. The sight of the Emperor's thin frame, visible through his shirt, hurt her inside.

"I worry for you. You look even more ill than before."

"My face is the same as always."

"No, it's not. You really do look unwell. Have you been drinking the herbal medicine I sent?"

The Emperor, feeling the Empress's slender fingers on his shoulder, smiled quietly. Even the times of excruciating pain that always ate away at his body, and the unbearable humiliation, felt like nothing in that moment.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I drink what you sent? I even had some just before."

Only after she had confirmed when and how he had taken the medicine did the Empress let her worry subside a little.

"So, you really did take it all."

"When have I ever lied to you?"

"Never. You've never lied... but...."

His grip tightened around the Empress's shoulder. The Emperor slowly raised his hand and held hers. The Empress's hand was soft and warm, but the Emperor's was rough like old bark and cold as a corpse.

"Sorry, did I startle you?"

However, before the Emperor's hand fully withdrew, the Empress's hand came down and held his tightly.

"I wasn't startled."

The Emperor was a little surprised, then he laughed. The two held hands for a long time, receiving the sunset that poured through the window.

After a while, as the Emperor's hand warmed from the heat transferred from the Empress's hand, the conversation resumed.

"By the way, did the Duke Peletta's visit go well? How was he?"

"I'm still unsure."

The Emperor responded in a soft voice.

"But he seemed more enthusiastic than I thought. I was a bit surprised when he volunteered to do the task we had planned to delegate to the mages. I wonder what got into him."

"Isn't that a good thing? Duke Peletta is undoubtedly worried about you as well."

"Well, he would be worried. The ordeal I'm going through will inevitably be his burden someday."

"There you go again, speaking so harshly on purpose."

The Empress applied a slight pressure to the hand she had placed on the Emperor's shoulder. Despite being brothers, closer and more caring for each other than anyone else, the Emperor never openly displayed it.

Considering the enemies scattered around them, it might have been inevitable, but the Empress felt a faint sadness whenever she saw the pessimistic attitude the Emperor displayed.

Turning

Chapter 58

"Did you not say there is a mysterious power in the Red Stone? I am certain that Duke Peletta will find a way to make it serve your cause."

"..."

"The court mages and the priests of the Sun God are all working day and night for you, Your Majesty. And I too..."

The Empress trailed off, forcing a smile onto her face.

"Please continue to take the herbs I've prepared for you, replenish your energy, and you'll surely find a solution. Everything will be fine."

Hmm. The Emperor swallowed the murmurs he couldn't bring himself to voice directly to his Empress.

Even if he could mend what was already broken, how long would it last?

On an unusually sunny afternoon, three people stood in a deserted physical training field set up behind the Cavalry barracks. They were Yuder, Kanna, and Gakane.

"Before we start, how are you feeling?"

At Yuder's question, Kanna and Gakane closed their eyes, seemingly checking their own conditions.

"I'm... fine."

"Me too."

"Commander, do you not need to step back a bit?"

"Ah, I'm also fine, of course. Don't worry about me and proceed."

Kishiar, who had elegantly seated herself at a table a bit away from the trio, waved his hand with a languid smile.

At the same time, Nathan, who had appeared from inside the barracks, placed a teacup from the tray he was carrying in front of Kishiar.

As he poured tea from a teapot - too small in comparison to his hands - into the cup, a crisp and fragrant smell filled the dusty training field, seeming rather out of place.

"Such a wonderful aroma."

"It's tea made from the leaves of a medicinal herb the Empress has recently cultivated. She sent it while you were away on your mission."

"Her Majesty? Always in her debt. I suppose I'll have to write her a letter of thanks."

While Kishiar's side was filled with serenity, the area surrounding Yuder was tense.

Starting that day, Kanna and Gakane had decided to train under Yuder for the development of their abilities. Although it might seem odd to receive training from Yuder, who was essentially a fellow soldier even if he was the commander's assistant, the two of them had no objections, having seen his skills firsthand.

Normally, many soldiers should have been in full swing training at that time. But now, there was no one except them. This was because the entire Cavalry had started a holiday that Kishiar had granted the day before.

When all the nobles turned their eyes to the Cavalry after the incident of driving out Count Gallon, Kishiar seemed to have been waiting for the moment, announcing a week-long holiday.

