

Turning 571

Chapter 571

"Shall we begin the third round?"

Yuder's arm extended to spin the board effortlessly. Kishiar gracefully placed a white piece atop the now half-turned board.

It was the same move, at the same spot, as Kishiar had chosen to initiate the first game. Yuder's eyes flicked momentarily to the man's face.

'He isn't planning to concede this time around, obviously.'

Yuder had won both of the previous games, but to be accurate, it was more like Kishiar had willingly walked the path of defeat.

The fact that Kishiar had chosen the same initial move for the third game could only mean one thing.

'He wants to show his true style of gameplay now and compare it distinctly with what came before.'

Yuder took a short breath and rotated the board, picking up a black piece. He laid it down with a touch slower, yet more deliberate than in previous games. Kishiar's lips curled faintly at the corners, noticing the piece's position.

Then Kishiar spun the board again and made his next move. Yuder, too, looked intently at the board before placing his subsequent piece. The clattering sound of the stone pieces against the board echoed, mingling irregularly with the sound of the spinning board.

"..."

The tension that had been palpable at the start between the two players seemed to wane, but this time it was Yuder's black piece that was first to fall.

Yuder narrowed his eyes as he watched Kishiar pick up the black piece.

This meant it was time for Kishiar to ask his first question.

'What will he ask first?'

It was hard to guess just how far Kishiar's sharp mind had gone, now that he had the crucial answer in hand.

'The most likely question would be how I exist in this moment. That's what I would have asked too...'

"How old were you then?"

"...Excuse me?"

However, the question shattered Yuder's expectations.

"I have two dreams that I remember clearly. One where you were awkwardly practicing with a sword, and the other one... well, you know what it is."

Kishiar's eyes momentarily darkened as he referenced the moment when Yuder had been standing in front of a guillotine.

"While I can't be certain when the last dream took place, it definitely wasn't when you were practicing basic swordsmanship. If you were about the same age as you are now while practicing the sword, then during that moment... you definitely seemed more mature. Of course, you're an adult now, but you know what I'm trying to say."

The accuracy of his insight was eerie.

If Kishiar had deduced Yuder's identity from just a fleeting and blurry moment in a dream, how deep had he looked into it?

Faced with this unexpected first question, a blend of surprise and hesitation naturally arose. However, Yuder swallowed it all.

"As you said, Commander, I was the same age when practicing swordsmanship as I am now. And during that last moment... I was eleven years older."

"Thirty-one."

Kishiar mumbled, confirming the age.

"Yes."

"So, you're actually older than me now."

Technically... that would be correct.

The reason why Yuder, who had returned from death, did not regard Kishiar as a distant figure, was not only because he had once stood at the pinnacle of power where the status of an imperial family member or a Duke was not scary to him. His accrued wisdom with age played a significant role as well.

Even so, Yuder didn't feel about Kishiar as he had about the other members he'd encountered again—a young junior Awakener he should guide and take care of. Rather, he was more struck by the robustness, youth, and warmth that flowed from Kishiar, a far cry from the dim memories of their previous lives.

As a result, the temporal distance Yuder felt between himself and Kishiar was in a peculiar state; it was simultaneously similar and dissimilar to their relationship in their previous life.

Caught in the uncertainty of how to describe this, Yuder remained silent until Kishiar abruptly broke the quiet.

"If you ever wish to be treated as older than me, just say the word. I'm fine either way."

"I've never wanted that. I've never felt you were younger than me, either. Treating me as you do now is sufficient."

"My assistant really is devoid of greed."

Even in this Cavalry, where Steiber, the oldest member, received no such seniority treatment, why would Kishiar say something like this? The intention was somewhat suspect, but Yuder had just acquired a new piece.

"Since it appears your question has concluded, I'll make my next move."

The board turned once more. The black pieces, exuding a momentum entirely different from the previous game, charged forcefully toward the white pieces. It was a familiar strategy that Yuder had always favored: a tile leading from the front to disturb the enemy while protecting the rest.

A knight piece with exceptional mobility, a general piece capable of unconventional moves to protect others, and common pieces lying in wait, ready to capitalize on opportunities—these were his instruments.

"Indeed, this is how you should place them."

Kishiar mumbled as he keenly observed Yuder's moves, not missing a single one.

"A strategy that reflects you. Utilizing a few capable pieces to protect the weaker ones and create a beautiful cooperative formation."

"..."

"It's ideal and excellent, but the pieces in the front are also more susceptible to danger. Especially against someone like me."

As he finished speaking, Kishiar took one of Yuder's pieces and knocked it down. The spinning board wobbled and came to a halt.

"Here's my second question. In the 'failed game,' did one of our king pieces ultimately pass away?"

Had Emperor Keilusa of their previous life met the same fate without encountering a miracle like this one? Was that why Yuder had so recklessly asserted that the Emperor must live, with a conviction that not even the Emperor himself was privy to?

It was a heavy question filled with various implications, and once again, Yuder found it difficult to answer. He looked down, maintaining his silence before finally shaking his head. To Kishiar, who raised an eyebrow as if surprised, Yuder replied with an even colder truth of an event that had never occurred.

"No, the king pieces we lost were not just one."

The king pieces, called Imum, came in pairs. Just as the imperial laws declared that the Emperor and Empress should govern with equal authority and titles, so too did the Imum. Though they were called king and queen depending on the pattern, there was no actual difference between the two pieces.

Losing one might make the game difficult, but there would still be a chance to turn it around. Losing both, however, meant irrevocable defeat.

And Kishiar would surely know this as well.

Yuder felt a heavy surge of strength in the arm that Kishiar had wrapped around him. The depths of Kishiar's reddened eyes seemed immeasurably dark and sad. Without a word, he turned the edge of the board.

Several white pieces fell in front of Yuder's pieces on the board. However, Yuder's pieces were not entirely intact either. Multiple black pieces had fallen off the board. Only after that did Kishiar finally speak again.

"Why stay here to begin anew, rather than starting a new game elsewhere? Is there something special that can only be achieved here?"

"No, I didn't necessarily think it had to restart here."

"So you mean to say that you came back to this board just before joining the Cavalry?"

"...Yes."

"Every being seeks comfort in familiar surroundings. Is the Cavalry that place for you?"

"It could be."

"In that case, your previous self must have been..."

Kishiar's hand slowly groped the board and picked up a piece. It was a general piece with red markings on white.

The general piece, known as 'Makas,' came in three different colors, each with its own unique ability. The red Makas that Kishiar had picked up was reputed to be the highest-ranking among the general pieces.

A noble person who could stand closest to the king's piece.

However, the general pieces also had the ability to switch places with pieces of equal or higher rank, often sacrificing themselves in place of a king in peril.

Kishiar stared at the red Makas for a moment before placing it in a new position. The piece landed with a thud, as if it would die at any moment in its precarious position.

Yuder understood what Kishiar left unsaid, what the red general piece meant. And through Yuder's silence, Kishiar must have found an answer as well.

"..."

"What more do you want, aside from not suffering the same defeat twice?"

"Nothing."

"Are you not interested in revenge against the one who defeated you?"

Kishiar's fingers hovered over the edge of the board, as if about to turn it. Yuder noticed the piece at the tip of Kishiar's fingernail was the king's piece. A strange feeling overwhelmed him, as if Kishiar would snatch that piece at any moment if he agreed.

'Revenge.'

He had entertained the thought while sorting out his mind, unable to sleep in the inn after his first death and resurrection. He knew all sorts of secret passages and mission routes; it wouldn't be impossible to storm into the palace and kill everyone, including Crown Prince Katchian, and then die in satisfaction.

If he survived that, he had even fantasized about escaping to some distant island in the far North and living out the rest of his life there.

But all those thoughts ended up as fleeting fantasies. The reason was simple.

"I don't think that could ever be a game. I've been given the opportunity to fulfill my true mission. Ruining that before it even starts would be no different from running away. So, it means nothing to me."

Yuder had a goal. He wanted to save Kishiar, rebuild the Cavalry, and protect the world this time.

If he could accomplish that, then nothing else mattered.

After that thought, Yuder had forgotten all the boiling emptiness that had left him lost.

Kishiar took some time, lost in thought, before speaking again. When he finally did, the question carried an emotion similar to before, yet somehow different.

"At the end of victory, what you gain is more important than mere revenge, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Kishiar had said something similar before. He was not one to deal with his enemies out of petty emotions; instead, he made his moves with an eye toward the distant future of the country and people he sought to protect.

It was unlikely that he would miss the underlying intent in Yuder's words.

A long, quivering breath tinged with suppressed pain escaped from between Kishiar's lips. He pulled Yuder into a deep embrace, resting his forehead on Yuder's shoulder.

"...If I taught you this game, I could have taught you anything else as well. No one knows the meaning of that as much as I do. And yet, while you were losing in the game, the fact that I did nothing..."

"... "

"I too was already absent there, wasn't I?"

Yuder closed his eyes.

"Yes."

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It was a dreadful truth, one that couldn't be fully conveyed with a mere word or two. A mix of conflicting urges—to either swallow it whole or to spit it out—tickled at Yuder's throat.

Images from a distant past jumbled and sped past behind his closed eyes. Though he was in contact with Kishiar and shouldn't have felt cold, his fingertips turned icy. As Yuder exhaled thinly, as though drenched by the chill, the strong arms supporting his back pulled him closer.

The force was so strong, it was as if the being within those arms would vanish if not held tightly enough.

Breathing became slightly laborious, but Yuder found that preferable. Through this constraining sensation, he could feel assured that both Kishiar and he were alive.

The resounding heartbeat from the chest against his ear clearly conveyed that this was not a dream or an illusion of a decapitated convict.

So, Yuder found the strength to open his eyes again.

"..."

The pieces on the board of their tactical game remained unmoved, silently holding their places. It was Yuder's turn to move.

If no move was made, the game would never end.

But wasn't that why he had started the game in the first place?

To continue the conversation, the next move was necessary. Slowly, he reached out and grabbed a black piece.

"To be honest, I think I deserved to lose before. Not because you were absent, but because it was my game," Yuder said.

Kishiar's eyes shifted to the piece gripped in Yuder's hand.

"I didn't even understand the rules properly, and I made many mistakes and wrong moves because I didn't trust the pieces I had. I'm still seeking answers for some of the things I've done. This includes matters related to you."

Even if Kishiar were to ask about his absence, Yuder had little to offer by way of satisfying explanation.

"But I can tell you this: a finished game is just that—a finished game. A wrongly placed piece can't be taken back, but I've learned that you just need not repeat the same mistake in the future. So... I don't plan to forget that what I have to do is no different," Yuder concluded.

As his words ended, the knight piece in Yuder's hand audibly and forcefully advanced on the board.

Speaking had somehow loosened the knot within him. He felt a sense of relief, as if he had finally understood why Kanna had once said that revealing hidden secrets could be liberating.

Instead of instructing the next move, Yuder looked up and met Kishiar's eyes. The man had been watching him with a furrowed brow and an indescribable expression, and now he let out a long sigh.

"...Yes, you're right," Kishiar agreed.

With that, he raised his other hand and spun the board half a turn. The pieces on the rotating board seemed to brush against Kishiar's fingertips as they moved.

"One can't resume a game that has already ended. Anyone can make a mistake with their pieces. What matters is what you do after. In that regard... if the person who taught you this game heard what you said, he might've shed tears of emotion," Kishiar mused.

His expression was both playful and bitter, speaking those words while knowing that he himself couldn't remember his past self.

Kishiar, with his head bowed, gently pressed his lips to the corner of Yuder's eyes. His lips soon grazed Yuder's cheek and ear, tenderly drawing in the lower lip, and then ventured deeper. Within this prolonged kiss, a sensation emerged, as if the tightly held lock of their hearts was slowly being released.

