

Turning 511

Chapter 511

Aware that there was no benefit to stalling, Kiolle took a seat without resistance. Yuder was the first to speak.

"After we last met, I conducted my own investigation into those healers. I want to first confirm whether the people I found out about are the same ones who frequent that place before we continue our discussion."

"Alright, go on."

Yuder recounted the numbers and descriptions of the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran he had personally observed. Listening with the utmost caution, Kiolle clenched his fist and yelled, "That guy!" as soon as Yuder mentioned the actual sage who appeared to be middle-aged.

"He's the leader of those healers."

"Is that so? Then the people I described are all associated with those healers?"

"It seems so..."

Kiolle looked at Yuder with eyes filled with suspicion, caution, and a hint of fear. Knowing exactly what he must be thinking, Yuder kindly broke the silence.

"You must be wondering how I found out about their appearances and attire when I haven't received any information. I assure you, it's not as frightening as you think."

Startled, Kiolle tensed up and recoiled.

"I didn't read your mind to find out, of course. There are methods for these things. Stop wasting time with unnecessary thoughts and answer my questions."

"..."

"Do you know their names?"

"I... don't remember. Although I vaguely recall the name the leader mentioned when he introduced himself..."

Kiolle trailed off, shaking his head, but a moment later he seemed to remember and lifted his face.

"...Jinen? Chinen?"

"Have you not investigated these healers since we last met?"

"What does remembering their names have to do with investigating them? What's important is what they're doing, not their names, which could be aliases for all we know."

Kiolle snapped back, clearly embarrassed by his own foolishness.

Yuder looked at him disdainfully and moved on.

"So, what peculiar activities have you noticed about them?"

"...None. They've come a few more times to treat the Crown Prince since then, but..."

According to Kiolle, the 'healers' always visited on scheduled dates, accompanying a chamberlain into the Crown Prince's chamber. They then spent about an hour in the dimly lit room, filled with lit candles, mumbling something around the peacefully sleeping Crown Prince. That was the entirety of their 'treatment.'

After listening to Kiolle's account, Yuder paused to think before speaking.

"Do you know what they're saying during those times?"

"I don't. They speak in whispers so soft even the chamberlain can't hear. Unless the Crown Prince tells us, there's no way to know."

"You never personally attended to observe?"

"..."

Kiolle's expression twisted. He seemed to struggle for breath, his face flushed with humiliation and rage, before he finally answered.

"I had initially intended to, but His Highness... forbade me. Then those con artists looked down on me... and had the audacity... to make a disrespectful offer..."

Although it was hard for him to articulate each word without violating some vow, it was not difficult to surmise his meaning.

Initially, he was unable to attend because the Katchian side had refused his presence. Later, although the situation improved slightly, Kiolle's pride was wounded and he became furious when the healers themselves offered him the opportunity to join them.

‘Just hearing the rumors gives me a good idea of how that man is faring in the Crown Prince's palace.’

The common workers of the Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resided, must have felt as if they were walking on thin ice, as though there were two Crown Princes.

‘Anyway, it's clear that Kiolle is not as trusted by Katchian as I thought. I would have done the same if I were Katchian, but still...’

"You're a bodyguard and yet you can't even enter the Crown Prince's bedroom. Doesn't that just mean the Crown Prince doesn't trust you, and that's why others are treating you that way? If you're in such an ineffective position, I might have to reconsider our collaboration."

"What are you talking about? You think I'm the only one who couldn't go in? All the other knights were the same! Even the servants couldn't enter at first! You're still saying this when I'm the one chosen to protect His Highness today? I even verified the identity of those guys for you!"

Indeed, Kiolle was quick to flare up, speaking without reservation at the slightest provocation.

"In the first place, the reason I became His Highness's bodyguard was because there was no one else who could bridge the gap between the Bright Palace and the outside world! I was the one who first had the privilege of greeting him when he refused even meals and stayed in his bedroom during hard times, before those quack healers arrived!"

"Hmm, I see."

"Who do you think rallied the demoralized guards and servants? Who comforted His Highness, ensured that meals were delivered consistently, and took care of the broken mirrors and utensils? Who's keeping an eye on those fraudulent healers? Me, it's me! Do you think I could do all that without his trust? How dare you, when you know nothing...!"

Noticing how sensitive Kiolle was to the phrase 'a bodyguard who doesn't have his lord's trust,' Yuder could make even more precise conjectures about Katchian, who had been reclusive since the assassination attempt.

‘So, before meeting those healers, he stayed in his room, refused meals and contact with anyone, and even broke things. He's more volatile than I thought.’

It was not a completely unfamiliar story. In his previous life, Katchian sometimes shut himself in his room after his western reconstruction policy failed. Without any given reason, he postponed state affairs and confined himself for two or three days, ordering that no one be allowed near him. Even Yuder, who executed the Emperor's most secretive orders, had no idea what happened in there.

After he started ruthlessly cutting off the limbs of powerful noble families, including his own backers like the Diarca Duchy, using assassinations and various means, such episodes became less frequent, but it had happened.

The Emperor repeated such behavior until the 'sage' of his previous life appeared, and it got worse after the sage's death.

When the Awakener King Ejain led Nelarn to rapidly grow and openly confront the Empire, when news arrived that natural disasters had led to increasing resentment towards the Emperor, and even after praising Yuder for his accomplishments, then suddenly confining him to house arrest and forbidding palace entry the next day without any particular reason...

And what about the day Yuder was executed?

‘...He didn't even show up, claiming illness.’

Yuder paused his flowing thoughts and exhaled softly.

At any rate, it was fortunate that Katchian La Orr was not the Emperor right now. However, the fact that both the 'sage' of his previous life and the real 'sage' of the Star of Nagran were by his side meant that Yuder couldn't feel entirely at ease.

"Fine, calm down. Since I've confirmed that the people I found are indeed those 'healers,' I'll also share a piece of information from my end."

"..."

Kiolle, who was about to say something more, quickly fell silent.

Yuder searched his memory and slowly opened his mouth.

"Do you remember when you said those people seemed like frauds because they weren't mages, doctors, or priests?"

"Yes."

"It seems like you were right. Their power lies elsewhere."

"What are you talking about?"

"The same power you see before you, in me."

For a moment, Kiolle swallowed a gasp and choked, breaking into a fit of coughs that reddened his face. Finally regaining his composure, he asked in a voice that was almost a croak.

"Are you saying they're Awakeners?"

"..."

"That's impossible. If my father had known, he would never have let them into the Bright Palace in the first place. And what about the people who introduced us to them? Not one of them ever mentioned this! If they've been lying, I would have found out and never forgiven them!"

'You don't even know their names, so your forgiveness is meaningless.' Yuder thought inwardly, knowing Kiolle couldn't hear this response, and opened his mouth.

"Power can be hidden, as much as one wishes."

"I've never heard of someone awakening to a healing power! Even among your Cavalry, there's no one like that! If such a person existed, everyone would already know!"

"Yes, you're right."

When Yuder obediently responded, Kiolle looked skeptical.

"So what is it? What are you trying to say?"

"You still don't get it? What I'm saying is, it doesn't matter if it's not a healing power. If you can make people believe in another power, that's all that matters."

"...What?"

Chapter 512

Yuder said no more. Kiolle, with a deeply furrowed expression, opened his mouth.

"So, no—what I mean is, your claim is that these charlatans definitely tricked His Highness into believing they could heal him. But you're saying they might possess a power similar to healing?"

"No. It doesn't have to be similar at all; they just have to make him believe it is."

"What are you talking about? So, is the effect real or not?"

"Maybe you should think about that yourself. There's hardly anyone in a better position to find out than you."

"Are you mocking me?"

Mocking? It was utter sincerity.

Kiolle was in an excellent position to best understand everything if he wished. He was a knight in close proximity to Crown Prince Katchian, a trusted son of Duke Diarca, and simultaneously someone who could meet the Star of Nagran without arousing anyone's suspicion.

That wasn't all. He had already encountered other Awakeners, including Nahan, due to a series of incidents that happened in Hartan, and had directly experienced these matters.

It was quite remarkable that despite such experiences and his current position, he still knew next to nothing.

And the fool, even after hearing all this, looked cluelessly and indignantly at Yuder. Yuder finally decided to give him a small hint.

"Kiolle Da Diarca."

"..."

"No answer?"

Yuder leaned deeply against the back of the sofa and refilled his empty cup with water. Kishiar, witnessing the transparent liquid swirling out of nowhere into the cup, was visibly startled. Avoiding eye contact, he shifted uncomfortably and finally responded.

"...Why, why?"

"Let me ask one thing. What do you intend to do moving forward with the information you've acquired today?"

"What's it to you?"

"Do I need to remind you of the third clause of our oath, and our previous agreement to cooperate?"

"You're really devilish, you know!"

An angry Kiolle shouted, his face red with rage.

"If they really are Awakeners... if they're charlatans, then they must be expelled! What else is there to do?"

"Do you think you can do that just by your will alone?"

"What?"

"Do you think the Crown Prince and Duke Diarca will agree to your perspective?"