The official reason was to celebrate the successful completion of the Cavalry's first mission. But in reality, a select few knew that it was a maneuver to prevent the Red Stone hidden within the Cavalry from being exposed to unnecessary attention.

The soldiers didn't know that the secret mission of their comrades, which had ended in success and a big reward, was to retrieve the Red Stone. However, they were extremely pleased to get a holiday thanks to it.

There were quite a few people in the Cavalry, like Yuder, who were not confident of their admission and had left things to settle back in their hometowns.

Including those who wanted to show their families what they would be like after being admitted, most of the soldiers left the barracks immediately.

The vacation plan had initially begun due to a conversation with Yuder during the mission to recover the Red Stone, but Yuder himself had ultimately given up the vacation. He couldn't afford to spend a whole week of his scant month dedicated to locating the Red Stone on something like a holiday.

There were also a few members, aside from Yuder, who didn't take the vacation. Most of them either had no place to return to, or their homes were too far to visit within a week. Among them was Kanna, of course.

At first, Yuder had planned to take her alone for personal training to improve her abilities. After the holiday, he intended to strengthen all members' abilities even further, and had requested Kishiar for permission related to the training.

However, the problem was that Gakane was present when Yuder approached Kanna to propose training together during the holiday.

"Training with Kanna? For a whole week? I want to join too. Let me do it."

At first, Yuder refused. Training two people with different abilities could reduce his focus. However, Gakane was extremely persistent. He immediately canceled his plan to spend his vacation in his hometown and clung to Yuder.

Since he had received permission from Kishiar to participate in the training plan, he would train the other members like Kanna in enhanced training after a week anyway. So he argued there was no need to do it first. But Gakane was adamant. His obsession with strength was beyond what Yuder had imagined.

"You're training with Kanna because the leader ordered you to investigate the Red Stone, right? You think her current abilities are insufficient, so you're trying to teach Kanna something more, aren't you? Then my shadow will definitely be helpful too!"

It was natural for him to think so, having seen Kishiar take back the Red Stone that they thought would be presented to the emperor. However, the one who ordered it was not Kishiar but Yuder himself, something Gakane naturally could not guess.

Until then, Yuder had thought of Gakane as just a good-natured and diligent guy. But seeing his determination not to shy away from following him even to the restroom, Yuder's perception changed.

Gakane Bolunwald was a persistent bugger who pretended to be nice.

"Yuder, please. I already know how tremendous your skills are. How could I give up such an opportunity? I want to become as strong as you. If I can train with you, I'll do whatever you say. I really mean it."

"..."

After being hassled all day, Yuder finally let out a long sigh.

"It's just one week. Nothing might change, and you may only suffer. Even so, are you willing to do as I say?"

"Of course! If I gain nothing, that's my fault. I'll never blame you."

The Yuder from his past life might have refused nonetheless. But Yuder eventually nodded. If the one eager to walk the path of hardship regretted it, so be it - it wouldn't be his loss.

"Alright."

"Thank you, Yuder!"

Gakane hugged Yuder tightly, his face filled with emotion.

When Kanna heard that Gakane would be training with them, she was greatly relieved that she wouldn't be alone.

To her, Yuder was a cherished comrade who was nothing less than a lifesaver, but he was sometimes even more inscrutable than Kishiar. The thought of training one-on-one with such a person for a whole week had made her secretly anxious.

And so, two members became the first subjects of Yuder's ability enhancement training. Kishiar expressed great interest in this training plan and declared that he would definitely observe it.

Thus, today's situation had been set in motion.

The training ground they were to use was constructed in a place that could never be seen from the outside. Despite being right behind their lodgings, it was not visible from within, making it exceedingly suitable for a training session like today's.

"Yuder. But, can I... can I really do it? Even with training, can I actually develop my ability enough to read an object's information without touching it within a month...?"

Kanna asked with a worried expression. She was aware of the potency of Yuder's ability, but she was the one receiving the training. With the leader, Kishiar, watching over her, she felt afraid that she might disappoint them again, like the time when she was unable to help during the Red Stone retrieval mission.

"You can do it."

Yuder answered with short but assured certainty, then pulled out an object he had brought earlier. Kanna and Gakane's gaze focused on it.

"A book...?"

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Kanna, try reading the information of this book using your ability first."

Yuder purposely turned the back of the book to Kanna so she couldn't see the title. With a puzzled expression, Kanna approached and placed her hand on the book. Soon, a transparent energy began to ripple slightly between her fingers.