Yuder felt the silent agony emanating from Kishiar, and the myriad emotions directed solely at him. Such intense emotions poured out all at once, leaving Yuder feeling almost intoxicated.

It was a connection of emotions that Yuder hadn't felt since Kishiar had dreamt of his death.

Several times, Yuder felt breathless and dizzy, but he didn't push Kishiar away. Instead, he embraced the sensations conveyed by Kishiar's lips. Even after they parted, the afterglow lingered for a long while.

Through their locked gazes, Kishiar naturally understood the emotions Yuder couldn't express with words.

It was always a wonder how the body could convey so much more than words.

"We should make the next move," Kishiar, resting his forehead against Yuder's, said after a long contemplation of the board. He then delicately picked up the red-patterned general piece, Makas, which seemed to be precariously surrounded. Its intended place was originally the safe spot reserved for the king piece.

When Kishiar swapped the positions of the two pieces, the now vulnerable piece became the king, or Imum.

It was a significant change.

Yuder silently moved his piece again. Amidst the flickering light of the burning stone furnace, several moves were exchanged. After swapping the king and general pieces, Kishiar wielded the king piece as if it were a knight, dominating the board. Despite the many restrictions on the king piece, in Kishiar's hands, it appeared as a born leader guiding all pieces.

The king piece wasn't just meant to hold its position until the end of the war. With a meticulous strategy, the white Imum dominated the board anew.

It was a style of play Yuder had never seen in their countless tactical games from their past lives. Within Kishiar's innovative use of the king piece, the red general piece acted as if it were a third Imum, fulfilling its role.

Yuder realized for the first time that a single move of the Imum could so vividly change the small world on the hexagonal board.

Yuder's black pieces bravely charged, but they struggled against Kishiar's white pieces, which adeptly attacked and retreated. Yet, even though he was losing, Yuder didn't feel bad at all.

Finally, Kishiar's advancing white Imum gracefully defeated the opponent and took its place. The victory was undoubtedly his.

Leaving the dominant piece on the board, Kishiar finally spoke, "Now, what do you think I'm going to ask?"

"I always thought you'd ask how I managed to return here," Yuder replied.

"If you knew the answer, wouldn't you have shown less interest in the ancient records related to time?" Kishiar speculated that Yuder didn't know the reason for his return to the past.

"Was I wrong?"

"No, you're right."

"What I want to ask is something entirely different. But it's also the most important."

Yuder nodded firmly in agreement.

"Understood. If you're asking about the former Commander, then..."

"Hm? No, that's not it."

The man let out a soft chuckle before suppressing it.

"Didn't I say there are still many unanswered questions about me from the previous game? It's not that important, so there's no need to discuss it now. I'll talk about it when everything becomes clear."

Yuder doubted his own ears for a moment before cautiously asking, "Why wouldn't that be important?"

"There's something I want to say in advance, since you seem overly concerned. How I disappeared in the previous game doesn't particularly intrigue me."

"Shouldn't you still be aware of it?"

"Well, as far as I can see, the 'me' from back then was neither a good beginning nor a good ending for you. Knowing more about that time is unlikely to change this view."

Kishiar, responding indifferently, lifted the corners of his lips in a smile.

"That is..."

It was a sharp inference, as if he had seen their relationship from a previous life in its entirety. Faced with the many displays he had seen up to this point, Yuder eventually closed his mouth and struggled to find his words.

"It's different now."

"Good. That's the only thing I can be happy about right now. I can't express how grateful I am that you put it so kindly."

Kishiar once again pressed his lips against Yuder's forehead.

"What I most want to know right now are the conditions you believe are necessary to win in this 'new game,' and your ultimate goal."

"..."

"You haven't told me your larger objective, even though you've abandoned revenge to pursue it so fervently. Saving me, preserving the Emperor, and solidifying the Cavalry—all feel like steps toward a greater goal. So, will you clearly tell me?"

It was only then that Yuder realized he had never articulated his greatest ambition: to save the world.

He had never felt the need to say it out loud, as he was deeply rooted in the belief that no one would trust him.

He stared blankly at the man before him for a long time. Even when faced with those trusting red eyes, the words were not easy to release.

Would he believe him?

Would he not?

Finally, a voice, strained from years of torment, flowed forth.

"My aim, my goal is..."

"..."

"To prevent and avert all the impending disasters that will befall our world."

With just a single sentence, the long age of distrust came to an end.

And then Kishiar smiled at Yuder with an expression he had never anticipated.

"I was going to say that even if your goal was world domination, I'd still support you. Guess I got it half right."

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"I was going to say that even if your goal was world domination, I'd still support you. Guess I got it half right."

Only half right? The only commonality between saving the world and conquering it was that both concerned the world they lived in. It was a wildly audacious joke, but the individual it pertained to remained unfazed. Kishiar was as he always was—neither laughing at Yuder's words, nor particularly scrutinizing them.

After repeatedly observing Kishiar's demeanor, Yuder finally spoke, hesitating as if he couldn't find the right words.

"Do you not find what I said... absurdly ambitious?"

"Why would I think that?"

Kishiar counter-questioned.

"If you're only saying that because it was me who said it..."

"While it's true I'm prepared to believe whatever you say, that doesn't mean I don't have any basis for it," Kishiar replied decisively.

"If claiming an unseen goal is absurd, then wouldn't priests, who believe and follow an unseen God, be absurd in their very existence?"

"Isn't that different from this?"

"Depending on your perspective, not really. The existence of divine power as evidence of God has been a long-standing debate among mages. The logic was that the existence of magic power doesn't necessarily mean you should believe in magic. Priests weren't fond of the topic, to say the least."

Wasn't it more than just a topic priests weren't fond of? Wasn't it a taboo subject that could brand you as insane?

As Yuder pondered his response, Kishiar overlaid his hand atop Yuder's clenched fist. Slowly caressing the back of Yuder's hand, Kishiar continued.

"Wanting to prevent an impending calamity is different from vaguely clamoring for world peace or salvation. If the Yuder I know had the latter kind of aim, I imagine he would be in a temple, not with the Cavalry. Perhaps wearing priestly robes that would make someone like me uncomfortable."

Each soft-spoken word from Kishiar struck deeply into Yuder's ears and resonated in his mind.

"But you chose the Cavalry, not the temple. That signifies that you deemed your abilities as an Awakener more essential for your aims than prayers. Considering what you've been doing all this time, everything appears to be rooted in practical efforts, far removed from absurdity, don't you think?"

His long fingers wove between Yuder's, enumerating each of his past deeds.

"You've taught others to increase their chances of survival, without fear of envy or jealousy. You've faced dangers head-on, nipping problems in the bud, even saving lives destined for death. To anyone observing, this is closer to the attitude of a military leader preparing for war, rather than its opposite."

"..."

"Self-proclaimed prophets and madmen who cry that the end is near have always existed. However, those who only talk never provide evidence or prepare for anything. That's the difference between you and them. That alone is reason enough for me to believe in you."

No one.

No one had ever given Yuder such an answer before.

Quietly blinking, a whirlwind of memories from his past life swept through Yuder's mind.

'Yudrain, are you in your right mind? If you're going to spout nonsense, leave and go do what you were instructed to do.'

'True. The disasters have worsened over the years. Last year's earthquakes and droughts were followed by a harsh winter. But to say these events and the appearance of monsters are omens of impending doom is laughable. Are we saying that it's the end of the world, like in the time of the First Emperor a thousand years ago?'

'Commander of the Cavalry, you wander the lands these days seeking to be a hero, don't you? Isn't what you've achieved so far enough? If you're that bored, get a wife. Ah, is it because your body is some sort of Omega that you can't?'

'Even if what you say is true, it's difficult to officially acknowledge. The King of Nelarn can only protect Nelarn; we can't afford to stretch our hands towards the Empire.'

'Well, Commander, I'm not so sure. Weren't the results from the last investigation of the cracks inconclusive? No unusual elements were found. Perhaps you're overthinking this because the last event was too taxing?'

Doubt. Scorn. Mockery. Concern.

None of these reactions that Yuder had grown accustomed to were present here.

Standing before eyes that seemed to genuinely listen, Yuder felt as though the burden he'd been carrying for so long had lightened for the first time.

He bowed his head and took a deep breath.

"You truly believe what I'm saying."

"Yes, I do."

"..."

"Then speak. What do you mean when you say a disaster is coming, and what needs to be done?"

Yuder bit his lip lightly and looked up. Then he finally spoke the thoughts he had kept to himself for so long since his return from death.

"You've likely seen the strange cracks that appeared when monsters began to emerge unusually in the West. Do you remember?"

"Of course. I ordered an investigation into whether similar cracks have appeared since, but no news has come so far."

"I've seen similar things before."

"Is that what you're trying to address?"

The conversation with someone who seemed to understand him completely flowed without any hitches.

Yuder nodded slightly.

"Yes, but in my opinion, that's only the beginning."

"What comes after the beginning?"

"Listing them all would be pointless; there will be numerous disasters."

Earthquakes, droughts, harsh winters, torrential rains, famine, plagues, war, and people who bewilder others like sages, as well as those who look out only for themselves. Yuder listed them all and added one more point.

"Soon, priests and mages will lose their power, while the Awakeners will increase exponentially."

It was one of the pivotal issues during the chaotic times of his previous life.

The number of Awakeners grew, while the ranks of mages, priests, and knights dwindled. Mages who could hardly cast any spells, priests struggling to heal even minor injuries, and knights who couldn't even produce auras were fiercely fighting to protect their privileges, shunning the emerging Awakeners among them.

As a result of these power struggles, many established groups lost their vitality. Even the collapse of what seemed like an eternal Pearl Tower happened as an extension of this struggle.

All existing powers, including magic and divine forces, were like faint candles compared to the power of the newly emerged Awakeners. Yet the people holding the power were these older groups. Among the Awakeners, who gained strength overnight but failed to unite or gain respect, disorder and chaos erupted.

Any norms for systematically solving disasters were lost. With everyone scrambling to address immediate issues, no one sought to investigate the root causes.

"I thought it might be a sign that this board... no, the world is falling apart. So, I conducted an investigation of my own," Yuder recalled.

The memory that led Yuder to this conclusion dated back to the time when the Pearl Tower was collapsing. At that time, he had been closely investigating the traces of cracks that frequently appeared at the disaster scene.

Mages, who had shown no reaction to Yuder's requests for assistance, were conducting their own research under the premise that, "Perhaps the situation a thousand years ago was similar to what we face now."

Although the research was fundamentally aimed at restoring the mages' power and authority, and was not of any practical help, Yuder found their findings to be somewhat worthy of consideration once he obtained the information.

What piqued his interest specifically was the notion that the circumstances of the world nearly a thousand years ago, when it had almost perished, might be similar to the disasters happening now.

He began to travel the world to investigate matters related to this. He met experts from various countries to seek their advice and rushed to the scenes of unusual disasters to gather information.

However, people did not view his efforts as purely altruistic. Opinions abounded that the Cavalry Commander who ignored even the Emperor's orders to go around doing his own thing was harboring dangerous intentions.

Some mages and knights from other countries he met to convey his ideas also first suspected that there might be a hidden political motive behind Yuder's actions. If not, the mockery followed that he must be mad.

"It's easier on the conscience to proceed secretly when nobody believes me anyway," Yuder reasoned, ultimately making the dangerous decision to investigate the world's state on his own.

"In the end, I never got a chance to properly verify whether my thoughts were correct, but I'm not displeased with how things have turned out."

Since he had been executed, there was no way to know what had happened to the world afterward. All he resolved was not to repeat the same mistakes in this life.

"The things I need to accomplish my goal remain the same as before. If the Commander and His Majesty the Emperor maintain their health, and the Cavalry continues to hold its center, then that will be sufficient."

"..."

"Those are all the words I wish to offer."