"...What are you saying? My father would, of course,..."

"I don't think so."

Kiolle blinked several times.

"What..."

"Think about it. Was no one aware that these individuals are Awakeners, hiding their true identities?"

"..."

"Regardless of what their actual identities are, it's true that the Crown Prince's condition has improved enough for him to appear today. In such circumstances, who do you think the Crown Prince will trust more? You? Or the healers?"

"But I am...! His Highness's knight and a person from the House of Diarca, personally recommended by my father. Obviously... he would trust me more..."

As he spoke, the strength in Kiolle's voice gradually faded.

"Fine. Let's say that's the case. Would these so-called healers quietly accept your assertion and step back?"

At that point, Kiolle clenched his mouth shut.

Despite his own assertions to the contrary, he had felt in his bones that the Crown Prince no longer regarded him or the House of Diarca with the same affection as before. Would the prince, who had not stood up even to follow Duke Diarca today, fully trust what Kiolle had to say? And what about his own father?

His father clearly detested Awakeners, openly calling them wretched souls cursed by the gods. Naturally, Kiolle assumed he brought them in without knowing who they were... but what if he did?

Kiolle slightly lifted his head, glancing down at his clenched fist. The man who once drank Quelochet—a drink one normally sips cautiously—as if it were water, looked back at Kiolle with a face no different than before. As if he knew the extent of Kiolle's turmoil, he spoke with abyss-like eyes.

"If you think the mere fact that they are Awakeners is sufficient reason to drive them away, consider why you are sitting here with me."

His tightly clenched fingers twitched. The reason Kiolle sat opposite Yuder was, of course, due to a begrudging oath and a semi-forced alliance. But on a larger scale, he was here because the man before him was stronger, more competent, and could provide useful information.

Yuder Aile was an Awakener. Kiolle neither liked nor trusted Awakeners, but the enormous power the man had shown couldn't be denied. If Yuder called the healers Awakeners, then they certainly were.

Had he not believed that, he wouldn't have tried to recruit him on multiple occasions.

Though reluctant to admit it, Yuder Aile was genuinely competent. A commoner who had risen to the title of Baron—what more was there to say? Kiolle, who had never felt inferior to his own siblings, had never once felt an advantage when with this man.

The sheer force emanating from his gaze felt eerily similar to the sensation of being in the presence of his angered father.

Even though he'd never felt that way about the healers, if someone that capable and useful was involved... wouldn't both his father and the Crown Prince turn a blind eye?

Had what he initially planned to do truly been for the benefit of his father and the Crown Prince?

The mission that began as a way to help his father and the Crown Prince by getting rid of some deceitful scoundrels suddenly became incredibly confusing.

"It's truly amusing to hear you talk about driving them away without knowing the extent of their powers or their true intentions in approaching the Crown Prince. I wouldn't be surprised if you turned up as a corpse under a flowerbed in the palace within a month."

"Stop speaking ill!"

"I'm not speaking ill. It's the truth."

"..."

"Let me clarify: I don't believe they approached the Crown Prince for good reasons either. But I'm not basing that assumption on mere dislike or irritation like you."

"So, what should I do?"

Kiolle retorted, unable to contain his irritation any longer.

"If you want to prove they are scammers and expel them, find out why they are scammers—beyond the simple fact that they're Awakeners."

"Easy to say. How am I supposed to do that!"

"That's for the interested party to figure out. It's not like you're going to follow my instructions blindly."

It was an irritating, yet true statement. Kiolle could say nothing; he unclenched his fist and lifted his head.

Standing in front of the Duke of Diarca, he spoke clearly, devoid of any sense of fear.

Was there really something Yuder fears or finds difficult?

'...'

The face that came to mind at that moment was of a man dancing with Duke Peletta under the light of the chandelier. The man, who danced shamelessly and naturally as if unaware of the absurdity he was committing, was now wearing an entirely different expression as he looked at Duke Peletta.

His face was as stoic as ever, yet far more cautious and gentle.

Behind an expression so different that one might believe it belonged to another person, there seemed to be a glimpse of an inexplicable emotion.

As if it was the kind of emotion you would only see from someone with whom you have a truly deep relationship... That kind of...

'Did that brat say he has a different second gender from that of Duke Peletta?'

Voices discussing this matter, which he hadn't even considered before, now echoed repeatedly in his mind.

Kiolle seemed to have said all he had to say and was quietly staring at Yuder's face as he drank water. Kiolle shook his head irritably. His head was throbbing, and he wanted to take some medicine.

But before that, there was something he needed to say.

"If I find out more about those healers, are you interested in exchanging information again?"

"Well, that depends on what you find out. I really can't say today since you weren't much help."

"...Anyway, you're saying you're open to the idea!"

"Let's say that's the case."

"...Then meet me again next time. I've become interested in finding out more about those guys myself."

Chapter 513

"Come back next time, then. I've become interested in learning more about them as well."

Yuder broke the silence first, yet anxiously observed Kiolle's face as he stared back at him. Just before Kiolle's limited patience ran out, Yuder leisurely nodded, signaling his acceptance.

"Alright. But Kiolle."

"What!"

"If you're going to investigate them, just be upfront about it. You're not good at hiding things."

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about?"

"I'm giving you advice as a gesture of goodwill, considering the warning you gave me at 'Da Fiel' and our renewed alliance."

Even without his advice, the outcome would likely have been the same. Nevertheless, it was helpful. Kiolle, however, couldn't perceive Yuder's advice as anything but condescending, and his expression tightened noticeably.

Kiolle had already been on edge while watching Yuder confront Baron Durmand and appear before his father. He had been so anxious that he couldn't even look directly at him. Even now, a lingering, uncomfortable sensation filled a corner of his heart, as if he had betrayed his own father.

"Are you mocking me?"

"If I wanted to mock you, I would've just laughed."

"..."

"Remember that if you really plan to investigate."

Instead of replying, Kiolle grimaced as if he was about to curse. He took several deep breaths before abruptly standing up. Just before he exited without looking back, Yuder called him again.

"Wait a moment."

"Why now!"

"Your knight's emblem fell off."

It seemed Kiolle had stood up so abruptly that the emblem of the Knights of the Bright Palace, which had been secured between his uniform's cape and shoulder, fell and rolled onto the floor. The fastener had flown off, leaving only the pin rattling around. Yuder easily picked it up.

The emblem, engraved with a beautiful, luminous tree, was made of a material tinged with the red color that symbolized the Crown Prince.

"Give it here!"

Kiolle quickly walked back with a flushed face and snatched it. For a moment, Yuder felt a slight sting inside his glove. When he looked down, he saw a small red stain on the white fabric. Apparently, the pin had scratched through the glove and touched his skin.

"..."

"Wait. That wasn't my fault, I..."

Kiolle hastily spoke upon seeing Yuder's silence, clearly worried about facing retribution. Though the white gloves made the stain slightly noticeable, it was hardly more than a pinprick and not painful, so Yuder merely shook his head.

"It's fine. Go."

"But why did you even bother to pick it up when I didn't ask you to...!"

"Just go."

Kiolle, who was about to offer yet another excuse that wasn't really an excuse, finally retreated when Yuder frowned. How they would meet next time was not decided, but Yuder could always summon Kiolle if needed.

'I'm only dealing with one guy, but in some ways, it's more draining than facing both Duke Diarca and Baron Durmand.'

Yuder sighed and rose from his seat. He planned to join up with Enon and Lusan in the adjoining waiting room and make his way back when the time was right.

However, just as he was straightening his knees to stand, an unexpected bout of dizziness hit him, causing his vision to momentarily blur.

'...What's this?'

Yuder braced himself against the back of the sofa, bowing his head. After shaking his head and taking several deep breaths, the dizziness soon dissipated. Though he didn't experience a headache, his mind felt inexplicably suffocated.

'Maybe it's because I'm still a little drunk.'

Yuder summoned water to drink once again. A sense of relief washed over him.

He opened the door and headed for the adjacent waiting room. As soon as he knocked, Lusan and Enon, who were glancing at him in unison, hurriedly approached.

"Did you finish your talk with him? Everything's alright, I hope?"

"Yes."

"Good to hear."

Yuder had told Lusan and Enon that he met with Kiole due to a personal task. He hadn't disclosed what the task entailed, but Enon seemed to have an inkling, judging by his expression.

Unlike Lusan, Enon scanned Yuder with a piercing gaze. He soon noticed the glove and widened his eyes.

"You said everything was fine. What's this?"

"Ah, this is..."

Before Yuder could explain, Enon grabbed his hand. Lusan gasped upon seeing the small bloodstain on the glove.

"My god, that's blood!"

Faced with the scrutiny of both the pharmacist and the priest, Yuder felt as though he had committed some great sin. He averted their eyes, clenched his fist, and hid the wound.

"Ah... it's not a big deal. Just a minor mishap."

He explained that he had been slightly grazed by the sharp pin on the back of an emblem that Kiole had dropped. Enon's expression remained stern.

"If that's the case, why hide it? You should've asked for treatment immediately!"

"It's not painful. There's no need for that."