"Hmm... it's a book that has been handled by many people. Most of them seem to think it's a difficult book. It seems to be about 20 years old... a source of warm comfort..."

As Kanna spoke, her words gradually became less coherent and eventually faded. Yuder quietly observed her.

"I can't read any more than this. This is my limit."

"Kanna, when you use your ability, what do you usually think about?"

At Yuder's sudden question, Kanna's eyes widened in surprise.

"Huh? I just... I don't think about anything. Only about needing to read quickly...?"

"I see. Then, this time, try using your ability while focusing on the thought that you must read information related to the title or content of this book. Can you do that?"

"I've never tried before... but I'll give it a shot."

Kanna took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Once again, she placed her hand on the book, and a short time later, a ripple, larger than before, began to emerge. Gakane, who was right next to her, seemed to notice this ripple as well, as he held his breath and looked surprised.

"...In the beginning, there was a land without light. One day, God took pity on those wandering in the darkness and cast down light. The first light was small and hard, clustered like a pebble... Remember the first sentence well, as it's the most important. This is..."

Slowly muttering, Kanna opened her eyes and looked down at the book with a stunned expression.

"This is the Scripture of the Sun God, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right."

Yuder flipped the book over. It was indeed an old copy of the Scripture of the Sun God. Despite being quite worn from many hands over a long time, the cover still looked clean, as if it had been carefully preserved.

Turning

Chapter 59

Yuder had borrowed it from one of the Cavalry members returning home the day before.

He remembered that the man, a devout follower of the Sun God from a pious family, always carried multiple holy books. Believing Yuder to be a fellow devotee, the man had willingly lent him a copy.

While not everyone deeply believed in the deity, most people on the continent had grown up closely observing and interacting with the temples of the Sun God from a young age.

Therefore, even the commoners who could barely read were generally aware of the contents of the holy book. It was common knowledge. This was precisely why Yuder had chosen the holy book as his first training tool.

"Well, do you understand something now?"

"Huh?"

"Kanna, if you want, you can limit the scope of the information you read."

At Yuder's words, Kanna's expression reflected a sudden realization.

"Oh... I see. I didn't know. I've never thought about it before..."

Of course, she hadn't. Until now, she was satisfied as long as she could read anything, and that had been enough.

However, to develop abilities like hers, it wasn't sufficient to just read anything well.

If one attempted to absorb excessive information without restraint, they would soon hit their limit. Her habit of abruptly stopping after reading a few words without order was likely due to using her ability aimlessly.

“So, you must start by setting a goal and start from a narrow scope. First, practice reading the small things in detail, then gradually move on to more detailed and broader aspects. Eventually, you should be able to select and read the more critical information.”

It was akin to practicing speed-reading. Initially, you would read each line thoroughly, and later, you would skim while still identifying the essential sentences.

Of course, this wasn't a skill that could be mastered overnight. It would require consistent practice daily. It was something that would gradually prove its worth over time.

"Practicing with books would be best. At first, just touch the book and read only the information related to the content, then check how accurate you were. Once you're comfortable with that, move on to the author, when the book was written, and its previous owners. It might be easier to read if you start from the most recent person and go backwards."

"Ah..."

Kanna nodded frantically, trying her best to remember Yuder's words.

"Do I do this every day?"

"Yes. And there's something else you need to do."

Yuder pulled out a thin cloth from his pocket, wrapped half of the holy book, and placed it on the ground.

"Try to read the information of the book you just read in this state."

"...But I'll only be able to read the information of the cloth?"

"Place half of your hand on the book and half on the cloth. Which one do you think you'll be able to read?"

"Well..."

Kanna's expression changed peculiarly.

"I'm not sure."

"Try it. If the information of two objects tries to come in at once, try to read only the book's information. It's a practice of selecting information. Since it's the information of a book you've read once, you should be able to read it more easily."

"I... I'll try."

As Yuder suggested, Kanna placed half of her hand on the cloth and the other half on the book, then closed her eyes again. The formless energy bursting from her hand was even larger and clearer during the second attempt, pulsating intensely.

Kanna's forehead was drenched in sweat, a clear sign of her struggle. Her energy had fluctuated, growing and shrinking several times.

"Uh..."

"Keep concentrating. Keep at it. Don't give up."

"My, my head hurts... I didn't know choosing to read would be this tough..."