Kishiar remained silent for a long time. Only when warmth returned to Yuder's hand, which he held, did he finally open his mouth.

"What should we do now?"

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"What should we do?"

What did he mean by 'what should we do'? Kishiar's lips briefly curled into a smile devoid of warmth as he silently gazed at Yuder, contemplating the ambiguous statement. Kishiar leaned his head against Yuder's shoulder as he let out a breath, as if exhaling unspeakable burdens.

"Really, what should we do..."

The utterance, devoid of a clear subject, felt like a sigh of parched sorrow or perhaps an exclamation of fervent regret. There seemed to be room for myriad interpretations, making it difficult to discern what he actually intended to convey.

But one thing was clear.

Even after hearing the story, Kishiar wanted to deeply connect with Yuder.

That was enough to quash any doubt. Yuder didn't say another word and simply let his body relax into Kishiar's embrace. Despite having only played a few tactical games, his muscles screamed as if he had completed an exceedingly difficult task.

"...If I think of anything more about what lies ahead, I will discuss it with you later. I may not know much, but I remember most things related to disasters."

Instead of responding, Kishiar gently breathed onto Yuder's nape.

After a brief silence, Yuder impulsively spoke, noticing the trembling of Kishiar's fingers near his knee.

"Do you know that Kanna has been avoiding me lately?"

"A bit. But it didn't seem to be a big problem, so I left it alone."

Kishiar, ever inscrutable, hinted that he had guessed as much.

"Yes. I only recently found out why. The moment our gloves touched, she apparently gleaned information that led her to speculate about my relationship with you. She seemed to be struggling to keep this a secret, but after sharing it, she felt relieved and pleased."

Kishiar would probably guess why Yuder had brought this up. Still, Yuder slowly articulated his thoughts.

"I think I feel the same way now."

"Keeping secrets is difficult and painful."

"I've never felt that way before. I neither desire to confide in others nor find it difficult or painful."

Whether the story deserved secrecy or not, it was all the same to Yuder. He had often been criticized for appearing emotionless. He never felt the need to share his inner thoughts, nor was he curious about others' secrets.

The Emperor Katchian, who admired this trait in Yuder, had heard that even when Yuder was tortured, he remained silent and revealed nothing. This belatedly sent a chill down the Emperor's spine.

Only Kishiar was an exception. The common sense that information is more beneficial when kept to oneself lost its meaning in front of him. The weight of a secret felt heavier to Yuder than any shackles he had ever worn.

Deceiving himself was perhaps better than deceiving Kishiar.

"How honorable. So, am I the only one who knows what you've just shared?"

Yuder closed and reopened his eyes in response to Kishiar's question.

"You are the only one who knows this much... though Enon does know a bit."

Yuder wondered if this might cause disappointment, but Kishiar's voice remained serene.

"How much does he know?"

"He knows that I'm involved in a new game, and that I aim for different outcomes than before."

"Is he, perhaps, one of the outcomes you wanted to change?"

It had grown rather pointless to react to Kishiar's insights.

"Yes."

"I recall what you said after the Western mission was over. You mentioned that we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves for our performance, suggesting that we might have prevented greater chaos."

Hearing Kishiar's words, Yuder also remembered the conversation they'd had at that time.

"I think it's time to return those words to you."

Yuder turned his head to meet Kishiar's gaze. Deep-set red eyes, filled with complex emotions, softly swirled as they held Yuder.

"Both His Majesty and I, and everyone else for that matter, owe you a great deal. It would be absurd if the person in question didn't realize this."

"A debt, you say?"

"A very big one."

Despite his disagreement, Kishiar wouldn't hear of it. Just as Yuder was about to speak further, Kishiar skillfully interrupted him by suggesting they rest for the day in his chambers, pointing to the darkening sky outside the window.

Yuder would have refused in the past, but tonight he wanted to make sure that Kishiar got a proper night's sleep.

They even played a tactical game, but you can never be sure of the outcome without seeing it. Knowing all too well how skilled Kishiar was at acting perfectly fine, Yuder felt it imperative to verify this for himself.

Kishiar no longer took headache medicine. Without a word, he kissed Yuder several times and, without a single gap, drew him close, resting their heads together. Near Kishiar's bed hung a sachet of fragrant herbs, similar to one in Yuder's room—a gift from the Empress.

Amid the subtle aroma, fighting back exhaustion and sleep, Kishiar whispered with a smile, already aware of Yuder's struggle to stay awake.

"Sweet dreams."

And then, a whispered, "Thank you."

It was so faint that Yuder couldn't be certain he'd heard it correctly. But not wanting to wake the man whose eyes were already closed, Yuder simply blinked quietly in his embrace.

Lying side by side, Yuder realized this might be the first time he fell asleep after Kishiar. While awake, he hadn't noticed, but with eyes closed, he saw Kishiar's cheeks were paler than usual. Even

the tiredness, induced by sleep deprivation, made him appear differently beautiful. Yuder found he couldn't be entranced by that beauty as he had been before.

The same man who had been surprisingly composed, even when confronted with unbelievable tales of time travel and his own death, appeared so fragile now, all because of a dream in which Yuder died. This realization brought both wonder and a pang of sorrow.

Looking at his peacefully resting face, Yuder thought of his past life's self, who had not been curious about him. Knowing the truth of his death, perhaps this man before him would be as nonchalant about it today. The thought crossed his mind for the first time.

So maybe, just maybe, Yuder felt that he shouldn't be the only one to feel that way.

'...Perhaps I'm the one who should be grateful, the one who is truly in debt.'

For a long time, Yuder watched Kishiar sleep in the darkness. Doing nothing more than watching him wasn't boring or uncomfortable. This moment felt like the most peaceful part of his day.

What should he do now? Yuder quietly repeated to himself the words Kishiar had once murmured.

What should he do now?

The love he first became aware of and named didn't seem like a stranger upon reflection, but rather like one of the familiar sensations that had always gripped his heart and never let go.

...

“ ... ”

Beneath the dim moonlight streaming through a round window at the highest point of the bedroom, Kishiar opened his eyes.

He gazed at Yuder, who lay beside him, breathing evenly. A wistful smile appeared on his face. He wanted to kiss Yuder's smooth forehead, revealing his character even in sleep, but refrained,

knowing that Yuder would wake up due to his heightened senses. Instead, he pressed his own lips to his fingertip and lightly touched it to Yuder's hair before rising.

Stepping quietly, he left the bedroom and walked down the chilly corridor into his study. The fire in the hearth seemed weaker than before, perhaps due to the many spent magic stones. He added another handful, and the flames roared to life in brilliant colors, illuminating the neglected game board and chairs.

Kishiar took a seat and quietly examined the board he had set up.

White pieces led by a white king had won the round, still standing triumphant against the black pieces.

He stared at the setup as if committing it to memory before starting to return the pieces to their original positions. Soon, the board was restored, looking ready for another game.

Even after resetting the board, Kishiar didn't stop. He began moving the black pieces, then placing them back on the board one by one.

Black piece. Next, a white piece. Then another black piece.

The pieces found their places without hesitation, following the exact sequence of their first game with Yuder.

Usually, he would replay the game in his mind, but sometimes, when he wanted to relive the emotions perfectly, he would play it out alone like this. Kishiar felt that now was one of those times.

Click,

Click,

Click...

As the soft sounds of the pieces touching the board echoed in a steady rhythm, Kishiar's thoughts drifted to Yuder's pale face that he had once gazed upon.

He recalled every moment: the scarred hands placing the pieces without hesitation, the moments of truth confessed in a voice as cold but burning like dark ashes.

-Click...

What he had heard today was not everything. He was certain of that.

Yuder had told him that there was more to be said, yet he didn't realize how vacant his own expression was when he said it.

And he probably didn't know what emotions that had stirred in the observer.

Kishiar replayed their numerous games over and over. The intricate maneuvers Yuder had made, the swapping of general and king pieces that Kishiar had executed, all flowed seamlessly until they suddenly stopped. Despite his intention to keep them on track, the pieces began to stray from their predetermined lines and boundaries.

Why had the pieces crossed the lines even when he thought he had played them correctly?

Kishiar stared down at the hexagonal board with a blank expression. For a moment, everything blurred, and the straight lines twisted. Then suddenly, everything became clear again.

At that moment, a transparent droplet fell onto the board, leaving its mark.

Kishiar stopped, holding a piece in his hand.

It seemed that he couldn't continue the replay anymore.

Chapter 575

"Did you sleep well?"

The next morning, when Yuder woke up, the Kishiar he met was shining like never before. Perhaps it was the perfect weather, but his face radiated with sunlight, making it almost difficult to believe it was real.

As Yuder stared blankly at him, Kishiar, who was seated in a picture-perfect posture, tilted his head and asked, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"It seems you slept extremely well," Yuder remarked.

"Of course, I slept well. Thanks to someone," Kishiar said, a glow emanating from his face that made it impossible to doubt his words.

The tactical game they played yesterday had evidently worked wonders. Yuder felt a tingling sensation deep in his chest as he went to the bathroom to wash up. When he emerged, taking a bit longer than usual, Kishiar was busily writing something at the table.

"You're working before breakfast?" Yuder inquired.

"As soon as I woke up, thoughts of the tasks ahead poured into my mind like a waterfall. I couldn't resist. I haven't felt like this since I first awakened," Kishiar responded.

Yuder couldn't see the contents of the paper that Kishiar was zealously writing. Sensing Yuder's gaze, Kishiar offered a sly smile.

"Would you like to know what I'm planning to do today?"

There was no reason to refuse. Yuder nodded silently and approached Kishiar, who extended his arm, pulling Yuder to sit naturally on his lap. When Yuder made no move to resist or stand up, Kishiar lightly kissed his still-damp cheek and lips.

"After I finish these letters, we'll have breakfast while sending the couriers. Then I'll call Nathan to request the return of some documents and brief him on upcoming tasks. I'll meet with the legal scholars, the nobles, and the administrators. After that, we'll visit Lady Justin, the manager at the Shuden Trading Company in the capital, to collect items I've previously ordered. For dinner, we'll have a cozy, family-only gathering at the palace."

The words 'family-only' and 'cozy' struck Yuder. From Kishiar's expression, he sensed that this 'family' likely involved more than just the Emperor and Empress.

'Is he planning to call Crown Prince Katchian?'

Whether the Crown Prince would come was uncertain, but Kishiar seemed not to consider refusal a possibility.

"You'll need more than a day," Yuder remarked.

"Not just me, my assistant will be overwhelmed too. But it's already exciting," Kishiar said, finishing his writing and signing the document. Throughout their conversation, his quill had been moving at an impressive speed.

"Done. Would you like to read it before I send it off?"

"If you don't mind, I would," Yuder agreed.

"Nothing here that an assistant can't see," said Kishiar.

Yuder picked up one of the completed letters. It was addressed to the Emperor. Since it wasn't encrypted, there was no need to decipher it. He read through it quickly.

After offering earnest words for the Emperor's health and well-being, Kishiar got straight to the point for which he had sent the letter.

"Your Majesty, I would like to discuss a method that could make the newfound light you've acquired easier to manage. I am certain you will be pleased to hear it... Furthermore, I would like to accept the caring concern you've previously suggested, and hope to dine with you tonight at the First Palace of Sun Palace. Someone from Dawn Palace will contact Your Majesty."

The "newfound light" the Emperor had acquired was undoubtedly the Awakened ability. What could make it easier to manage was probably...

"I see why you want to bring me back to the palace," said Yuder.

It was clear that Kishiar intended to recommend Yuder as an assistant to train Emperor Keilusa in his new abilities.

"Originally, I planned on giving you more time to rest, but as of yesterday, I've concluded there's no need to delay. One reason is that His Majesty desperately needs rapid progress in his abilities. Will that be alright?"

"Had you not offered, I was going to ask for it anyway."