"Isn't a paper-cut still a cut? When will you ever get treated if you're like this? Just remember you can't get treated after you're dead!"

"Enon is right," Lusan added. "We are here specifically to handle such matters. Even a small wound can fester. Especially considering you've been drinking..."

"Sit down!"

Yuder finally relented after apologizing profusely. He removed his glove and allowed himself to be treated. Lusan poured a waterfall of divine energy into the minor wound, which soon vanished without a trace.

"...Thank you."

"Any other issues?"

Both looked like they'd give him an even harder time if anything else came up later. Yuder hesitated for a moment before mentioning the slight dizziness he had felt earlier.

"I felt a bit dizzy when I stood up, but it went away quickly. I think it might be due to the alcohol."

"See, this is why we have to ask multiple questions. Some people just don't speak up right away, even if it's inconvenient."

"Absolutely."

"...So we're done now, right?"

Exhaling a sigh, Yuder watched as Enon surveyed him a few more times before reluctantly nodding.

"Yes."

Yuder blinked his still-cloudy eyes and put his glove back on. Just as he was about to turn to leave the room, a sudden wave of unsteadiness hit him, and he had to brace himself against the wall.

Thud. The sensation of his skin hitting the solid wall felt muted.

"Yuder!"

Lusan's voice sounded oddly distant. It took him a few seconds to realize that it was Enon who was supporting him by the arm.

Yuder shook his head to clear it. The dizziness, and the subsequent recovery, mirrored what had happened earlier, but this episode lasted a bit longer.

"Lift your head a bit."

Yuder realized that Enon's hand, pressing against his forehead, felt cooler than before. And he also realized that Enon's expression had turned decidedly more fierce.

"You're feverish."

"Really?"

Lusan looked startled and retorted.

"This guy, his complexion hasn't changed, but he's incredibly hot."

"Could it be that the poison from earlier is just now taking effect?"

"No, that's not it."

Yuder shook his head and brushed off Enon's hand. He felt his heart beating faster than before. A wave of heat surged from his fingertips to his toes, and the insides of his eyes felt unbearably hot.

At first, he couldn't understand it, but as all these sensations came together, a forgotten memory quickly resurfaced. Yuder knew what this floating sensation under his feet was.

This was... a distinct sense of intoxication.

"It's just... drunkenness."

"What are you talking about? You weren't like this earlier."

"I don't know why it's intensified so suddenly... but it's definitely not sickness. I'm drunk. I've... experienced it before."

Yuder shrugged off Enon. His own face reflected in a distant ornate mirror seemed to waver faintly. His complexion was as pale as it had been before, which had also been the case in his previous life when he was drunk. So it was certain. This was simply drunkenness.

"This isn't something to make a fuss about. I'll be fine after a short rest; you go on ahead."

"What?"

"Go."

The moment he spat out the word, a gust of wind blew from beneath his feet. Yuder stepped back and sat on the sofa. He buried his face in his hands and took several deep breaths. The dizziness slowly began to subside. He felt a bit cold, yet not cold at the same time.

"Enon, sir..."

"Kid, you go ahead. And then..."

The conversation between Lusan and Enon faded in and out, and the door opened and closed. After Lusan had left, Enon who remained took a deep breath and slowly approached Yuder.

When he was about a few steps away, Yuder lifted his head and frowned. At this, Enon stopped in his tracks, crossing his arms as if he would not come any closer.

"Stop being so defensive, will you?"

"..."

"If you're going to get drunk, at least do it gracefully."

"Enon, just go."

"I will. But before I do, cover yourself with this."

Enon threw something. It was something heavy that fell over his head—it was the outer garment of his formal attire.

"It's suffocating. Take it with you."

"It's supposed to be suffocating; that's why I gave it to you!"

Enon sighed and shook his head. Then, faint but disruptive footsteps were heard not far away. Casting a brief glance in that direction, Enon muttered under his breath.

"...They're here. I'm going. Know that you'll get scolded later."

Chapter 514

"What is coming?" Yuder's mind belatedly dissected the words, trying to make sense of them. His vision, shrouded by the robe of his formal attire, became blurred. Lost in a familiar darkness, Yuder stopped thinking altogether and simply stared into that silent black void.

His head felt duller than usual. Sounds were muffled, and the world seemed to move slowly. He was well-acquainted with this kind of darkness; it was mostly during the nights that he savored the sensation of being drunk, always alone.

Back then, he would always be in the Commander's room. When consumed by thoughts he couldn't shake off on his own, he would drink Quelochet that he'd stashed in a dusty corner of the Commander's room located at the top of the old barracks of the Cavalry.

He couldn't remember who had given it to him, but he was certain it was during a party. It was right after an event celebrating their perfect victory against large monsters in the northeast.

Emperor Katchian had bestowed a reward upon him, while nobles murmured behind him—suspiciously discussing his inhuman strength and the dangers of being an Awakener. And yet, it was the most mundane setting for Yudrain Aile, the Commander of the Cavalry unit, where several people would furtively seek his attention, hoping to ask something of him.

Someone raised a toast to the great Commander Yudrain Aile. He was no stranger to poison drinks served with ill intent, but since he had never fallen for it before, he took the glass without worry. "When will they stop this foolishness?" he remembered thinking. But this time was different.

The moment he drank, his stomach burned and dizziness overwhelmed him. Sensing his heart rate accelerate, he frowned, prompting concerned voices to rise around him. Of course, most of those voices were disingenuous, exaggeratedly loud to maintain an appearance.

"Is the day finally here? The day this inhuman monster, this lowborn, falls?"

"Could I be the first to witness such an extraordinary and interesting spectacle?"

Behind these easily-read expressions, the relaxed face of Emperor Katchian was visible, seated comfortably on his golden throne. He seemed indifferent to the state of his favored subordinate, sipping his own drink.

Gazing beyond a beautifully crafted glass, Yuder's eyes met the emperor's—turbid and red.

In that moment, when his knees nearly gave out as if looking through a shattered mirror, a phrase brushed Yuder's mind.

"—You'll always have those who look down on you. But remember, a Commander has no need to lower himself."

To others, and to himself.

Strength returned to Yuder's legs. He neither staggered nor fell.

Firmly planting his feet on the ground, he slowly looked around, as if nothing had changed. Those who met his gaze hastily looked away. The person who handed him the drink had long since paled.

Though his head was still dull and his blood still rushed quickly,

Nothing had changed.

Yudrain Aile did not falter before those who wished for his downfall. With an unchanged complexion, he drank more, sending a shiver of terror through those present. Nobody dared stop him as he left the party, bottle in hand.

Back in the Commander's room, Yuder tried to recall the taste of the Quelochet he had drunk. But he couldn't remember it, perhaps because he would get drunk right away. All he could summon was the distinct smell of dust from that very room.

Yuder had never shown anyone the way he got drunk. All he did was sit in a chair, feeling his body temperature slowly rise and then fall again, while staring at the night sky beyond the window.

And when he grew bored, he would count the passage of time with dimmed eyes, for no particular reason, until his inebriation faded.

Until his body temperature returned to normal and sounds became audible again, until he could no longer revel in thoughtless silence. On and on it went.

He had decided it would be so...

"...Suddenly feeling tipsy, aren't we?"

A voice suddenly pierced his ears. The muffled noises that had surrounded him disappeared, replaced by a sudden clarity of voice. Yuder opened his heavy eyes.

Though his head and senses remained dull, the presence of the person before him felt incredibly vivid. His body sensed the other's presence before his ears did.

Where he was standing, what he was looking at, how he approached, how he was extending his hand... Everything felt palpably connected by some invisible force.

Even though his vision was obstructed by a ceremonial robe, his body, highly alert, didn't budge an inch before the reaching hand. The sporadic tension that had shielded him from the surroundings now lay still, killing his ragged breaths.

And finally, the hand, imbued with a chilly scent, slowly lifted the flap of the ceremonial robe that had covered Yuder's face.

When the sun is at its zenith, people easily forget that night had existed just a few hours ago.

The moment Yuder locked eyes with Kishiar La Orr, he momentarily forgot all the memories that had surfaced from the darkness that had covered his face.

"..."

"Yuder Aile, can you hear me?"

To meet Yuder's gaze, Kishiar had knelt down. Yuder realized the familiarity of the scene.

'When was it?'

He cautiously met Kishiar's gaze; that face, though gentle, failed to fully suppress the fiery emotion within its eyes.

'When...'

"Yuder."

White fingertips touched Yuder's cheek. In that moment, Yuder realized what he had been trying to remember.

It was the moment he had manifested his second gender.

"...Commander."

His lips parted, slightly damp. Kishiar seemed to instantly recognize who Yuder was referring to, nodding his head.

"Good, you can hear my voice."

"When...did you arrive? Why..."

"That's not important."

Kishiar turned his head slightly to better lock eyes with Yuder, his voice soft but firm.

"May I remove your gloves? I heard you were injured."

"That has...healed, but..."

"I know. There's something I want to check. It'll only take a moment."

"..."

"Is that alright?"