It was to be expected. Growth, after all, often demanded pushing oneself to the limit just to advance a single step.

However, the moment of using one's ability to its limit was often a moment of life-threatening danger. Therefore, many Awakeners only managed to grow within the brink of death.

This faulty method of growth was something Yuder realized only quite late.

'If you steer in the right direction and continuously stimulate your limit without endangering your life, you can still grow without facing such a crisis.'

The important thing was to keep trying to exceed the limit of one's abilities, not to actually put oneself in danger.

After watching Kanna struggle so diligently, Yuder turned his head. Gakane, who had been observing the two with his mouth slightly ajar, quickly straightened up in surprise.

"Gakane. You're next. Are you ready?"

"Of course! Just tell me what to do!"

It was admirable to see a student brimming with so much enthusiasm. Even recalling his past life, Yuder could not remember a junior who sought to learn with such passion. Viewing Gakane with the heart of a former Cavalry commander, Yuder nodded in approval.

"First, bring out your shadow."

Before he could even finish speaking, Gakane's shadow abruptly rose to its feet. The black silhouette had the exact height and build as its master.

"How far have you tested the limits of your shadow?"

"Limit... I'm not sure. It just moves as I think..."

Gakane muttered as he looked at his shadow clone with unfamiliarity. He believed that by strengthening his own abilities, he could better control his shadow, thus he rarely used his powers and focused more on physical training and swordsmanship.

That, of course, was a good method of training. But in Yuder's opinion, a pioneer who had repeatedly clashed and eventually reached the end in his field, such a method alone clearly had limitations.

'Blindly training the body without knowing how far the shadow clone can exert its power is like a horse running with its eyes covered. It can run, but reaching the destination is difficult. It's a reckless approach.'

From what Yuder had observed so far, his clone was capable of effortlessly lifting several long spears at once. This indicated that it could exert physical force, and that its strength was far superior to that of humans.

And when it touched the Red Stone, the arm that exploded out was returned to shadow by Gakane, and when it was summoned again, it returned to its original form.

If a shadow clone could recover from damage in such a way, shouldn't one naturally want to find out how far its limits went?

"Have you ever struggled while handling your shadow clone?"

"Um... No. I don't think I ever did."

Gakane shook his head as he recalled his memories.

"Good. Then let's test today how far you need to go before it becomes hard."

Yuder casually drew the training sword he had at his waist. The training sword was blunt without any sharp parts, but that was sufficient.

With a light gathering of force, red flames erupted from the sword in an instant. Overwhelmed by the intense heat and momentum, Gakane's expression hardened.

"From now on, I will attack your shadow clone. Do not move your main body, stand still, and use your clone to evade and block the attacks."

"What?"

"Let's start."

Without giving Gakane any time to think, Yuder lunged at the shadow clone. As he swung his flame-wielding sword, the clone staggered back to avoid the blow. But it was too late; one of its arms had already been severed.

"..."

Unlike humans, the shadow did not scream or show any signs of pain. The severed arm vanished as if it had never been there.

"Defend properly. If you can't move, revert to shadow form and resummon. We're starting from the beginning."

"Ah, got it. But I don't understand how I'm supposed to block a sword with a shadow....."

"How is it possible for a shadow to carry multiple people? You've already been doing it all unconsciously, you just haven't realized it. Concentrate."

"...ugh...!"

"Move your clone solely through will. Don't open your mouth to command it, and don't move your own body."

Even as he issued these instructions, Yuder continued to swing his sword relentlessly. The shadow clone, slower than a human, could not properly evade even the casually swung sword.

As Gakane's shadow clone continued to take damage and disintegrate, just before a final blow was about to strike its head, Gakane closed his eyes tightly and swallowed hard.

At that moment, a miracle happened. The shadow clone raised its remaining arm in a flash, wrapping around its head to block the attack.

It felt as if Yuder's sword had struck an invisible wall made of wind. A strange sensation traveled up his arm, and moments later, the blade was deflected.

"Wha...?"

Yuder nodded at Gakane's shocked expression, which said, "I can't believe I just did that."

"Good. Let's continue."

"Wait! Give me a moment to think about how I just did that... Just a moment!"

There was no moment to be had. Yuder continued to batter Gakane's shadow mercilessly, ignoring Kanna's increasing frustration from the noise disrupting her concentration. Watching from the sidelines, Kishiar sipped his tea with a look of pure enjoyment.