"Why would I do that when you're in charge of all the Cavalry training programs and are the most knowledgeable about awakened abilities?"

The rest of the letter was mostly easy to interpret.

Dinner at the First Palace of Sun Palace traditionally required all the family members of the Emperor to be present. As Kishiar had subtly implied earlier, it seemed he was intent on definitively assessing Katchian's stance in a private setting tonight.

'In a world where Emperor Keilusa, the Empress, and even he himself didn't exist, it's clear who would have been the Emperor. It's just a natural progression.'

Until now, Kishiar hadn't shown much interest in Crown Prince Katchian. The change in attitude was evidence that yesterday's conversation had significantly impacted him.

He believed Yuder's story.

Realizing this through the sudden dinner invitation gave Yuder mixed feelings. Suppressing a tingling sensation somewhere in his heart, Yuder spoke.

"This part here... what is this 'caring concern' that you previously suggested?"

"Ah, that's nothing much. His Majesty offered to take over the duties I've been handling in the capital since he felt rejuvenated and eager. He suggested that I focus on what I want to do."

"And what is it that you want to do?"

"Cavalry matters. I told him back then that it wasn't necessary... but given that the second Cavalry recruitment and branch establishment announcement will be moved up to tomorrow, I thought I'd just accept His Majesty's consideration like an impulsive younger brother."

"I'm sorry, did you say tomorrow?"

For a moment, Yuder thought he had misheard. But Kishiar's smiling face remained unchanged.

"Yes, tomorrow."

"And it appears that, contrary to initial plans, I may personally take action for establishing the branches."

Originally, the establishment of Cavalry branches and recruitment were to be done by sending qualified members from their respective regions.

Yuder had observed Kishiar preparing for this in the midst of party planning. Selecting suitable members and preparing for deployment were straightforward, but the current hurdle was the local aristocrats, who would host the new branches.

The feudal lords generally represented indigenous powers that had protected their lands for a long time. In some ways, they wielded authority even greater than the Emperor himself. It was unlikely that they would willingly accept a Cavalry branch stationed in their front yard. The establishment of a branch was tantamount to reasserting the Emperor's authority throughout the land.

Deploying commoners to establish a branch would be slower and more difficult than if Kishiar, an imperial family member, took it upon himself to do so.

But... that couldn't be all he was after.

Yuder recalled the third tactical game Kishiar had last played yesterday. It was a new strategy, unlike anything he had ever used in his past life. And thus, a victory was crafted.

A new path found through new information.

Yuder thought that perhaps the direction Kishiar intended to take from now on might be slightly different from before. But what did it matter? In the end...

"I will follow the path you choose."

Yuder's future path would also be the same.

...

A little earlier, in the barren desert of the south.

Men with reddish skin from the southern lands stared off into the distance with cold faces.

"This is definitely where Nahan disappeared and reappeared."

Onakwei, a wounded southern merchant who had accompanied Nahan to the south, surveyed the surroundings with deeply set eyes. They had discreetly followed Nahan from a distance after dropping him off and were taken aback when he disappeared near the desert.

After several days of surveillance, they discovered traces of Nahan's reappearance. However, by then, he had already left the desert with his other comrades. Onakwei and his companions wanted to continue chasing after the man they considered an unsettling beast, but as it was not a direct order, they reluctantly held back. Instead, they thoroughly investigated where Nahan had gone and from where he had reappeared.

What they discovered was a force that distorted the surroundings near the beginning of the desert.

"Swin, with his keen eyes, confirmed it. A fairly large area near here has this 'power' spread out. It seems to have the ability to remain hidden, unnoticeable to those not granted permission."

"It must be a stronghold."

"Yes, what we were looking for."

Being Awakeners themselves, it didn't take them long to speculate what lay within that power once they recognized its existence. But identifying its existence and finding the actual entrance were two different matters. They spent several more days and finally managed to break through into the stronghold.

"Intruders have broken in!"

"Is it the Cavalry?"

"No, it's southerners!"

The Awakeners, whose peaceful daily life was invaded, cried out in alarm. Children and the sick hastily retreated to hidden shelters, while those trained for such invasions quickly surrounded the southern men.

A woman who seemed to be their leader stepped forward, brandishing a sharply honed farming tool.

"From the look of you, you're no ordinary lost travelers. Who are you? Depending on your answer, you may not leave here peacefully."

The blade of what should have been a simple farming tool ominously wavered. She was a person with the ability to control metal.

The southern merchants were not greatly perturbed even in this threatening situation. After confirming that the place was a village, they raised their hands in a sign of no harm intended. The one who stepped forward was Onakwei, who had received direct orders from their superior 'Aton' to locate this place.

"We are Awakeners like you. We reached this point through a fellow named Nahan."

Even though Onakwei had no intention of ever meeting Nahan again, he calmly lied. Upon hearing his words, the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran speculated that the southern Awakeners must have heard from Nahan how to make contact with them.

"Nahan... is not here right now."

Realizing that they were all Awakeners, both parties relaxed their aggressive stances, cautiously eyeing each other.

"How did you get to know Nahan?"

"I can't go into details, but let's just say we've helped each other. We didn't intend to intrude so abruptly; we had no choice but to enter when we couldn't find another way. My apologies."

At this, the Awakeners of the Star of Nagan finally let their guard down a bit. Although the newcomers were unfamiliar, their demeanor wasn't hostile, so there was no indication of an attack. In any case, they were a collective of various Awakeners who had trickled in from all over, so they quickly regained their composure in this situation.

"Fine. They just happened to wander in because of Nahan. Let's get back to work."

Watching them disperse, their varied abilities dissipating, Onakwei quietly opened his mouth.

"We've roamed the Empire quite a lot, but this is the first time we've learned of a group like yours. If there's a leader, could we meet and talk?"

"Hmm... Well, come this way and let's talk. The entrance to the village is narrow."

A woman who had introduced herself as Sera led them into a small house. The long table set for the meeting was the only piece of furniture there. After seating Onakwei and his companions, Sera issued a stern warning.

"The chairs here are enchanted. Make a wrong move and you'll be instantly bound. Losing your memory and getting kicked out wouldn't be an issue, so it's best to converse politely."

"Intriguing."

"Isn't it? Places like this exist only here. All thanks to the sage."

"The sage is your leader then? We thought Nahan played a similar role."

Given that the southern merchants they had met in the west had only encountered Nahan and a few Awakeners who followed him, this was a reasonable assumption. Naturally, the Awakeners following the sage took offense to the conjecture.

"Who said that? Was it Nahan?"

"So it wasn't?"

"No. Our leader is the sage. A humble and gentle guide who has nurtured this place. He's nothing like Nahan!"

Voices erupted in excitement, each person interjecting with their own comments. The atmosphere didn't seem tense, as if they were freely expressing their grievances like they would to any new Awakeners in their village. Anyone with a political sense could easily deduce quite a bit about the Star of Nagran just from that exchange.

Onakwei exchanged glances with his companions. They all quickly surmised that this conversation could be very useful for them.

'Intriguing. To think there's such a large group of Awakeners tucked away in the furthest corners of the Empire, so active that they even have factions.'

Aton, who had sent him here, had guessed right; besides Nahan, there would surely be other Awakeners, possibly even those who could communicate with them.

"This is certainly an opportunity."

Nahan was too clear and dangerous in his desires to collaborate with, but this sage seemed to be on a somewhat different path. If they could use this group, everything would become a lot simpler.

After listening intently to the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran for some time, Onakwei smiled.

"I'm quite intrigued to meet this sage of yours after hearing about him. Where is he now?"

"Why do you ask?"

"There's much more I'd like to know about this place."

"We don't even know who you are, aside from the fact that you're Awakeners, or where you've come from. How can we trust you?"

Despite her skepticism, Sera ultimately agreed to send word about their desire to meet the sage. She said she would pen a message to convey their request.

Chapter 576

On the day a new letter arrived at the sage's residence in the capital, informing that Awakeners from an unknown southern land had arrived at the southern base, the residence was conspicuously empty. Normally, one of the Awakeners staying at the Crown Prince's palace would have stepped out briefly to retrieve the correspondence, but they were all extremely busy trying to locate Nahan, who may also have arrived in the capital.

In the meantime, the residence where they stayed stood vacant, except for the presence of some unfamiliar intruders standing confidently at its entrance.

"...Are we really going in like this? Without covering our faces?"

"Of course! Why cover our faces in broad daylight? Want to look suspicious and get reported?"

"Finn, Gakane is new to this kind of infiltration. Let's be understanding."

"But still..."

Gakane Bolunwald, Hinn Eldore, and Finn Eldore.

The three of them, dressed in casual attire with their faces fully exposed, looked up at the house where the Star of Nagran had been staying. The average-looking mansion, located in the Fifth Wall District of the capital where the middle-class commoners mainly resided, appeared utterly peaceful. The people passing by were calm, the distant cries of merchants were leisurely, and the weather was superb. It was hardly the time to break into someone's house.

'People are just walking around... Are we really going in under these circumstances? Is this okay?'

Gakane Bolunwald looked around nervously, his face full of concern. Yuder had granted him permission to inspect the house, which was fine, but he had never imagined they'd be doing so at this time on this day.

However, the Eldore siblings brushed off his worries as unfounded concerns and merely grinned like relaxed little beasts.

"Don't worry, Gakane. There's no chance we'll get caught. We've been watching this place for days and no one's come by. And the people walking around couldn't care less about us. They'll probably just think we're guests visiting this house briefly."

"Right. And we won't stay long. If those guys return, you'll know immediately through the shadows you've placed on the walls and gates. Just use your ability to escape."

"You're the one who knows best how much our teleportation abilities have improved. Still nervous?"

Gakane looked down at the bright-eyed siblings and sighed deeply.

"...My concern isn't whether you two can pull this off. It's that the world is full of unforeseen circumstances, and it's good to never forget that."

The siblings locked eyes. The sentiment that they were trusted in skill but that unexpected things might happen lifted their spirits instantly.

"Ah ha... Hehe, exactly."

"Well, being cautious is one of Gakane's strong points, anyway."

"...What's my strong point?"

"Alright, Gakane. We'll transport you in, so open the door!"

Seizing Gakane's arms, the siblings activated their teleportation abilities.

"Wait! What if someone walks by—"

Before Gakane could finish his sentence, he vanished over the wall. As the siblings chuckled, it didn't take long for the main gate to open from the inside. Gakane, a hint of red in his cheeks, gestured for them to come in.

"...Come in."

No one paid any attention to the sudden disappearance and the subsequent opening of the inner door. Thus, the trio confidently entered the residence where the Star of Nagran had been staying.

"See? No one's suspicious, right?"

"Ah... Yes, that seems to be the case."

"Hm? But Gakane, what's that in your hand? A letter?"

Finn noticed the unfamiliar object in Gakane's hand and asked.

As soon as he stepped inside the wall, he found it at his feet. It seemed like someone had thrown it in there.

The letter had neither the receiver's name nor the sender's. However, it was clear that the occupants of this house were the intended recipients.

"Gakane, open it. What does it say?"

"Uh... give me a moment."

Gakane quickly read the contents of the letter. A moment later, his eyes narrowed.

"It's a letter from a place called 'Southern Base.' It discusses recent events there and mentions 'a sage' whom some unfamiliar visitors wish to meet. And also..."

Gakane's expression became grave as he read the bottom of the letter. He stopped speaking and began reading intently. The Eldore siblings shouted in unison.

"And what?"

"Tell us quickly, we're curious!"

"Ah, sorry. As I was reading, it occurred to me that the new visitors at the base might be people we know."

"Who? Who are they?"

"You remember the southern merchants who supposedly escaped with Nahan from the West? They haven't been caught yet."

"Wow. Could it be?"

"I'm pretty sure it's them."