Yuder flinched as the hand pulling at his fingertips made its move, yet offered no resistance. Two gloves were removed with a tingling sensation; he felt Kishiar pass them to someone behind him, but he let it be.

"If something turns up, we'll take care of it immediately."

"Is it... serious? Had he... used too much power? Is he alright, Commander?"

"He's fine. The priest and apothecary said so, so we will need to be careful from now on."

"I'm relieved, but still..."

"..."

"Understood. Then..."

A brief exchange later, the door closed again. Now, only the two of them remained in the lounge.

When Kishiar attempted to kneel before him again, Yuder extended his hand, clenching and unclenching his fist. He wanted to speak, but his mouth felt too heavy to open. He merely lowered his head slightly, but the perceptive man quickly caught on to Yuder's intentions.

"Do you not like it when I sit like this?"

"..."

"I understand."

Soon after, Yuder felt the seat next to him sink as a palpable weight settled. A comforting warmth enveloped him, much like a quilt.

He hadn't noticed until then, but someone had turned off all the lights in the lounge. The room was eerily silent and dim. A window, not too far away, was slightly ajar, letting in a night breeze that tickled his face.

Yuder let the silence wash over him, staring into space as if by habit. As he slowly cycled through this, the tension drained from his body and he relaxed completely.

It was then that he heard the voice again.

"What are you thinking about right now, my assistant?"

Yuder's eyes blinked slowly. The smiling, pale face before him seemed oddly unfamiliar. The excessive beauty of the visage made it appear half-unreal, like something from a dream or fantasy.

"...Counting."

"Counting what?"

"Counting the passing moments."

"Counting the passage of time was also a game I often played long ago."

"..."

"In my case, it was because lying in bed got tedious. Do you feel the same?"

‘Is it tedious?’ Yuder asked himself, then shook his head.

"It's not tedious."

"Do you, in fact, enjoy spending time like this?"

He didn't respond, but the other man didn't seem to mind.

"Hmm. That's quite interesting, a fact I've learned for the first time."

The man chuckled softly. Amidst everything feeling slow and dull, that laughter touched something deep within Yuder, making his chest tingle.

Perhaps because of that, Yuder suddenly found himself speaking more openly than he had intended.

"I've always counted like this, even before."

For a moment, there was a brief silence beside him, then a slightly lower voice spoke.

"Even before, you say?"

"..."

"Have you often counted time while as intoxicated as tonight?"

Chapter 515

It was a difficult question to answer. How many times would be considered many, and how many times would suffice for the answer to be 'few'? After a moment of silence, Yuder gave the best answer he could muster with his clouded mind.

"I don't know."

"I see..."

Kishiar didn't say anything more.

The room once again fell into a heavy quietude. As Yuder took a deep breath and opened his eyes, he felt a gentle touch on his cheek. A familiar scent tickled his nose, and simultaneously, his head felt even hazier. The tension drained from his previously rigid body.

It was a sensation similar to the tipsiness he had been experiencing, yet somehow different.

What was different? His slow-moving thoughts eventually came to a standstill. He didn't feel like pondering over something so taxing while inebriated. Instead, Yuder fixed his gaze on the man's face that had caught his attention, as well as the window beyond him.

Before he knew it, the heat that had risen noticeably in his body yearned for the cool breeze blowing in through the window crack.

Just as he moved to catch a little more of the breeze, Kishiar finally turned his head toward him.

"Is it hot?"

"Yes."

"If you want to catch some air, that direction would be better. There's a door leading to the balcony."

Kishiar pointed in a direction obscured by furniture and pillars. Without a word, Yuder stood and walked in that direction. Though slightly dizzy, walking wasn't an issue. His feet, however, felt as if they were floating above the ground.

"Be careful."

The man who naturally followed beside him gently steered Yuder's shoulder, subtly adjusting his direction a couple of times. Although he wanted to say it wasn't necessary, his lips felt heavy again, and he simply exhaled.

Kishiar was right. Pushing open a door that was so adorned with intricate artwork it was hard to tell if it was a door or a wall, Yuder discovered a hidden balcony.

The balcony, furnished with an exceptionally plush long chair and low table, looked as though it was designed to be a rendezvous point for lovers. However, the view below was too splendid to be wasted on such trysts.

The expansive garden extending from the palace, the numerous grand sculptures forming fountains, and an artificial canal traversing them were softly illuminated by decorative lights. The faint sound of people talking in the distance mixed with music, adding another layer to the picturesque scene.

Yuder leaned against the railing and deeply inhaled the breeze that cooled his heat.

"One reason Cantameria Palace is famous is for this view. From here, you can see all the most beautiful parts of the garden at once. In the summer, you can even watch people sailing little boats on the canal."

Yuder wasn't particularly imaginative, but while listening to Kishiar's melodic voice right next to him, he almost felt like he could see the scene in his mind's eye.

Despite being overly accustomed to palace parties, this was a novel experience for him.

"Rather than counting the passing time, it's more enjoyable to watch scenes like this."

Indeed, that was true. Staring into the darkness or merely gazing at the sky outside the window offered far less to see.

And even more colorful and varied than this beautiful scenery were the countless emotions reflected in the eyes of the man standing beside him.

Suddenly turning his head to meet those eyes, Yuder realized a bit later than usual that he couldn't look away.

And he also realized that the eyes staring back at him looked deeper than usual, tinged with an indescribable pain.

"Why?"

The moment he wanted to know the reason behind that gaze, his heavy lips parted.

"Why do you look at me that way?"

"If you want to find the answer to an unprovable question, you must first begin to trust, even under unbelievable conditions."

The reply did not directly answer Yuder's question.

"For me, it's about trusting all the information given to me without doubt, and finding the point where all of it could become the truth. It's a terribly difficult and challenging task, but perhaps the answer I seek lies there."

The voice continued evenly, revealing no particular emotion.

"I thought I was doing well up to that point... but as I come to know more and more, I realize it's becoming even harder for precisely that reason."

Due to his dulled senses, Yuder couldn't fully comprehend even half of what was said.

"I... I don't quite understand what you're saying."

"..."

Red eyes disappeared between golden eyelashes.

A moment later, he reached out and pulled Yuder into a tight embrace. It was the strongest force he had exerted thus far. Breathing became momentarily difficult, but Yuder didn't push him away. There was no reply, but somehow, it felt alright just like this.

"Shall we dance?"

Kishiar spoke again around the time the distant music ended and the next song began.

"Suddenly, what...?"

"Is there any reason not to dance when there's music and a companion who has stolen my heart? Dancing is the best when one is intoxicated."

Strangely, Kishiar seemed more intoxicated than Yuder, who was likely the one who had been drinking. But then again, Kishiar had always been unpredictable. Before they knew it, their hands were clasped in a familiar manner.

It was not a perfect pose like in the ballroom. The movements were erratic, mostly consisting of slow spins with arms around each other's waists. It was laughable to call it dancing, but, oddly enough, the chaotic dance wasn't so bad.

"You just smiled."

After almost tripping over each other's feet and barely recovering by almost collapsing onto a chair, Kishiar said so.

"I don't know... "

"You smiled, I swear on my name."

The man holding Yuder in his arms replied with assertive certainty. Yuder looked at him blankly, then furrowed his brow.

"Don't swear on your name for something so strange."

"It's not strange. Seeing that you're now capable of smiling, I think it's important enough to swear on."

After saying this, Kishiar gently kissed the top of Yuder's head.

"Do you remember? The day we first went on a vacation together."

The words flowed out casually, but Yuder instinctively felt they carried immense significance.

"I felt overwhelmed by some enormous emotion that I couldn't fully understand. Tears came to my eyes; it was that intense. At the time, I didn't know what it was..."

The man who had momentarily paused looked into Yuder's eyes, which were fixed on his face, and smiled bitterly.

"...After experiencing it once more just now, I think I understand."

That enormous, overwhelming feeling that painfully stabbed at the heart.

That agony.

"It wasn't just mine... Yours was undoubtedly mixed in there too."

It was an assertion that needed no reply.

Yuder felt a faint dizziness surging in his head.

...

A distant knock sounded at the door. Kishiar, holding Yuder in his arms as if he were half-asleep, returned to the inner part of the balcony. After laying him on the sofa and covering him with a red cloth, Kishiar opened the door. Kanna Wand appeared with a tense expression on her face, clutching the gloves she had taken off Yuder.

"Commander."

"Was there a harvest?"

"Yes. But Yuder is..."

Kanna's eyes briefly darted to behind Kishiar's back. Her expression changed to one of sorrow upon confirming Yuder's reclined figure. Kishiar added a word for her sake.

"He seems fine. From what I've seen so far, he's not showing any symptoms more severe than earlier."

Of course, by "not more severe than earlier," Kishiar meant not worse than when he first found him. He didn't bother mentioning that Yuder's condition was somewhat removed from what one would generally consider 'intoxication.'

"Ah... That's a relief. Truly."

Relieved, Kanna immediately resumed her clear-headed and determined expression.