"Look, Nathan. Isn't it amazing? It's as if a swordmaster is training a novice. I was curious about his teaching skills when he confidently asked for training authority, but the dreams of the squad members returning from vacation will be shattered. Hahaha."

"...It seems so."

From a swordmaster's perspective, Yuder's swordsmanship was not particularly impressive. However, the powerful fire and water constantly emanating from his weapon, as well as his exceptional battle senses and judgment, could not be ignored.

How much practice must he have had to be so adept at this strange combat style, being neither a mage nor a swordsman?

Even if he had awakened quickly, it was only two years ago. Was it really possible to build such skills in that time frame?

Ever since first meeting him, Nathan Zuckerman had been continually investigating Yuder Aile's background. But just as his lord had predicted, there was nothing to find. His past was impeccably clean.

The only certainty was that, as an Awakener, he was a prodigy to a degree that would make anyone envious.

Turning

Chapter 60

"If he can fight so well simply by spewing fire and water from his sword, he would become a complete monster if he mastered any more techniques."

"Do you see it that way?"

Upon hearing Nathan's muttering, Kishiar softly retorted.

"Do you think differently, sir?"

"In my eyes, I see a powerful beast trying to make itself small."

Kishiar, after taking a sip of his tea, followed Yuder's movements without missing a beat, his red eyes unblinking.

"Liars can recognize other liars. For some reason, that captivating beast is intentionally hiding his strength."

"You're saying he's hiding his strength?"

Nathan was the type who would believe his lord even if he claimed the sun rose in the west, but this time, he couldn't help but question him.

It was plain to see that Yuder Aile possessed exceptional skills, and he was an audacious man who had no intention of hiding his superior qualities. The idea that this man, who seemed least likely to hide anything in the world, was concealing even greater power within, was difficult to believe.

"He's hiding it. A lot of it."

"So he's indeed suspicious."

"But your investigation turned up nothing?"

"..."

"Nathan. It's time to trust your instincts over your suspicions. I've decided that he is essential to the Cavalry unit I plan to create. I don't know why, but that charming beast isn't sparing his body for me and the Cavalry unit. Isn't he boldly demonstrating his ability and teaching two people in an environment where he might be doubted? And doing both at the same time."

Nathan nearly blurted out, "What exactly is charming about him?" but managed to swallow the words. A charming beast? Was he referring to the formidable man before their eyes? Even he would doubt his ears if he heard such a nickname.

However, as Kishiar watched Yuder, his red eyes truly seemed filled with joy. He was always cheerful, but Nathan, having observed Kishiar for a long time, knew how to distinguish between his genuine and fake smiles. Surprisingly, his lord was sincerely smiling now.

"If it wasn't for him, I might have been seriously injured while retrieving the Red Stone this time. Or, using an unexpected amount of power might have put a crack in the balance I was barely maintaining."

"That's too speculative."

"Yes. But you also know that there's no guarantee that such things wouldn't have happened, right?"

Nathan remained silent, knowing that Kishiar's words were correct. His lord was always teetering on the edge.

But in the past few years, it had become even more precarious, the line he was walking on seeming as thin as a thread.

Kishiar, who seemed to have received all the blessings of heaven, became even more dangerous as these blessings accumulated. Neither friend nor foe left him alone. Such was his destiny.

"Regardless, it's true that he risked his life for me that day. If he was a spy sent by the dukes, he certainly wouldn't have left me in that situation."

"..."

"I wonder where such a character came from. It's really interesting."

"Too much attention can be dangerous..."

Nathan had only managed to utter a single word, but Kishiar merely responded with a soft smile, not a verbal reply. His gaze remained steadfast on the man with black hair, who was ruthlessly swinging his sword, not moving in the slightest.

"Well... it might be a bit late to worry about that."

His voice was so soft, even Nathan, the Swordmaster, couldn't properly hear him.

Nathan refilled the seemingly delighted lord's empty teacup. As he did so, Kishiar's eyes slightly narrowed at the sight of a small, neatly folded note that had slipped underneath the teacup's saucer.

"What's this?"

"While I was preparing the tea, a courier arrived from the Rik Mountains. You must have seen enough of the training, please take a look at this as well."

Kishiar knew this was Nathan's attempt to distract him from watching Yuder, but he showed no sign of it and merely smiled. As he unfolded the note to read it, a few unrecognizable emotions flickered across his eyes.