"My goodness! What a treasure of a letter!"

"Quickly, put it away! No one will know it's missing since there's no one to claim it!"

The Eldore siblings' eyes gleamed with excitement. This time, Gakane did not oppose their suggestion.

They began exploring the interior of the house in earnest. Unlike Gakane, who moved cautiously, the siblings scurried about like a pair of squirrels, turning over every room.

Though the occupants of the house had left few personal belongings, the search was not entirely fruitless. Wherever people had lived, some trace that hinted at the owner's identity would inevitably remain.

"Look at this, Finn! A shopping list for essentials! It even names who should buy what!"

"I found an unfinished letter amid the trash. It might be valuable to Kanna."

"Hmph, unbeatable."

"Gakane, didn't you find anything useful?"

Beaming with the thrill of discovery, Finn asked.

"Ah, well... this."

With a somewhat sheepish look, Gakane held up a twisted leather cord.

"Huh? Isn't that just a piece of string?"

"True, but... men from prestigious noble families often tie something like this around their sleeves or shirts."

"A noble's string?"

"If you look closely, you'll see the family crest embossed all over the thin leather. It also serves as proof of identity. But the problem is... I think I've seen this crest at the imperial palace party."

"Really? So a noble who could attend such a party has been here?!"

"Could it be an associate of Duke Diarca who lent this house to the Awakeners?"

"That's likely, but it's odd that they would leave this behind. Gifting this cord implies deep trust; it's like saying you can use my name wherever you go. It doesn't make sense for the secretive Duke Diarca to do that."

"Ah, you have a point."

"It might not be the family crest I remember from the party. Still, it's worth checking, so I'm going to snip off a piece."

"Wow... Gakane!"

The siblings were deeply impressed by Gakane's unexpected resourcefulness.

"I knew it would be good to have you along! Now, have we finished going through everything? Should we check for hidden spaces?"

"I agree!"

"Hold on."

"Don't oppose this, Gakane. Treasure hunting is essential for infiltration!"

"That's not the point! Something triggered the shadow I cast outside. We need to go now...!"

Just as he spoke, a noise like a breaking door resounded from the exterior. It wasn't the sound of someone unlocking and entering in the usual manner.

'...A third intruder?'

The three looked at each other and reflexively darted toward the stairs leading to the basement. Gakane's shadow clone altered its form to conceal them in the darkness, just as voices were heard from above.

"We were told they'd be sending a letter of contact here. Why is no one around? Another hoax?"

"It can't be. This is the place..."

"Nahan. What should we do?"

'...Nahan?'

The eyes of the three Cavalry members sharpened at once. If they hadn't misheard, the third intruder was Nahan—affiliated with the Star of Nagran, and elusive since fleeing from the west.

As Hinn clenched and unclenched his fist, contemplating whether to rush outside, Gakane shook his head frantically to dissuade him.

'Not now! There are three of us and many of them!'

'So what? We can win!'

'Have you forgotten that Nahan escaped from Yuder and our Commander multiple times? He's a real threat!'

"Let's search the room. Something will give them away."

Then, a very soft and slow voice resonated. Despite being an ordinary conversation, something in that voice compelled the listeners to focus.

"Ah, yes, of course. It's Nahan, after all. Let's search!"

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed as people began to scurry about. Gakane spread his shadow clone even wider to hide their forms. A few times, footsteps approached close to their hiding spot, ramping up the tension, but fortunately, no one ventured all the way down.

They found what they were looking for somewhere in the rooms they searched.

"I've found it! This is definitely Nezo's stuff."

"I've also found something that looks like Ella's hair."

"Exactly. There's no doubt, the sage was here."

Nahan whispered.

"Then he hasn't completely left this place. We should wait a few days."

Nahan quietly thanked those who had found evidence confirming the sage's presence. The Awakeners couldn't hide their joy.

"Let's go!"

As the Awakeners filed out, having accomplished their mission, Gakane breathed a sigh of relief. But then, a chilling voice was heard from above.

"What's that over there?"

"I thought I saw stairs leading to the basement."

"A basement."

"They wouldn't need a basement for a temporary dwelling, so I didn't check. But should we look now?"

The Eldore siblings clenched their fists, showing signs of transformation. But luckily, the presence hovering above them neither descended nor moved.

"Nahan! The guards are coming!"

"..."

"We need to get out of here!"

"Nahan."

One of Nahan's companions called his name in confusion. After a moment of silence, Nahan turned and began to walk away.

After they had all left and the door closed, the Cavalry members used their abilities to swiftly escape through the back door they had scouted earlier.

"Phew, what was that all about? Nahan barging in like that?"

"Why is someone who was chased from the west so brazen? I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't heard it myself."

"Let's head back immediately and report."

The three of them looked at each other and nodded. Their steps back to the Cavalry headquarters were quicker and more urgent than ever before.

...

"It's an honor to have you visit the Black Pigeon, Duke Peletta."

Yuder glanced at the administrator as he and Nathan Zuckerman bowed their heads in greeting. The administrator looked as if he hadn't slept in about a week.

Behind them, many people were scurrying around, clutching scrolls or hefty bundles of papers. Indecipherable shouts filled the air from all directions. This was the heart of the Empire's administrative machinery—the Black Pigeon, occupying the most extensive land area in Second Wall.

"His Excellency regrets that he cannot come down to greet you in person and asks for your understanding."

"If he is still in a meeting, then it can't be helped. I naturally understand. So... will I be meeting the scholars first?"

"Yes, please follow me."

As the administrator turned to lead the way, Nathan Zuckerman gave Kishiar a discreet bow.

"I shall return. I am going to return some books."

"Alright. We'll meet back here when you're done."

Nathan Zuckerman had come with them to return some rare books that could only be borrowed from the imperial library. Kishiar and Yuder were to head to the upper floors of the Black Pigeon, so it was time to part ways.

Yuder returned the bow that Nathan Zuckerman gave him as well. The loyal adjutant had noticed that his lord seemed to be in better health that morning, and for some reason, his manners seemed unusually formal today.

'He wasn't disrespectful before, but something feels different...'

It was hard to put into words, but something was definitely off. Yuder abandoned the search for the right term and followed Kishiar. As they ascended several flights of stairs, Yuder's mind was filled with thoughts about the people they were about to meet.

'Legal scholars and ministers.'

These were people far removed from Yuder's previous life. Especially the ministers—their roles had diminished in influence as the aristocracy's power had grown.

In this era, a minister was essentially someone who oversaw all the Empire's administrators and handled the nitty-gritty of daily governance. A thankless job with a heap of responsibilities but little to show for it.

The legal scholars were also situated in the Black Pigeon, interpreting, amending, and introducing new laws every day. Yet, like the ministers, they had little presence for the amount of work they did.

'Kishiar had consulted with them before to draft and modify regulations within the Cavalry concerning second gender.'

What was Kishiar planning to do with them this time?

The tall man walking ahead of Yuder seemed to notice his gaze and turned his head slightly. When he offered a fleeting smile, Yuder found it difficult to continue his train of thought.

"...Here we are."

They had arrived at a quiet area, devoid of passerby.

"Well done."

Kishiar lightly commended the guide before opening a closed door and walking in.

"Duke Peletta has arrived!"

Scholars who were gathered around a pile of papers discussing something immediately turned their attention toward Kishiar.

Yuder watched as they all bowed their heads toward Kishiar in unison. Most of them were older, exuded a stubborn air, and showed little reaction to Kishiar's presence.

"Have you arrived, Your Highness?"

"It's been a while, Marchio."

Kishiar directed a warm smile toward Marchio, an Elderly scholar who appeared especially solemn among his peers. It was a smile that could disarm anyone, yet Marchio only twitched his nose, offering no smile in return.

"When I received word that you would be coming today, I thought it must be a mistake. But it turns out it's true."

"You wound me by saying that. I thought I've always been consistent in my actions."

"And why are you here this time? To add another rule to the Cavalry?"

"That's part of it, yes. But this time, I've come to ask about the legislative process related to imperial laws."

"You do understand that adding a new law isn't a simple matter, correct?"

"Of course. That's why I've sought you out, isn't it?"

Marchio sighed deeply.

"Last time, you made us scramble to find precedent for completely new clauses, tormenting us in the process. What law are you aiming to create this time?"

"Oh, let's not create misunderstandings, my dear advisor. This time it's really quite simple. I just want to formalize some existing regulations within the Cavalry and incorporate them into imperial law."

Marchio paused for a moment.

"I apologize, but it seems my hearing has deteriorated with age. Would you mind repeating that?"

"Very well. I intend to take a few regulations from the Cavalry, and seamlessly integrate them into imperial law. ...Can you hear me now?"

Kishiar flashed a shameless and sly smile.

Chapter 577

It wasn't just the legal scholars, including Marchio, who doubted Kishiar's words. Even Yuder, who had somewhat anticipated what Kishiar might do when meeting the scholars, was taken aback by his unexpectedly bold statements.

'He intends to create laws concerning Awakeners so quickly? Is that even possible?'

In his previous life, new rules or laws were only incrementally added when Yuder and his Cavalry returned from accomplishing a task, or when an incident related to Awakeners occurred. In other words, it was extremely difficult to change imperial law unless something significant happened.

Sure, regulations concerning the Cavalry could easily be amended. However, the weight of imperial law was entirely different. Yuder had heard that while it was easy to add exceptions to existing clauses, creating entirely new ones was incredibly challenging.

'Of course, I had planned to discuss legislation at some point... just not now.'

Yet Kishiar was not someone who would recklessly plunge into the impossible. If he believed it could be done now, then perhaps it was better to do it sooner rather than later.

'Yes... the issue might simply be that we have fewer Cavalry members and our influence is somewhat weak right now. Both will be resolved soon, and the Emperor is back in good health to back us up.'

While being weak posed its own set of challenges, growing too powerful would also attract various forms of containment. Their current, moderate status might actually be the ideal time to act.

'But that's my perspective... the real question is whether those legal scholars will help.'

The scholars appeared stunned by Kishiar's audacious proposal. Seeing Marchio's trembling eyes, Yuder took a step forward, ready to intervene should Marchio charge at Kishiar.

However, Marchio remained calm. The stern-faced scholar wiped his face a few times and then asked a single question.

"So... exactly what kind of law do you wish to implement, Your Highness?"

Kishiar smiled, as if he had been waiting for that question.

"Excellent. Here is the draft of the target legislation I've diligently prepared, along with a list of Cavalry regulations to support it."

"When did he even prepare this?"

Yuder narrowed his eyes, unaware that Kishiar had brought such documents while they dined and traveled here. Marchio, who had begun reading the paper, also frowned considerably.

"The focus appears to be on laws related to the treatment of Awakeners."

"We have sufficient case examples from the activities of the Cavalry, which makes drafting this new legislation feasible. All you scholars need to do is compile the justifications and help with the submission."

"Compiling justifications is easier said than done... Provisions related to the heat period of second gender Awakeners, marital arrangements, and child rearing and inheritance could face significant opposition. You are aware, of course, that even after submission to the council, there will be countless hurdles before the new laws can be finalized. The temples and the Mage Guild also have to review and approve."

Upon hearing the issues Marchio pointed out, the other legal scholars began to murmur amongst themselves, all wearing serious expressions.

"I know. Don't worry, I won't leave all of this in your hands. This is something we're starting with adequate preparation."

"Phew..."

Marchio wiped his face again. As he glanced around at the other scholars, their eyes met, as if they were reading each other's thoughts. It was as though they each possessed some uncanny ability to do so.

After a considerable pause, they all seemed to come to a decision, bowing their heads in unison.

"Since you've all appeared to have made up your minds, what more can this old man say? Just know that this will be a difficult battle."

"Isn't every battle related to the law a difficult one, Marchio? Remember your own words?"