"The information gleaned from the gloves, and what I've heard from Enon the pharmacist, and Priest Lusan, all match. Yuder picked up a knight's emblem dropped by the individual he met here and was injured by a sharp part of it while the individual was trying to retrieve it. Everything else, including the healing process, is exactly as you know."

"What about the part where it was an accident?"

"It's difficult to read the exact circumstances, but it seems that Yuder indeed believed it was accidental. No information suggesting he was exerting force in a fight or argument with the individual was detected."

"I see. Then it is as expected."

"As expected, you say..."

Kanna trailed off, her expression asking for further clarification.

Kishiar opened his mouth slowly, his face devoid of any smile.

"You do know that the individual Yuder met was the Crown Prince's escort knight, don't you?"

"Yes."

"The emblems of the Imperial Guard Knights are usually made in a color that represents their master, and it's customary to pass them on to the successor, unless the knight leaves the post in disgrace. Therefore, they are made from materials that are highly durable and long-lasting."

And the color that represents the Crown Prince is red.

Kanna blinked for a moment, not fully grasping the implication. A beautiful yet icy smile surfaced on Kishiar's lips.

"Can you guess what might be the most appropriate material for such a token?"

For a moment, Kanna's eyes widened as if she had guessed something.

"You can't mean..."

"Yes. It's a byproduct from a monster."

Chapter 516

Not all the Imperial Guards in the Imperial Palace used badges made from monster by-products. However, it was a fact that monster by-products were considered some of the most durable materials.

Moreover, when it came to finding a material imbued with the symbolic red color of the Crown Prince, this was far superior to any gemstone or metal. Teeth and bones that emerged from monsters often had a red hue, and they could symbolize the glory of the First Crown Prince of the Orr Empire, Aclan La Orr, who was famous as an exceptional monster hunter under the title of 'Red Brilliance.'

Considering Yuder Aile's sole weakness, it would be more surprising to guess that the badge wasn't made from monster by-products.

Yuder probably didn't pay much attention to what the emblem was made of. Kiolle Da Diarca, who supplied the emblem, also likely didn't know; considering the burden of the oath and his usual demeanor, the chance that Kiolle had made an informed decision was exceedingly low.

However, it wasn't surprising that Yuder experienced a sensitive reaction from an object made of monster by-products while under the influence of Quelochet, a substance as polar opposite to his nature.

Even the tiniest wound could be the final straw that leads to death if the body it inflicted was already in a precarious state, like a cup filled to the brim with water.

How would it be for someone who had just barely recovered from injuries? Fever, drowsiness, and dimming of sight and hearing are common signs of intoxication, but they are also symptoms commonly experienced by those weakly poisoned.

Yuder himself had merely called it intoxication, but his instinct thought otherwise. The lounge was still a mess from the objects scattered about due to the force exerted to block out anyone from approaching him.

Kishiar thought of Yuder, who was huddled in a dark corner of the lounge, his imperial robes thrown over him like a cloak. It was a temporary measure Enon had taken to calm him down, cloaking his eyes to forcibly soothe the beast within. However, the chill Kishiar felt when he faced Yuder in that moment was like a blade slicing through him.

And what about the moment when Yuder, so guarded against the outside world, leaned his head against Kishiar's hand without any resistance?

When the question Kishiar had thrown out to lighten the atmosphere and gauge his condition was returned, Kishiar La Orr felt an indescribable upheaval of enormous emotions within him.

Yuder Aile, now unusually lucid, displayed an expression that seemed as worn and weathered as the surface of a long-eroded stone. His eyes, empty of anything, paradoxically let one feel the fierce tempests he must have faced.

The moment Kishiar wanted to know about that tempest, and that as-yet-unknown answer, unfamiliar sensations began to stir and spread within his chest. The alien feeling of something new inserting itself among his own contained emotions felt eerily similar to the sensations they had first experienced when they became intimate.

The only difference was that if the new sensation they had felt back then was a mix of pain, joy, and ecstasy, this time it was a seemingly calm but unfathomable darkness, under which lay hidden a weighty sorrow.

"...So, what should we do now, Commander?"

Kishiar paused his thoughts at Kanna's question and looked up.

Sending Yuder back first and then ending the party would be easy. But doing so would erase the advantages Yuder Aile had gained by drinking Quelochet. There was no intention of ruining the sacrifices and efforts he had made to successfully conclude the day.

"So... there's only one thing left."

The best course of action for his Cavalry was to keep his condition and weaknesses a secret, ensuring the party ended successfully without anyone knowing the situation.

Kishiar calmly assessed the matters that would follow the party and spoke.

"How are things in the hall?"

"So far, not bad. Everyone believes Yuder is resting without any issues. After you came over, the Crown Prince and the other nobles seemed a bit suspicious, but..."

"Fine. Then proceed with the party as planned. I will return to the hall shortly. Keep an eye on Yuder for a moment."

"Are you sure? What if Yuder's condition changes again like before..."

"That won't happen, don't worry."

From the moment Kishiar came into contact with Yuder, his condition had rapidly stabilized. Kishiar was confident that Yuder wouldn't drastically deteriorate even if he left, especially since Yuder had even recovered enough to dance.

"Inform the others that I had to meet a guest separately and can't return immediately. If someone comes to visit following my instructions, let only that person in."

Kishiar intended to attribute this 'guest' to the Empress, who had vacated her seat. It wouldn't be suspicious for the Empress to secretly send someone to inquire about today's top performer. She would also readily cooperate once she heard the situation, allowing for quick resolution. It would be easier to divert attention if the Empress, rather than the Emperor, was involved.

Kishiar mentally reviewed the tasks and contacts he needed to make, then straightened his clothes. He had covered Yuder with the red cloth he had been wearing around his shoulders and waist, leaving him somewhat underdressed, but he had no intention of correcting that.

Before leaving the lounge, Kishiar took one last glance back. The quiet figure lying there seemed peaceful, which only weighed heavier on his heart.

He closed his eyes and recalled the brief smile Yuder Aile had shown.

The small breath that had escaped when he hurriedly caught him from tripping; the awkward yet sincere smile that was rare at his age.

That was reason enough to move his reluctant feet.

...

When he came to his senses, he was told the party had ended.

That alone was bewildering enough, but what startled Yuder more was the fact that the Empress's chief maid was right in front of him.

"I'm glad you've awakened safely, Baron Aile."

She introduced herself as Countess Algorita Barnez. The story of how this came to be was first told by Kanna, who had been tending to him, but he couldn't help but feel strangely about it.

"When Her Majesty the Empress hears that you have regained consciousness, she will be truly delighted."

Algorita appeared to be exceptionally generous, a rare sight in the palace. She didn't seem displeased even after mentioning that the Empress had sent her here due to Kishiar's request, and although she seemed talkative, she didn't show excessive curiosity towards Yuder.

She smiled like a simple country wife, yet the way she maintained her composure suggested she fit perfectly as a close aide to the Empress, someone who would grow medicinal herbs herself and bring them all the way to the Sun Palace.

Judging by the decent expression on Kanna, who stood beside her, it seemed she too had a rather favorable impression of her.

"...Thank you. Please also convey my deepest gratitude to Her Majesty the Empress."

"Of course. There's nothing better than onion soup after drinking poor-quality alcohol. Make sure to have some."

She answered cheerfully, but instead of getting up to leave, she unexpectedly addressed Yuder with additional words.

"By the way, Baron Aile. Do you have any plans to visit the Dawn Palace soon?"

"Excuse me?"

"Although I came here at the request of His Grace, Duke Peletta, the truth is that Her Majesty the Empress has taken an interest in you, Baron Aile. She asked me to inquire about your willingness to visit, should you wake up safely."

Upon Yuder blinking his eyes, she flashed a somewhat secretive yet bitter smile.

"It seems many questions have arisen since your last visit to the Sun Palace... but Her Majesty said it's perfectly fine to decline if you're too burdened by the many Cavalry projects. So feel free to answer."

Declining wasn't on his mind at all. This was nothing but a confirmation of Kishiar's plan to first stimulate the Empress's side instead of Emperor Keilusa, who had strongly rejected any attempts at treatment.

However, Yuder was momentarily displeased, sensing the Empress's thoughts in her words that he could decline the invitation even as she made it.

"I'm fine with it. If Her Majesty the Empress calls for me, I can go at any time. Please relay that for future reference."

Upon hearing the quiet yet prompt acceptance, Algorita's expression brightened. She then said she would contact the Cavalry later and exited the lounge.

The next person he made eye contact with was Kanna.

Chapter 517

Until now, whenever Kanna caught eyes with Yuder, she'd strangely hesitate and either back away or avoid him altogether. This time was different. Her gaze, filled with indescribable emotions, briefly met Yuder's before fading away with a sigh that seemed to sink into the earth.

Yuder decided to break the silence for her sake.

"Kanna, can you tell me what exactly happened after I got drunk?"

He had woken up to Kanna's news that the party was over, and that Kishiar had sent the Empress's chief maid for some reason. However, he hadn't heard any further details.

While it was good that the party had ended, he was deeply curious to know if it had concluded in a joyful atmosphere.