"Place this inside my quarters' desk later."

"Yes."

Kishiar handed the note back to Nathan after reading it. Nathan clutched it in his palm as if it were glued there, naturally hiding it from the view of others.

Yuder, Gakane, and Kanna continued their vigorous training, paying them no mind. Kishiar, while watching them, opened his mouth without changing his expression.

"It seems that they've discovered a place near the base that appears to have been inhabited by beasts. However, no evidence to suggest who might be behind this has emerged."

As this was expected, Nathan was not surprised.

"If they're that thorough, they won't give up just because of one failure."

"Indeed. The thought of those we didn't dare to touch over the last two years now flocking to us is already tiresome."

"Even so, didn't you bring the stone for His Majesty despite all this?"

Kishiar didn't respond to that. The conversation he had with the emperor when he went to the palace with the Red Stone he had retrieved a few days ago flowed through his mind.

'Kishiar. So, is your vessel still fine?'

'Thanks to your concern, brother, it's perfectly fine.'

When they were alone, Kishiar called the emperor 'brother'. Although this was against etiquette, when they were alone, the emperor called him by his real name, not his title, so it was all the same.

'What a pity. If the late empress saw you alive and breathing healthily without any outburst, she would undoubtedly have been so upset that she would have risen from her grave. It's quite regrettable that I can't show her that her most important decision was so wrong.'

The emperor's red eyes, visible through his glasses, shone with a cold, mocking smile. That mockery was directed not at Kishiar, but at the now-deceased empress. Guessing what era the emperor was recalling, Kishiar replied with a soft smile.

'Well, it's all in the past anyway.'

'Yes, it's all in the past. Her forcing you into the position of duke, and the fact that because of that, I had to hand over the throne to my enemies in my court, it's all in the past.'

The emperor's gaze, coldly muttering, turned to the box that Kishiar was holding. Kishiar was opening the box from a distance, as the emperor had expressed his wish to see the Red Stone.

'That worthless little stone is really the Red Stone. Even as I see it, I can't believe it.'

"Everyone seems to say so."

"If that tiny thing truly possessed the power to protect your vessel two years ago, I hope it could be of some help to me this time around..."

A bitter smile crossed the Emperor's pale face.

"After all that curiosity, seeing it in person doesn't instill much faith. Perhaps it's best to let go of any expectations."

"Such discouraging words after I went through all the trouble to bring it, don't you think that's a bit much? Would I have bothered to fetch this if it weren't for you?"

The Red Stone undoubtedly held an incomprehensible, immense power. However, Kishiar never once desired or admired its power. The Emperor knew this all too well.

"You have quite the way with words. Is this why the benevolent man I know put me through so much hardship by forming a Cavalry?"

"If the Cavalry hadn't been formed, we wouldn't have been able to retrieve the Red Stone safely, so it was a necessary step. Holding onto resentment for so long isn't good for your health."

"At this point, what's health to a man on his deathbed?"

All that was left was the slow tightening of the noose and the inevitable end. The Emperor's eyes told this tale.

"Oh dear. Where did the tyrant who hurried me every day to fetch the stone go? Did you really issue such an order just to torment your only brother? How disappointing. When did you stop believing in miracles...."

"Enough. Stop talking."

The Emperor waved his hand with a tired face. After telling Kishiar to close the box, he beckoned him closer.

Kishiar placed the box at his feet and knelt in front of the Emperor. The Emperor stared at the face of his brother, a face both similar and dissimilar to his own.

Bitterness, worry, relief, and countless other emotions surged in his eyes before receding, like sand washed away by the tide.

"Kishiar."

"Yes."

"I didn't order the quick retrieval simply because of a vain desire to expand my power. I believe you still have a chance, unlike me. If, after you and the mages have finished investigating and it turns out that the power of the stone truly helps the vessel, I will order you to use it first, even if it's just a moment sooner."

"Your wife would have been saddened to hear that."

The Emperor's gaze softened momentarily at Kishiar's calm response to his astounding declaration. A profound longing was replaced by renewed determination.

"I'm not joking. Listen well. But if the opposite happens..."

The Emperor coughed a few times and muttered with a grave look.

"If it turns out that the stone's power is of no help to us, I'll leave the next steps to you. Whether you take it or destroy it, it's entirely up to you. However, it must never fall into the hands of the Dukes or the Crown Prince...."