"...Those were the words I spoke to the young prince who came here, frustrated by the abundance of 'do nots' and wanting to change things."

Marchio's words carried weight, but not like a thorny sharpness. Despite knowing the comment was directed at him, Kishiar's expression remained unchanged. He smiled.

"When Emperor Aklan, the Second Emperor, reformed the laws concerning mages, he also faced significant opposition. But he accomplished it, and that law is now permanently embedded in the Empire, accepted by everyone as a matter of course. If precedent matters, then we're already halfway there, don't you think? This is a battle worth fighting."

"Things are different now."

"Still, the situation itself is quite similar—creating new legal categories for people who didn't exist under previous laws."

"..."

"Awakeners already exist, and their numbers will only grow, not shrink. Right now, young people moving towards the future, children yet to be born, could become new Awakeners. As the

Commander of the Cavalry and an Awakener serving His Imperial Majesty, I believe it's unjust to let them live in the Empire without even the smallest fence of law to guide them."

The smallest fence of law—a phrase Yuder had never heard before. But somehow, it struck a chord in him.

Marchio too, seemed to soften his stern expression for the first time, lowering his furrowed brows. An unusually long sigh escaped his lips.

"...You're as compelling as ever. Whether it was when you asked for help in setting up regulations for the Cavalry or now, it's impossible for old men like us to refuse you. Alright, you have my support."

"Thank you. You're the ones I trust the most."

Marchio received the thanks half-heartedly and soon disappeared, as if eager to put distance between himself and Kishiar.

Yet Yuder's perception of him had changed slightly from their first meeting. The legal scholars here worked on thankless tasks with fatigued faces, but before the work they needed to do, they never revealed any trivial emotions.

It was no ordinary feat to maintain their composure when confronted with the prospect of creating new laws related to the second gender Awakeners.

'I remember he said he's been helping with regulations since the Cavalry was first established.'

Yuder felt he understood why Kishiar chose to address this issue first.

"Legal scholars rarely give a definite opinion on anything. They said it would be difficult, but they didn't say it would be impossible. Don't worry. They're all people who love legal texts more than anyone else. I'd bet they're now quite excited to dig up old laws and precedents."

Kishiar spoke, perhaps mistaking the reason Yuder continued to gaze in the direction Marchio had disappeared.

"I wasn't worried."

"Is that so?"

"Although it may seem rushed, I'm beginning to think that now might actually be the right time."

"That's good to hear."

"By the way, when did you find the time to write all of that? Didn't you say you slept well last night?"

"Creating the legislative plan wasn't particularly difficult; I had been contemplating it in my head for some time. Knowing what to write made the rest simply a matter of speed."

It didn't sound like a lie. Given the circumstances, it was entirely possible.

'But what is this? This subtle feeling.'

Yuder gazed intently at Kishiar. In response, Kishiar squinted his eyes, seemingly pleased by the attention, but the feeling dissipated as quickly as it had come.

"..."

"Marchio has been here since the days of the previous Emperor. He's a reliable scholar in jurisprudence. Probably the only scholars you can trust not to toy with legal interpretation are him and the scholars here."

"That's why I came here," he said. Yuder recalled an impactful statement he'd heard earlier.

"You said, 'The law is the smallest fence.'"

"Ah, yes. That's a quote from Eloto, a famous scholar in jurisprudence whom Marchio admires. I cited it on purpose."

Kishiar grinned, pleased with himself.

"Indeed. I've never thought of the law that way, so I found it quite insightful."

"Law can't determine everything. But a house with even the minimum fencing is different from one without. Of course, how well you maintain and protect that fence also matters."

A fair point. A house with a well-planned fence from the start was certainly different from one where boards were hastily hammered in only after an accident occurred.

Yuder found this fact extremely satisfying.

"I apologize for my late arrival, Your Grace."

Hebreyina Reiflang, the current high minister in the Orr Empire, appeared with a face twice as weary as any scholar's. After exchanging greetings, she immediately downed a cup of black coffee that her aides had brought, exhaling as if she'd barely escaped death.

The first thing she said was an expression of heartfelt gratitude and goodwill towards Yuder.

"It's an honor to meet the famous Baron Aile here. I regret not being able to thank you at the last party due to unforeseen circumstances. Did you happen to receive my gift?"

Since returning to the capital, the invitations and gifts that had poured into Yuder had mostly been screened by Kishiar. Still, he had shoved most of the gifts that passed muster into a drawer without another glance. It seemed the high minister's gift was among them.

‘But I can't tell her that.’

"...Yes, thank you."

"Your contributions in the west have significantly reduced the workload for our administrators. Had that monster invaded a town or city, the consequences would have been unimaginable. Please find the gift useful; it was sent with sincere gratitude."

Yuder thought he should probably look for the high minister's gift as soon as he returned.

Fortunately, the high minister did not dwell on the subject of gifts and got straight to the point.

"I received your letter this morning, requesting assistance in selecting locations for branches across the Empire."

"That's right."

"If you could specify the areas, I'll notify the local administrators in advance. I can't guarantee everyone will offer the help you desire, but..."

"That's more than enough."

"Very well, then."

The conversation flowed, each participant carefully choosing their words, as they delved deeper into the intricate worlds of law and governance.

The high minister was a person of swift decisions. After spending a good while exchanging stories with Kishiar about the officials dispatched to the west for inspections, she casually brought up the topic of new laws, something Kishiar had earlier discussed with the legal scholars.

The high minister showed no particular reaction, but neither did she visibly oppose the idea. It was difficult for Yuder to discern what she was thinking as she listened to Kishiar's words.

'As for the current high minister, I really can't tell. In his previous life, she didn't last long after Emperor Katchian and we never had the chance to meet,' thought Yuder.

Although she hadn't worked under Emperor Katchian for long, it was hard to assert that she was truly loyal to the current Emperor. The atmosphere between her and Kishiar was strictly professional, which only intensified that impression.

However, Kishiar stood up from his seat with a satisfied smile as if that were enough for him, signaling that their meeting had come to an end.

"I apologize for taking up your busy time."

"Not at all."

A cordial yet political smile exchanged between the two, marking the end of their meeting.

Yuder carefully asked as he followed Kishiar, who was climbing onto a carriage headed for their next destination.

"Will the high minister truly support this new law?"

Kishiar responded, "That's not a bad response. She's the one who has most keenly felt the need for a Cavalry due to recent events, so getting her support shouldn't be difficult. However, it's a bit unfortunate that she seems to have taken quite a liking to you in the process."

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Kishiar responded, "That's not a bad response. She's the one who has most keenly felt the need for a Cavalry due to recent events, so getting her support shouldn't be difficult. However, it's a bit unfortunate that she seems to have taken quite a liking to you in the process."

If the high minister's reaction was good, why did Kishiar express regret about her fondness for Yuder? Could there be complications if she ended up liking him?

'I assumed her fondness for me was nothing more than gratitude for lightening her workload. Nothing more, nothing less.'

As Yuder pondered whether there was something he had overlooked, Kishiar, wearing a semi-serious expression, playfully filled him in.

"I really worry sometimes. If one more person advises you to change jobs because you, my assistant are too charming, what will happen? The high minister already has an unusual popularity among younger men and women."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is. There's even a legendary tale from her youth that says every debutante in the capital's social scene confessed to her."

Yuder briefly recalled the high minister's demeanor. While he couldn't pinpoint what exactly made her especially popular among the younger crowd, she certainly had a calm and composed aura that was hard to find in her peers. But that was it.

What Yuder found most peculiar about the high minister was something else.

'She never showed any surprise or negative reaction while having formal conversations with Kishiar, despite seemingly not having been close to him previously.'

To those unfamiliar with Kishiar, he was usually considered a frivolous man of little intellect. Hence, even a slight departure from that perception would be startling. Many believed that Kishiar was merely parroting Emperor Keilusa.

This was the case with nobles he'd met in the West, and even some young-looking legal scholars they'd encountered earlier displayed signs of discomfort around him.

Unlike them, the high minister remained unfazed. She had initially observed Kishiar for a brief moment but continued the conversation serenely thereafter. Whether it was because she fully understood Kishiar's forthright and insightful nature, or her ability to suppress her astonishment was exceptional, either way, it was quite impressive.

'Not that I expect her to actually suggest that I switch jobs.'

Yuder verbalized his final thoughts succinctly.

"Whether the high minister is popular or not, it's none of my concern. I'm grateful that you consider me so valuable, but you're worrying too much."

The crux of the matter was his last statement, yet all Kishiar seemed to hear was, "I'm grateful that you consider me so valuable."

"Who could be more valuable than an assistant like you? If countless nobles and even the prince of Nelarn and the Emperor heard about this, they would be flabbergasted. To think you undervalue yourself so. Whose fault could that be? Is it mine, as your Commander?"

His voice carried an exaggerated sorrow. It might have been half in jest, but Yuder was momentarily lost for words. Finally, he articulated the response that came to him a beat too late.

"Regardless, I have no intention of leaving the Cavalry. You know this now, don't you?"

He assumed that by now, Yuder would understand the weight of the word 'now.'

The words of the man who had seemed to be jesting a moment earlier abruptly stopped.

"Commander?"

"Yes, that's right."

Just then, a breeze that snuck in through a slightly opened window gently rustled the curtains. The sunlight, which had found its way in, beamed harshly onto Yuder's face, which was directly facing the window. Yuder reflexively squinted, and his eyes caught the fleeting upward curve of the man's lips.

"However, even knowing that, there have been times when I've wondered what would have happened if you had made a different choice, instead of the Cavalry. You would have surely excelled no matter where you were. You have that ability."

"Commander."

"Ah, of course, I have no complaints, as things are perfect for me now. It's just a thought that crosses my mind sometimes."

Strangely enough, despite wearing a cheerful smile, something about his expression seemed to lose its color.

"So, shall we head to the next location?"

...

The Shuden Trading Company building was located quite a distance from the center of Karl Lorwick Street, the hub of all trading houses. Although the building was small, it didn't lack in opulence, befitting a place that specialized in rare and valuable items.

Yuder, accompanied by Kishiar, who was wearing a magic bracelet that rendered his face ordinary, entered the place confidently.

"Welcome—Oh?"

The person who was greeting them widened his eyes as he saw Kishiar.

"My, what a rare pleasure. You have graced us with your presence after such a long time. But today, you're accompanied by someone else?"

As was often the case for those meeting Yuder for the first time, the employee seemed a little uncomfortable around the man with jet-black and pallid features. Kishiar cheerfully pulled Yuder closer by the waist and leaned his head toward him.

"He's with me because we are close enough to be together."

"Ah..."

The employee's attitude shifted instantly.

"Understood. Are you here to buy a gift for your cherished companion? We have some excellent new items in stock..."

"No. That can wait. Where is Lady Justin?"

"Looking for the Lady? She has been out since this morning for an appointment. Oh, could it be...?"

"I'm her appointment. Lead the way."

"Ah, of course."

The employee hurriedly escorted them upstairs. The door to the most lavish room opened, and a rich scent of perfume assailed their nostrils. A young lady, seated amidst a variety of exquisite items and inspecting jewelry, stood up to greet them.

"So, you've finally arrived."

She seemed less like a trading house manager and more like a dazzling figure commanding the social scene. Her voice had a mesmerizing quality, as did her perfectly styled hair and meticulously manicured nails.

Though she was captivating enough to steal anyone's gaze, Yuder wasn't interested in her appearance. What caught his attention was the familiar scent filling the room.

'It's the same fragrance I often smelled when Kishiar came back from going out...'

Moreover, Yuder had encountered this scent before in this lifetime. It was after he had just joined the Cavalry and had scolded Kiolle and then he had visited Kishiar's office and smelled it.

The vague memory of feeling uneasy after smelling a perfume that was popular among the high-society ladies at the time flashed through his mind. Had Kishiar visited this place back then?