"After Commander Kishiar checked on you and left, there were no issues. Everyone had fun. People were fascinated when they heard that you and I would be meeting with the Empress's entourage and would stay at the party a little longer. Most have returned to the Cavalry by now."

Kanna had to stay by Yuder's side in Kishiar's absence. To facilitate this, the Empress had decided to feign interest not only in Yuder but also in Kanna.

Given Kanna Wand's contributions in investigating the huge mana stone vein buried in the Great Sarain Forest, nobody questioned this. She had even received an award next to Ever for her work.

Nobody dared to intrude into their private room, and they could pass the time peacefully until Yuder's condition improved. The party had concluded without incident, a success by all measures.

"And what about the Crown Prince and the other nobles?"

"It's hard to say for certain... but no one openly inquired about you."

"That's good."

Yuder felt a sense of relief. It was clear that Kishiar had effectively filled his absence and wrapped up the party well. He had been secretly anxious, wondering if he had somehow disrupted the ongoing smooth proceedings. With a lighter heart, he sighed, his aching head clearing.

'I wonder why I got so seriously drunk out of the blue... I should ask Kishiar about that part when I meet him.'

He had been too intoxicated to think properly when his sudden drunkenness had hit. Even now, he could only vaguely recall what had happened then. But he distinctly remembered that Kishiar had visited and then left.

Kishiar's characteristic musky scent still lingered faintly in the room, steadying his mind.

"Thanks for letting me know. And... I'm sorry."

He had merely lain there, but Kanna had missed out on the party because of him. Lately, she had been behaving strangely, and he couldn't rule out that she felt even more uncomfortable than she looked.

As he apologized, Kanna's expression changed. Her eyes and ears reddened, and her tightly closed lips trembled slightly. Yuder could tell she was still suppressing her emotions.

"Don't apologize."

"But you didn't get to enjoy the party because of me."

"I wasn't enjoying it from the start. Being here is far better than dodging people who were unnecessarily talking to me just to extract some information about the mana stone vein."

"Someone did that to you? Who?"

Yuder was incredulous that any noble would dare to pull such a stunt on one of the Deputy Commanders of the Cavalry. At that, Kanna frowned for the first time and chuckled softly.

"Will you go beat them up again if you know who they are? Forget it. I didn't say it for that reason."

"I have more than a hundred ways to deal with it without getting caught. Just give me a description if you don't know their name."

"I said forget it."

Kanna, who had sternly shaken her head, averted her gaze slightly and mumbled after a moment.

"It's not that I don't want to; it's just that I've already taken care of those annoying people with my own power. There's no need for you to get involved."

"..."

When Kanna first joined the Cavalry, she had been afraid to even visit the imperial palace for fear of running into her father. Seeing Yuder's expression, Kanna realized anew that her father was no longer around, and her face brightened slightly more than before.

"Don't worry. I've controlled my powers well enough not to get caught. At most, the Cavalry will just be a bit more cautious, thinking they know more petty details than they actually do. That's not so bad, is it?"

"...Fine. Well done."

In the end, that was all he could say.

What should he say next? He wanted to ask why Kanna was avoiding him, but he hesitated as he couldn't even guess the reason.

He used to speak without such concerns, but it seemed he had changed in that regard.

"Yuder."

As if sensing his hesitation, Kanna spoke up. A similar sense of hesitancy briefly flickered across her now more relaxed face.

"You knew I've been avoiding you a bit lately, right?"

"Yes."

A complex array of emotions flashed across Kanna's face, which was slightly biting her lip.

"It's not that I wanted to avoid you. I just didn't know what to say when I saw you... I thought it would get better with time, but it hasn't... Anyway, it's not your fault. There's no serious issue. I was planning on saying this first today, but given the circumstances, I'm saying it now."

While she said it wasn't his fault, the idea of avoiding someone because you don't know what to say to them was puzzling.

"I don't understand why you have to avoid me if it's not my fault. You don't have to hold back, just tell me honestly."

"It's really not your fault."

"If you think cursing me out or using weapons would help, go ahead."

"Why are you so extreme? I have no reason to do that to you! Have you forgotten that I've always been on your side, no matter what?"

Kanna asked incredulously. A mixture of an unwilling smile and a sigh creased her scrunched eyes. "I really didn't want it to come to this," she mumbled, burying her face in her hands. When she looked up again, her unchanging affection for Yuder remained.

"Well, considering your nature, it's probably why you ended up facing that mad Baron on behalf of others this time too."

"..."

The sudden accusation startled him. It was like hearing what he thought would be said by Kishiar in advance, and he felt irritated.

"But I really like that about you, Yuder. That's why... I'm so worried about you."

"You don't have to worry. I'm fine now. What happened earlier was just a phase. Time passed and I'm back to normal."

"It's not that kind of problem..."

Kanna's voice trailed off as she exhaled a long sigh. She followed it with a frustrated groan, rubbing her face vigorously with her hands. Her agony and torment were evident.

"Kanna, are you sure it's not because of me? If it's so uncomfortable talking to me, how about discussing it with the Commander?"

"No! ... No, but... fine, I'll tell you. It's my problem. It's because of my ability."

No sooner had Yuder suggested consulting with Kishiar first than Kanna vehemently rejected the idea and shouted out as if she were a machine gun.

"Your ability?"

In that moment, Yuder felt a sudden chill creep down his spine. There was only one issue that would make Kanna this anguished and blame it on her own ability.

"...Did you read something from me?"

Yuder recalled a previous conversation where Kanna had mentioned the difficulty of controlling her rapidly-developing ability, which sometimes read information from those around her without warning. Yuder had considered the possibility that one day he too could be read. Fortunately, her ability didn't go as far as reading people themselves or peering definitively into their memories. He had judged that if needed, there was plenty of room for explanation.

But this was sooner than expected.

"...Ugh!"

Instead of answering, Kanna bowed her head once again, burying her face in her knees. Her ear tips, visible through her neatly combed and pinned-up bobbed hair, had turned a vivid red.

Yuder thought the only information to be read from him would naturally relate to his past life, but her reaction was oddly curious.

'...Could she have read something related to my previous life?'

Just then, the slow knocking of a door accompanied an outside voice.

"I heard Yuder is awake. May I come in?"

It was Kishiar. Kanna quickly corrected her posture and sprung to her feet, rushing toward the door.

Chapter 518

The person who stepped through the open door was not alone. Nathan Zuckerman, who had skipped today's party, quietly followed behind Kishiar.

"As soon as I received the news, I came. Has anything out of the ordinary happened in the meantime?"

"No."

Kanna responded with a tense face.

"You've done a lot. I'll leave you in charge of leading the remaining members back to headquarters."

"Understood. Then I'll take my leave. Also, I'll give this back to you."

Bowing her head slightly, Kanna glanced at Yuder. Her gaze was filled with complex, indescribable emotions.

"... Yuder. See you later."

Yuder was deeply curious about what information Kanna had gleaned from him, but now didn't seem like the time to inquire.

'I guess she's not avoiding me like before... I should talk to her properly when I get back.'

After Kanna left, Nathan Zuckerman closed the door behind him to ward off any potential visitors who might come to the lounge.

Finally alone, Kishiar dropped the smile he had been wearing. Approaching him was a man exuding a mix of various smells, from alcohol to food, suggesting he had been constantly on the move.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I apologize for causing you concern."

"Looks like you really have woken up."

Kishiar let out a soft sigh. Sitting across from him, he asked Yuder what he remembered up to this point. Yuder detailed the events that occurred when he met Kiolle, and what happened immediately afterwards.

"So you remember my coming and going, but not the specifics of our conversations?"

"Yes."

"Any idea why you got suddenly intoxicated?"

"I felt intoxicated after receiving treatment for the wound on my hand. I suspect something related happened in that interval. Did you find out anything related to this?"

"Yes. The object that wounded your hand belonged to a knight from the Diarca Family who had served the Emperor five generations ago when he was a Crown Prince. It was made from the fang of a monster called the Red-winged Drakandia."

Kishiar spoke smoothly, without hesitation. While listening to him, Yuder felt astonished.

'I didn't know such a minor detail...'

He had known that the material symbolizing the red color of the Crown Prince's escort knights was made from monster byproducts, but he had never anticipated that this detail could lead to his current situation.

Normally, even if he had a 'weakness,' such a minor wound wouldn't have affected him much. In fact, thinking back on his past life, wounds inflicted by monsters healed more slowly and resisted magic and medicinal treatment, but they ultimately healed, and he never found them particularly inconvenient.

'Could the problem have been that I was injured while I had consumed Quelochet?'

In retrospect, the small scratch seemed to bleed continuously, refusing to clot.

"I don't think Kiolle Da Diarca did this intentionally. But don't take this matter lightly either."

"What do you mean?"

At Kishiar's words, heavy with implications, Yuder looked up. Kishiar's face tightened, his expression a smile that wasn't quite a smile.

"Apparently, my assistant has a tendency to underestimate the power of what he himself has publicly acknowledged as his 'sole weakness.'"

"..."