In an instant, Yuder's gaze, now sharper than before, swept over his surroundings.

Sensing that gaze, Kishiar whispered with a smile.

"The Lady knows who I am. There's no need to be so tense."

"How much does she know about you?"

"Enough to comfortably call me 'Commander' here."

Kishiar's expression remained serene.

"Do you remember when we went to meet Prince Revlin? I had a fake identification from Shuden that allowed me to move freely around the capital. I've often obtained necessary items from here."

"You also sometimes served as my servant, infiltrating parties directly."

From the inner room, a lady emerged, carrying two boxes, one large and one small. She set them on the table, adding to the conversation.

"It was both tedious and thrilling. I've heard so much about you, Baron Aile. It's a great pleasure to finally meet you in person."

"Did you already know who I am?"

"Of course. Company Leader Mick has talked a lot about you. I heard that Madam Hellem took quite a liking to you, and seeing you now, it's understandable."

"Justin, what about the items?"

Kishiar cut her off with a laugh. Lady Justin also responded with a smile.

"Everything you've requested is prepared. You can take them after checking."

The lady sat down and opened the first of the two boxes on the table, opting for the smaller one. Inside was an object resembling a palm-sized mirror. Its surface was discolored in places and showed signs of aging, including some cracks.

"A Mirror of Truth. A genuine artifact."

Kishiar picked it up and examined it from all angles. The moment magic energy flowed into his hand, Yuder felt as if something tightened around the depths of his eyes.

Though no golden light flowed from his eyes, Yuder blinked as he perceived an aura undulating around the artifact in Kishiar's hand.

'...Is that magic?'

Even without an explanation, it was evident. The diminutive, weathered artifact was brimming with far more magic energy than he'd anticipated.

"Yes, it's authentic. Well done."

After a thorough examination, Kishiar placed the artifact back into its box. Yuder thought the next box would contain a similar magic tool, but he was greeted with something entirely unexpected.

"This is the sword sheath you ordered. It's enchanted with Radamantium to withstand an Eucalractus blade, and it's been finely crafted with the highest-grade potions on leather. I've also added some extra gems to go with those you sent me earlier."

Lady Justin presented a long, black sword sheath with a smile.

"It may not look all that extravagant, but I doubt there's a more expensive sheath in this age. Is it exactly as you wanted?"

Indeed, her words rang true. At first glance, the black-painted sheath didn't appear particularly grand. However, a closer look revealed a deep-red gem near the closure, a sight Yuder found oddly familiar. Thin lines of gold and tiny gems around it shimmered with restrained elegance.

That deep-red gem was originally embedded in Kishiar's new sword sheath, which had later come into Yuder's possession. It had been a fixture in the groove of Yuder's previous sheath until it shattered in a battle against a massive monster in the west. It was now back in its rightful place.

'...I thought he simply reclaimed the sheath after recovering it from that battle.'

Yuder stared at the new sheath in silence, recalling the sword that lay dormant in its temporary sheath. The man inspecting the sheath turned his head toward him, smiling.

Their eyes met.

"Well, this is the new sheath. I placed the order when we were in the West, but getting the materials took longer than expected. Do you like it?"

'Do I like it?'

It was not a question of whether he 'liked' it.

It was, quite literally, the best.

Yuder took the sheath from Kishiar with an emotion he found hard to describe. Despite being sturdier than the one he had used previously, it was surprisingly lighter.

"I like it."

"Seeing you finally happy about something—after all the gems and clothes failed to make you smile—also pleases me."

"I was worried I had made something wrong," Lady Justin said, looking somewhat relieved in the face of Yuder's normally emotionless countenance.

"This sheath won't break as easily as the last when you wield your sword."

Kishiar's soothing voice resonated in his ears as he looked at the sheath in Yuder's hand.

"Of course, preventing such a situation in the first place is ideal."

"Yes."

Yuder read the scars the West had left in his eyes and clenched the sheath tightly. A warmth spread through his hand.

"Thank you."

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As they were leaving the Shuden Trading Company, Yuder finally posed a question to Kishiar that he had been unable to ask earlier.

"What exactly is the 'Mirror of Truth'?"

"It sounds grandiose, but it's not much. It's a magic artifact that can uncover something hidden in the subject it reflects."

Kishiar explained that it was a sort of downgraded tool of an older 'Seeking' magic that ancient Archmages once used. Nowadays, it was so difficult to even create such an artifact that he had to search for an old one, a process that apparently hadn't been smooth. This was one reason he had sought assistance from the Shuden Trading Company.

"It's not universally applicable. It's most effective when you need to find out something unique about an object that has a magic enchantment."

Surprisingly, Kishiar didn't seem too pleased to have obtained the Mirror of Truth. When asked why, he simply smiled and answered succinctly.

"I was quite desperate to find it at the time, but now it has become useless."

An object that was once desperately needed but now had no value to Kishiar. There was only one explanation that fit.

"Did you acquire this for the Emperor?"

"Correct. You do catch on quickly. Initially, it was intended to be used on a relic sent by Prince Ejain."

Yuder recalled the relic that Kishiar had recently received. He had not seen its actual form yet, but he already knew a few details about it from Prince Ejain.

'The object of a blind sage, presumed to be the Archmage Luma by the Nelarn. If it's a mage's object, chances are it's close to a magic artifact.'

It wasn't uncommon to acquire one magic artifact to use another. Many ancient artifacts had lost their instructions or known effects.

"And the relic we received from the Nelarn Prince is called 'Dream's Voice.' According to records, someone who used it once was fully healed from injuries, regaining their prior physical state."

However, the person who had used the relic didn't know how they had been able to use it. Despite many efforts to study it among the Nelarn, the mystery remained.

'Now I see why Prince Ejain was willing to send it despite objections. A relic that can't be immediately used is less important than overcoming the current crisis.'

Yuder also felt he understood why Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar were so keen to demand that specific relic. Kishiar would certainly see enough value in the records alone to merit further research.

"So, I got this Mirror of Truth to examine that relic. Although it's not greatly needed now, I suppose we will use it when the time comes."

As they conversed, their carriage smoothly crossed into the imperial palace grounds. Looking out the window at the rooftops and walls of various palaces, Yuder thought about the imperial family dinner he would attend later that day.

Today, he would be attending that gathering under the guise of accompanying Kishiar along with Nathan Zuckerman. Only the Emperor and his family could sit at the table in these official imperial family dinners held in the First Palace, but that didn't mean others couldn't attend.

Being allowed to accompany someone to this secretive and familial setting was considered a great honor for those close to the imperial family.

Yuder had been summoned to Emperor Katchian's dining table several times in his previous life, so he was well aware of the fact. However, the feelings he had then and now were quite different.

Kishiar, who had come to know of a future that might or might not happen, wondered how he would face the one who had once taken everything from him and the Emperor.

"By the way, I heard the Crown Prince replied that he would attend the meal and plans to be accompanied by Kiolle Diarca," Kishiar remarked.

At that moment, it seemed Kishiar had the same thought as Yuder. "Is that so? That's good news."

"Yes, it is. When you see him, make sure to ask about the healers who have been staying in the Crown Prince's palace for a long time."

Yuder had already planned to do so. He had been wondering when he would get the chance to meet, but now that he knew the Crown Prince was coming, there was no need to worry. As he thought about how to squeeze answers out of Kiolle, who might be feeling uneasy by now, Kishiar asked another question.

"What role did he play in the previous game?"

"Are you referring to Kiolle? He... could be considered a card that never came into play."

"A card that never came into play..."

A card that couldn't even participate in the game meant an early death. The man who repeated Yuder's words seemed to understand the implication quite easily.

"Is that why you went out of your way to rescue him during the Eastern mission? Because he was an unforeseen variable?"

After learning of the future, when Kishiar heard Kiolle's name, he seemed to think of Yuder's past actions in that light.

While it was true that Yuder had gone out of his way to save Kiolle, he hadn't really hoped for him to become a significant variable. After a moment of contemplation, Yuder spoke, "That's one way to see it... but I didn't have high expectations. The main reason I saved him back then was because I didn't like the way Nahan spoke. Somehow, I ended up using Kiolle as an informant..."

Kiolle was indeed a strange variable. In his previous life, he might have died and disappeared, but now he was alive and well, serving as a knight for Katchian, something even Yuder hadn't expected.

"Nahan's words? Was there anything other than what was reported at the time?"

Yuder hadn't spoken in detail about the events of that time. But now, there was nothing more to hide. "When Nahan tried to suppress me to kill Kiolle, I didn't like the way he insisted he was always right and tried to command me."

"He tried to command you?"

"Even if Kiolle was worthless, that can't be a good reason to follow the logic of someone like Nahan. There's only one person who can command me. I had no reason to follow Nahan's orders."

The only person who could command Yuder looked at him.

"...Was that the real reason you came back injured?"

"..."

"Really..."

Yuder thought Kishiar would find it ridiculous. But when Kishiar looked at him with fiery eyes, Yuder realized he was mistaken.

Unexpectedly, without any questions or persuasion, Kishiar leaned in, grabbed Yuder's chin, and kissed him. The sensation of a hot tongue filling his mouth made Yuder's head spin. Slowly, Yuder wrapped his arms around Kishiar's neck.

The carriage traveled in silence for a long time.

...

Naturally, even if it was an informal and secretive dinner gathering, any event held in the imperial palace required proper preparation and procedure.

Yuder stood alongside Nathan Zuckerman behind Kishiar, who was dressed in formal attire adorned with the coat of arms of Duke Peletta. Though not as extravagant as the outfits they'd wear to parties, their attire still clearly marked them as Kishiar's people.

As they entered the designated dining area where the Emperor and his family were to have a comfortable meal, the chief attendant, now familiar to them, politely bowed.

"Welcome, Your Grace. Both His and Her Highnesses have already arrived; please proceed inside."

"How unfortunate. I appear to be the latecomer despite having called for the meal."

Kishiar chuckled as he walked in. Yuder, who was following him, only realized a moment later that the chief attendant was smiling softly in his direction.

'What's going on?'

"Baron Aile, I was worried as you were focusing on your recovery these past few days. I'm delighted to see you in good health."

"...Thank you for your concern."

"Don't mention it."

Although it was an adequate exchange of pleasantries, the chief attendant's sincere smile made Yuder uncomfortable. He followed Kishiar inside, unable to adapt to the chief attendant's breezy, almost flirtatious demeanor.

But the unfamiliar winds didn't stop there.

"Welcome, Baron. If you hadn't fully recovered, you could have rested. I hope you weren't dragged here needlessly by the Duke."

"The Duke told me you made good use of the sachet of herbs I gave you while you were resting. I've prepared more for you to take home tonight. I hope you'll use it."

"...Yes, thank you."

Though he didn't look as healthy as an average person, the Emperor's eyes were significantly more at ease than before, and the Empress, seemingly relieved from all her past sufferings, wore a flower-like expression as they continually spoke to Yuder.

Kishiar looked as though all the fuss around Yuder was as pleasant as a luring songbird, even Nathan Zuckerman, who normally would've been wearing a complex expression in such situations, seemed to take it all in stride. The atmosphere in the dining area was genuinely warm.

Ultimately, due to the Empress even going so far as to say, "Traditionally, companions may only join after the meal is done, but for Baron Aile, surely it's alright," Yuder found himself wishing that Crown Prince Katchian would arrive sooner rather than later.

And right on cue, an announcement was made that Crown Prince Katchian had arrived.

"The Crown Prince has entered."

The chief attendant's emotionless voice accompanied the opening of the door, and the previously jovial atmosphere vanished as if it had never existed.

"..."

In the ensuing silence, Crown Prince Katchian moved to his seat with Kiolle following him. Yuder caught a fleeting glimpse of Kiolle, who twitched his shoulders and made a strange face as their eyes met. Evidently, Kiolle had not known Yuder would be present.

'Just pretend you don't know me and keep quiet.'

Upon receiving Yuder's stern look, Kiolle immediately flinched and took his position behind the Crown Prince.

"Greetings to His Majesty the Emperor and Her Majesty the Empress."

A sharp-eyed youth, appearing even younger than his years, extended his greeting with impeccable courtesy. The Empress quietly spoke to him.

"You're late, Crown Prince."

"One of the newly arrived attendants failed to properly prepare the ceremonial attire. Despite rushing as much as possible, he inevitably ended up being late. It appears that there were mistakes due to the overly abrupt summons."

While explaining the reason, there was no apology for the lateness. Moreover, there was an unspoken criticism towards the one who had hastily called him over. It was a condescending approach.

Yuder caught the glance of a young man covertly scanning the Emperor's pallid cheeks and puffy eyes. He guessed why the boy was here.

'He must have wanted the opportunity to closely observe and judge the Emperor's condition, especially since the Emperor has only recently begun appearing at official banquets.'

The Emperor had yet to disclose his condition publicly. Aware of the Crown Prince's intent to covertly gauge whether he was on the verge of death or not, the Emperor said nothing and quietly drank his water.

Chapter 580

The evening dinner of the imperial family, who could never be described as congenial, appeared surprisingly peaceful at first glance.

Dishes masterfully crafted by the palace chefs, meticulously considering each person's health and preferences, lined the table. Because Yuder was inadvertently accompanying them, he had the chance to discern the culinary tastes of the imperial family members.

The Emperor, still not fully recovered, primarily consumed food that was gentle on the stomach and smooth. The Empress seemed to prefer dishes laden with flowers, mostly focusing on simple vegetables and fruits. Katchian picked at a few dishes as if he were a picky eater, although Yuder knew he didn't typically have such tendencies.

However, continuously consuming only specific dishes meant...

'He's being cautious while pretending not to be.'

Kishiar was the complete opposite of Katchian. He had no qualms about eating anything and managed to consume all kinds of food gracefully. Some might say that he was so naive as to not even consider the possibility of poison, but from Yuder's perspective, it was the complete opposite.

Kishiar was clearly enjoying his meal more boldly than usual, aiming for something—or someone.

And that someone was most likely Katchian.

'What kind of reaction is he trying to elicit by doing this?'

At the moment when Yuder was privately curious, Katchian was swallowing his extreme discomfort beneath a stoic facade.

"Your Majesty. This chicken dish is quite tender and tasty. Would you care to try some? I believe it would suit your palate."

"Very well. If the Duke recommends it, then I shall try."

"Your Majesty, Empress. Please consider adding this herb to the salad dressing you're currently having. I once had it that way in the West, and it added a delightful layer of flavor."

"Is that so? I'm not familiar with Western cuisine, but if Duke Peletta recommends it, I can trust it."

The invitation to the dinner at the Sun Palace had come from the Empress that very morning. At first, Katchian had been skeptical of the message's true intent, but he remembered that similar dinners had occurred when the Emperor was healthier and accepted the invitation.

'There was originally a dinner planned during the Harvest Festival as well, though it was ultimately canceled.'

The reason for the cancellation had been the fool from the Apeto family, whom he had sent to the afterlife by way of poison. But that detail was irrelevant to Katchian. What mattered to him were the terrifying assassination attempts he had faced since then and the days of suffering that followed.

To determine whether the Emperor's condition had improved or worsened, he had to take risks. And to survive in such a setting, he reluctantly had to put up Diarca as a shield.

Fortunately, Kiolle da Diarca, who was appointed as the Crown Prince's watcher, was an absolute fool compared to Duke Diarca, making him very easy to manipulate. Knowing Kiole's secret weakness—that he was secretly engaged in homosexual relationships without his parents' knowledge—Katchian had chosen him as his companion without hesitation.

But the dynamics at the dinner table... they made it exceedingly difficult for him to obtain the information he sought.

"...Cough, cough."

"Your Majesty! Are you alright? Here's some water..."

"I am fine, my Empress. It was just an unfortunate coincidence that the chicken had the leek sauce that I do not particularly enjoy. There's no need for concern."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed."

"My apologies, Your Majesty. I had momentarily forgotten about that. However, leek sauce is good for your health, so please do not worry."

Kishiar had been observing the Emperor as he ate his favorite chicken dish when, all of a sudden, the Emperor began to cough violently. The Empress looked visibly alarmed. She had thought the Emperor might be on his deathbed, but it turned out it was just a sauce that hadn't agreed with him.

Wiping his mouth, Kishiar turned toward the now noticeably pale Emperor, his expression steeped in exaggerated concern. It was impossible for Katchian to tell whether Kishiar was genuinely worried or just putting on a show. Although the Emperor's gaze hardened slightly, he refrained from scolding Kishiar and simply took another sip of water.

The Emperor called for the chief attendant in the midst of his meal and took a pill of some medicine. After that, he ate with a touch more enthusiasm than before.

Taking medicine implies poor health, but eating more than usual suggests the opposite. Just what condition was the Emperor in? Katchian felt as if everyone was either making fun of him or not; it seemed as though the symptoms he had managed to keep at bay were now breaking through.

Unease filled him. In the reflection of his cup, he thought he saw the ghastly red scar that marred his face once again. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that it wasn't real, how could he dismiss what he so vividly saw?

Katchian's gaze pierced through the transparent glass. He felt as if he heard a voice from long ago, back when he was much younger.

"Blond hair and red eyes, undoubtedly. The colors may be a bit tainted, but your skin is pure. Keep it that way; it's the only weapon you'll have for survival..."

The strongest evidence of his imperial bloodline was his hair and eyes, and skin as unblemished as untouched snow.

He couldn't afford to lose any of them... not even one...

As he nervously bit his lip, Katchian suddenly felt someone's gaze upon him. Behind the smiling Kishiar, he saw a man with black hair staring at him intently.

The moment their chillingly cold eyes met, the voices that had been swirling in his head vanished without a trace.

"Yuder. Yuder Aile... the Baron."

No emotion could be read from the man's dark eyes. They were disturbing, as impenetrable as darkness, yet strangely captivating.

Katchian had never expected to encounter the man he had seen at the party again here. But on second thought, it made sense. The man was accompanying Duke Peletta, who had stirred up unprecedented events by dancing at the palace. Of course, the Duke wouldn't leave out his confidant and advisor for such an occasion.

Katchian had heard the rumors that Yuder Aile was the confidant and right-hand man of Duke Peletta. At first, he found it laughable. But after seeing the man dance in the arms of Duke Peletta at the party, and then stand defiantly even in front of Duke Diarca, Katchian changed his mind completely.

Despite his humble background, the man acted as if receiving Duke Peletta's attention was his birthright. Even Duke Diarca was humiliated in front of him, appearing no different from any other. It was truly odd.

Yuder Aile's abilities were already proven by the massive monster head displayed in the Sun Palace. But was his unapologetic confidence also part of those abilities? Or did he possess something more that was hidden?

Katchian couldn't tell. And that uncertainty only deepened his interest in the man.

What if he could make him his own?

How would it feel to see a scene like today's, but this time with Yuder Aile in his own grasp, being the one shaken and stirred?

Could he not overcome obstacles like the bothersome Duke Peletta and the suffocating Duke Diarca?

It was a thought that naturally came to mind...

"Your Highness, Crown Prince."

At that moment, Kishiar called out to Katchian. His voice carried a peculiar weight, making it impossible not to look at him. Simultaneously, their brief eye contact was averted, as if Kishiar had never been looking at Katchian in the first place.

"When will you answer the question I just asked?"

Kishiar asked with a smile. However, Katchian felt a little embarrassed because he couldn't remember what Kishiar had said. He looked back at Kiolle, who stood behind him, for some assistance, but Kiolle was of no help, simply offering a clueless expression as if he didn't know why he was being looked at.

To think that such a fool who can't even offer a helpful word in situations like this is a knight escort.

Grinding his teeth, Katchian responded politely. After all, being distracted during a meal was a breach of etiquette.

"...I apologize, but I didn't hear you. What did you say?"

"It's alright. In hindsight, it wasn't such an important question. I anticipated that you might not find this gathering particularly pleasant, Your Highness. Perhaps my conversation has been rather dull."

Could Duke Peletta really employ such a tactic—skillfully lowering himself to attack his opponent?

A mix of suspicion and discomfort stirred within Katchian's mind.

Even when others considered Duke Peletta to be inconsequential, he had never let his guard down. While Kishiar La Orr often seemed devoid of thoughts, Katchian knew that was hardly the sum of the man.

After becoming the Crown Prince, Katchian had heard stories about Emperor and Kishiar's past as a prince from the courtiers. Unlike the public's opinion that painted Kishiar as a wastrel, many long-standing courtiers held an absolute faith in the 'Second Prince who became a Duke.'

This odd faith held by people within the palace was something outsiders would never understand.

Having been groomed to become the new Emperor, Katchian had always felt a sense of crisis and defeat within the bonds of these courtiers. Was it because he had experienced such feelings too many times even before properly meeting Duke Peletta? Even after meeting Kishiar in person, Katchian frequently felt that Kishiar was not as thoughtless as he appeared to be.

No matter what Duke Diarca said about there being no need for caution, this intuition had never faded.

And today, that intuition was blossoming like a flower, emitting a bright red hue.

Was it wise to have attended this gathering today?

'Your Highness, do not worry. No one can penetrate your thoughts. Remember that your heart is fortified with innate strength. Stand confidently. Trust in me, and all that you seek will be within your grasp.'

At that moment, as if he had been waiting for it, a voice echoed in Katchian's mind.

It was the voice of the healer who had greatly aided Katchian in coming here. As he recalled that slow and polite voice, Katchian surprisingly quickly regained his composure. His mind eased, and the reason for his presence here became abundantly clear.

'Yes, nothing can shake me.'

No situation had yet turned completely against him. Katchian decided to speak directly and ask.

"I..."

"Your Majesty, if this pleases you, I will arrange to send more next time."

"There's no need for that."

However, just then, Kishiar interjected, speaking to the Emperor, causing Katchian's first attempt to be thwarted.

"I apologize, but—"

"Ah, just as the Duke said earlier. It seems fine."

Katchian raised his voice once more. However, this time it was the Empress who responded to Kishiar, causing him to be drowned out again. It was a frustrating moment.

'Damn that Duke Peletta! Is this really unintentional?'

Annoyed, Katchian was about to raise his voice again when Kishiar turned his head.

"Crown Prince, did you have something you wanted to say?"

"...Yes."

Katchian exhaled heavily, attempting to grasp the atmosphere that was not going in the direction he wanted.

"Actually, I was concerned when Her Majesty suddenly proposed a meal today. I wondered if there were urgent matters to be discussed in such a setting. Especially considering that both of you had appeared together at several official occasions recently. If my concerns are unfounded, then that's good but..."

He almost expressed his slight annoyance, questioning why he was even invited if nothing was going to be said.

Though he was speaking diplomatically, he intended to keep probing for information about the Emperor's health. Emperor Keilusa was never an easy figure to deal with, but the comparatively tender-hearted Empress was easier to target. His plan was to try and get answers from her as easily as possible.

However, it wasn't the Empress sitting across from Katchian; it was Kishiar. The perfectly crafted sentences in his mind scattered the moment they met those red eyes.

Kishiar was smiling. But at the same time, an inexplicable, instinctual fear sounded an alarm in Katchian's mind. It was a sensation that was both chilling and overwhelming, as if a weight was pressing down on him. For a moment, he hesitated and closed his mouth.

Then, he simultaneously felt both doubt and shame about his own hesitation.

"Why did you stop speaking?"

With a smiling face, Duke Peletta kindly asked Katchian.

"..."