"A mundane drink can become poison depending on the person. You can see that from the not-so-rare stories of people dying from alcohol. So what would a drink designed to exploit a 'weakness' do to you?"

Yuder broke the silence, finally speaking.

"Do you think what I experienced was more than mere intoxication?"

"The sensations felt by those who are drunk and those experiencing mild withdrawal symptoms can be quite similar. If my assistant had ever been drunk on some other drink, he could have differentiated between the two. But if he has never been intoxicated by something unrelated to his 'weakness,' how can he be sure it was just simple drunkenness?"

That was indeed the case. Aside from the drink made with monster blood that contained poison, and what he had consumed today, Yuder could not say with certainty that he had ever been intoxicated.

A heavy voice, laden with implications too significant for phrases like "I was fine," echoed in his ears.

"This time, the effects were not severe and you recovered quickly, which is fortunate. But we cannot say for certain that it will be the same next time. You understand what I mean better than anyone else."

"...Yes."

"I know why you drank the Quilochet, and if I were in the same situation, and thought I could handle it without any slip-ups, I would have done the same. So, I won't say anything more about that. But now that both of us have come to know facts that we were previously unaware of, should a similar situation arise in the future... your judgment must be different."

Kishiar made it clear that this was all he expected.

Even though his tone remained calm, the weight of his words was immense. Yuder knew that every word was correct, which made them all the more impactful.

"Is there anything else you'd like to discuss about this matter?"

"Nothing, Commander. My judgment was inadequate. It won't happen again."

Shaking his head, Kishiar exhaled deeply and closed his eyes. As his penetrating red gaze disappeared behind his eyelids, a restless tension bubbled up within Yuder.

That tension seemed to stem from an inexplicable urge that could only be alleviated by seeing those eyes again.

Finally, Kishiar opened his eyes. Gone was the emotionless face of the Cavalry Commander, replaced by the warm expression of a deeply passionate man.

"...Yuder."

"Yes."

"Come here."

Without a word, Yuder moved closer. The man took his hand and gently guided it onto his lap before speaking again.

"Place your hand here."

As Yuder extended both hands, the man took out a pair of white gloves from his lap and began to silently put them on Yuder's hands, one at a time. They were the very gloves Yuder had worn earlier but had taken off after being wounded.

The scent that enveloped him as their bodies drew near was deeply intoxicating. It made Yuder want to close his eyes and lose himself in it.

"Would it be alright to ask how you knew in advance that Quilochet would be given to you?"

After completing the right glove, Kishiar started on the left as he asked the question. Yuder had been contemplating discussing this point in more detail since the party, so he readily responded.

"I didn't exactly anticipate that it would happen. I merely thought various methods might be employed, and one of them happened to match. I also considered the possibility that it could be a gift to someone else, not me."

"Various methods, you say."

Kishiar paused while fitting the glove onto Yuder's left hand, seemingly contemplating the torn part that had scratched against a pin. Silence filled the space for a moment. Yuder could almost sense the multitude of thoughts crossing Kishiar's mind with just that phrase.

"Do you remember earlier, when I visited, you talked as if you'd been drunk like this multiple times before?"

"...Did I say that?"

That was something Yuder hadn't considered. His confused blinking was met with a faint smile from Kishiar.

"I'm telling you because it's unfair for me to remember something you said while you don't. But judging by your expression, I don't need to ask further."

"Did I say anything else?"

"Most of what you said was endearing."

Even though he had little memory of it, Yuder felt that must be a joke.

Kishiar didn't let go of Yuder's hand, even after putting on both gloves. He leaned forward and tenderly kissed Yuder's nape. The overwhelming sensation instantly scattered Yuder's lingering questions like fog. Yuder tightened his grip on their entwined hands and pulled Kishiar toward him.

The moment their eyes met, nothing else was needed. Kishiar's lips met Yuder's in a kiss that conveyed more emotion than a hundred words could. They both felt a renewed understanding of how bodily warmth could express far more than spoken language.

"...Did you get a message that Her Majesty the Empress wishes to see me?"

Yuder broke the long kiss and spoke softly.

"No."

"I told her I would come."

"Then it seems I will set foot in the Dawn Palace after a long time."

Kishiar declared his intent to accompany Yuder as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Chapter 519

They left the break room as if nothing had happened. The hall where the party had concluded was long empty, and quiet had settled in. The only thing left in the silent space was the massive head of Pethuamet, placed on a cart to be later transferred to the Sun Palace.

Yuder stared silently at the head, which cast a shadow as if a symbol of something.

Throughout the party, he had seen many who had avoided and feared that head. However, some people bravely approached it, inspecting it closely and even thanking the Cavalry or asking about events that had taken place in the west. A good number among them were either related to houses friendly to the Emperor or those who had directly benefited from the west being their homeland.

These were sights Yuder could not have seen during the Harvest Festival, when many had deliberately ignored the very existence of the Cavalry. It was proof that changes were happening continuously, even in places that were not directly visible to Yuder's eyes.

Although Yuder himself had contributed to killing the monster quicker and differently than in his previous life, he wasn't responsible for the changes that followed. The ones shaking a world that had seemed set in its courses were Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar.

No matter how much people like Duke Diarca tried to suppress the existence of the Cavalry and the changing world, things would not roll along as they did in Yuder's previous life.

'For that very reason... the Emperor must survive,' he thought.

"What are you thinking so deeply about? Are you perhaps regretful about leaving that behind?"

"No," Yuder replied, breaking his reverie and turning away. Kishiar, who had casually glanced at the head of Pethuamet, narrowed his eyes, emitting a sound of approval.

"Good. I was feeling quite relieved to leave it behind. It would have been slightly tragic if you were feeling regretful."

Yuder calmly refuted, stating that he, too, felt better about leaving the head behind. Kishiar burst into laughter, prompting Nathan Zuckerman, who was walking ahead, to turn around with a curious expression. Yuder thought his gaze was strangely similar to Kanna's.

Thus ended the grand party held to celebrate the Cavalry.

"Sir Kiolle, what is that you're holding in your hand?"

"It's a symbol of an escort knight for His Highness," Kiolle responded, trying to maintain his composure as he heard the slow-rolling sound of the carriage wheels on the way to the Bright Palace. He had been holding it in his hand out of fear of losing it, surprised that it had been noticed and commented upon.

"Is it broken?"

"The pin fell off by accident earlier. I'm planning to have it repaired on the way back."

"Unfortunate. It seemed fine before you left your position. Did it happen on the way back?"

"Yes."

"There's a superstition among the escort knights that dropping your symbol brings bad luck for a while. Be careful."

"...Thank you for your concern."

He had been unaware of the superstition, but hearing it now made everything suddenly feel unfortunate.

"Then again, the whole situation is already unfortunate..."

The information he had heard from Yuder Aile today and the tasks he needed to focus on were already headache-inducing. And now, the Crown Prince, who had never shown an ounce of interest in him since he became an escort knight, suddenly struck up a conversation. Had he raised suspicions when he stepped away earlier? Even though Kiolle believed it unlikely, he felt extremely uneasy, as if he were sitting on a bed of thorns.

And as if sensing that discomfort and deliberately prodding at it, the Crown Prince opened his mouth again.

"But, who exactly is it?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm talking about the one you consider important enough to leave the party to meet, and with whom you've spent such an engrossing time that you've lost your emblem."

Kiolle was so surprised that he almost gasped for breath.

"Wha-, what do you mean? I don't quite..."

"I have ears too, you know. I've heard rumors that you've had a 'deep meeting' with someone during the previous party in the palace, enough to catch the eye of patrolling guards. Was the person you met today the same one?"

"..."

A pale Kiolle recalled Yuder Aile, whom he had encountered during the party on the last day of the Harvest Festival. That day, Yuder had grabbed Kiolle's collar and feigned intimacy to avoid the gaze of the patrolling guards. Kiolle had thought he'd successfully buried those rumors, so they wouldn't lead back to him. Had he not?

'No, more importantly, does he really not believe my excuse?'

Apparently, he didn't believe him, and he was correct in assuming that Kiolle had met the same person both previously and today. However, it seemed he didn't know that person was from the cursed Cavalry.

But the 'deep meeting' the Crown Prince was hinting at was absolutely, positively not the case between Kiolle and his companion. The emblem that Kiolle had lost wasn't because they had a deep relationship; it was a simple, unfortunate mistake. Checking the condition of an old emblem was the servant's job, not his own.

Meeting Yuder was a matter with not a shred of shame. Kiolle felt a slight guilt toward his father, but if things were sorted out, both his father and the Crown Prince would surely understand! It was an act full of sincerity and concern.

The Crown Prince was clearly deeply misunderstanding something.

'I'm not some sort of philanderer!'

But Kiolle couldn't figure out what to say to correct him.

Kiolle's slightly parted lips trembled. Yet, to the Crown Prince, that shiver seemed to indicate something else entirely.

"You seem surprised. I didn't mean to probe. It's just a little sad to think that even you, the Duke's most cherished child, might have secrets you can't share with your parents. Judging from the times you've left, I can roughly guess who this person might be."

"I... I..."

"It's fine. I have no intention of speaking about it elsewhere."

"..."

"By the way, I noticed you headed in the direction of the lounge when you left. Did you happen to see the assistant of the Cavalry Commander while you were tending to your business?"

"No!"

Kiolle reflexively raised his voice and shook his head. It was one thing for Prince Katchian to know he had lied to step out and meet someone; it was another matter entirely to reveal he had met Yuder. That had to remain a secret at all costs.

"As for that, I could hardly have seen a subordinate without his superior, secluded in the lounge. How could I possibly notice someone like that?"

"I see. That makes sense. Although the Empress was showing interest in him, I was just a little curious as to why he didn't appear till the end of the party."

"Why are you interested in such a person, Your Highness?"

Kiolle's face, flushed from his surprise, made it appear as if he was the one questioning Katchian's integrity. The Crown Prince tilted his head slightly, maintaining his calm demeanor.

"Why? Is it so strange for me to take an interest? Are you going to tell the Duke that I asked about him?"

Naturally, Kiolle couldn't comply. As he kept his mouth shut, a faint smile spread across Katchian's face.

"I told you, I was merely 'a little' curious."

"..."

"Having seen a new side of you through today's party, I find myself more at ease, hence this frank discussion. I'm beginning to regret having found you difficult to approach until now."

Amidst the abrupt change in atmosphere, as Kiolle's head swirled in confusion, Katchian shifted the topic and made an unexpected proposition.

"Kiolle, would you care to join me tomorrow for a game of strategy while we await the arrival of the healers? It's been a long time since I've had an opponent for such a game."

What in the world was this? Was the situation saved or not?

'In any case, I need to learn more about those scamming healers... I guess agreeing would be the right move.'

"...Yes, I understand."

Kiolle nodded with a grimaced face. A fine smile appeared on Katchian's enigmatic and fluctuating visage.

"You made a good choice."

Chapter 520

"Your Majesty, it seems that Duke Peletta, who had stayed until the end, has finally left Cantameria Palace. Additionally, the Empress has also arrived safely at the Dawn Palace."

"Is that so?"

After the party had ended and all the visitors had left Cantameria Palace, Emperor Keilusa was in his own residence, the Sun Palace. His face, now free from the weight of his elaborate clothing and makeup, showed unmistakable signs of deep fatigue.

Seeing the Emperor's condition worsen beyond the usual, the chief attendant cautiously mentioned a potent yet dangerous herb known for its strong analgesic effects.

"Would you require tea infused with Ponesa?"

"No, the usual will suffice."

By "the usual," he meant tea made from herbs sent by the Empress. The chief attendant quietly brewed a pale green tea and placed it before the Emperor. Only after sipping half of it did the Emperor's complexion slightly improve.

Holding the steaming cup, he soon spoke in a neutral tone.

"How is Baron Aile's condition?"

"Given that Duke Peletta left without any word, it appears there was no significant issue. Baron Aile was able to walk on his own and even joined the Duke in the carriage."

"That's a relief. What about Baron Durmand?"

"He has yet to regain consciousness but is undergoing treatment. According to the palace physicians, his symptoms are mild and he should be able to rise by tomorrow. Several people requested to visit and care for him, but all were denied. Knights are stationed around him to guard against any possible assassination attempts."

Though the questions were similar, the chief attendant's response was far colder than when speaking about Yuder Aile before. The Emperor's gaze also mirrored this coldness.

"Instruct that no one is to meet with him until Duke Peletta sends the results of the investigation regarding the liquor he brought in."

"Yes."

"Also, thoroughly investigate who leaked information to Duke Diarca today, and look into their circumstances as well..."

The Emperor continued to issue a series of commands without pause. His voice seemed to waver, but the chief attendant nodded without questioning. Only after concluding the official matters did the Emperor pause to sip his now-cooled tea.

Upon reopening his eyes, his expression seemed softer than during official discourse but nonetheless complicated.

"...Yuliver."

"Yes."

"What do you make of the words Duke Peletta said to me earlier?"

The chief attendant, who typically gave immediate responses, unusually hesitated to answer this question.

Today's party had gone in unexpected directions. Duke Peletta was scheduled to display his will alongside the Cavalry on behalf of the Emperor. That had happened, but the way it unfolded puzzled everyone.

No one had foreseen the dance between Duke Peletta and Yuder Aile. The Cavalry had moved as though they had been waiting for this cue.

Both the aristocrats led by Duke Diarca and the Emperor himself were shocked by the actions of his brother and his assistant. Naturally, summoning Kishiar was the immediate consequence.

Entering boldly as if expecting the Emperor's summons, the handsome man in a black formal suit faced him and calmly stated,

"I had already informed you about this matter when we last met, Your Majesty. You granted me complete authority over all matters related to the Awakener. I deemed this the most appropriate time to exercise that authority."

Kishiar had told the Emperor that he had no intention of dismissing the recent scandal about him in the West as mere gossip. The Emperor was not entirely convinced when Kishiar mentioned using the rumors to change the fate of Awakeners with the second gender, but he suspected that Kishiar had a plan.

However, he had not expected Kishiar to act so quickly, and in this particular manner.

The Emperor's younger sibling, Kishiar La Orr, was an Awakener with a second gender. Since the second gender was, after all, not significantly different from the first, there was little one could say against Kishiar's actions. There was still no formal law concerning those with the second gender.

While he was taken aback, the Emperor understood what loophole Kishiar was trying to exploit and what he hoped to gain by doing so. This realization only complicated his emotions further.

In the end, the only thing the Emperor could say was, "Didn't you say it wouldn't harm me, the Empire, or your assistant?"

"My intentions then, and now, have not changed," Kishiar responded.

The brazen gleam in his sibling's eyes was unexpectedly filled with sincere seriousness. A certain emotion carried within those eyes left the observer at a loss for words.

In the moment the Emperor found himself taken aback by an emotion he had not expected from Kishiar, the Empress, who had been sitting at a distance, stepped forward.

"Do you intend to attend such functions with other second-gendered Awakeners in the future?"

"To give you a precise answer, yes and no," Kishiar answered smoothly.

"I only intend to attend with Yuder Aile after today."

The Emperor felt dizzy. The faces of Yuder Aile, whom he had recently met at a dinner, and the rumors about his sibling began to intermingle in his mind.

Kishiar had often played the part of a harmless, eccentric individual to avoid seeming threatening to others. But that was merely an act. The brother the Emperor knew was extremely pleasant and considerate, but also very strategic and patient, a person not even he could fully trust.

Kishiar also knew very well how to make use of rumors surrounding him. While normal nobles or imperial members would have already engaged or married for various reasons, he never once lamented his own forbidden engagements or marriages due to his reputation and the political climate.

Therefore, the Emperor had never thought he'd see the day when Kishiar would have a woman at his side, and he didn't take the recent rumors too seriously.

But what was that look in his eyes?

The Emperor swallowed a low groan, belatedly realizing he should have found it more strange that his sibling was rumored to be involved with a man for the first time.

As for Yuder Aile, the young man who had received the highest award today and seemed to have a bright future ahead of him, the Emperor harbored genuinely good feelings. He was an extraordinary talent who possessed an uncommon combination of politeness, caution, and unwavering belief, difficult to associate with a commoner's upbringing.

Moreover, he was someone who was seeking ways to help with the Emperor's "situation," something he had nearly given up on himself. While he had pushed them away to prevent making their efforts futile, it did not mean he was not surprised.

If the person accompanying him was anyone other than Kishiar, the Emperor would have definitely considered putting him under his wing for greater tasks.

‘But for such a person to be dancing with my brother... that is a matter that surpasses mere fondness.’

Especially under the current circumstances, where the Emperor, with his increasingly frail body, has decided to change the environment surrounding Kishiar as much as possible.

At that moment, shocking news arrived that Yuder Aile was having a confrontation with Duke Diarca at the party, rendering him speechless. Rising swiftly from his seat, the Emperor could only muster a word to Kishiar about needing to meet Yuder Aile again next time.

After Kishiar left, the Emperor, lost in complex thoughts, heard the Empress speak.

"From now on, it seems no one will be able to forget the uniqueness of the Awakener and their second gender. Discussions will undoubtedly resume on establishing related norms. However, it seems the Duke's intentions do not solely lie there... I feel ashamed for being close to him yet unaware of his thoughts."

"..."

"I too will have to reconsider aspects I hadn't thought of before. Two heads are better than one in reaching a better conclusion, so don't worry too much."

Her comforting words seemed to understand the shock and concern the Emperor felt. Swallowing the rising pain and sentimentality in his chest, the Emperor nodded quietly.

"...My apologies, but as your servant, I only consider matters that won't cause you concern."

As the Emperor concluded his thoughts on Kishiar and exhaled deeply, Yuliver, the chief attendant, bowed his head. It was not that the Emperor had sought significant advice from him, so he did not blame him.

"Yes, it will all become clear when I meet him again."

"..."

Confidence, reason, and ambition.

The Emperor murmured these words as he closed his eyes, pondering what Kishiar had mentioned gaining through Yuder Aile.