

Turning 201

Chapter 201

Even as he left the dining hall and walked down the hallway, and even as he descended towards the training grounds, remnants of yesterday's memories still floated around a corner of his mind.

The fervor in the gaze that met his after he had finally detached from what he had clung to with such desperate longing for an indeterminate amount of time. The revelation of a deeper desire, manifested through his rapid, racing breath. The sensation of fingertips tenderly brushing his lips the moment he closed his eyes, unable to bear the wild unknown tumult within him. The soft laughter that echoed in his ears after he shook his head in response to the query, "Do you need healing?", before he even fully registered the profoundly quiet voice. The ticklish breath he felt over his skin. Once these memories began to surface, they lined up, one after the other, and he found it absolutely impossible to stop them.

Yesterday, Kishiar definitely proved he was right. Yuder was still unsure how to describe the vast and deep sense of unity he felt the moment he connected with him.

It was a surreal sensation, as if everything in the world had existed for that moment. The memory of that feeling was so powerful, surpassing simple stimuli and pleasure, that he even began to entertain the peculiar thought that he was currently dreaming, and that his body was still in the dressing room.

'It feels like my brain is paralyzed.'

He was aware of what he had done. However, he felt neither the expected guilt nor revulsion. Indeed, his mind must have been properly paralyzed at that time.

Walking somewhat unsteadily, as though the ground beneath him was floating, Yuder stopped when he spotted the entrance to the Imperial Knight's first training ground not far away. There was no real need to come this far, but he didn't want to head to the usual Cavalry training grounds at the back today. Part of him was reluctant to run into Kishiar so soon. If he couldn't concentrate properly, it would be better not to show up at all. He intended to calm his mind before entering.

'Enough thinking for now.'

At this time, the first training ground would be filled with Shin Division members struggling to control their remaining strength. Being with them, he should be able to regain his composure quickly.

However, having composed himself and entered the training ground, Yuder was met with an unexpected situation and stopped in his tracks once again.

"Do it properly, everyone!"

"You're the one who can't even lift a finger but talks a lot!"

The training ground was in far more chaos than usual. All the members were simultaneously unleashing their abilities. As expected of the Shin Division members, who mostly possessed physical enhancement abilities or the ability to infuse energy into weapons, each attack they swung seemed powerful enough to shatter the entire training ground, but the ground engraved with protective magic was perfectly intact.

And in the midst of all this was Kishiar. Not as an attacker, but as the sole target.

"Is this all you've got? I wonder where the spirit from earlier went."

"Ugh. Not yet!"

At Kishiar's smiling words, dressed in a dust-free light training uniform and holding only a wooden sword, a Shin Division member screamed and threw a stone with all his might. He had the ability to infuse power into thrown objects, making them faster than arrows and causing them to explode.

The stone he threw, wrapped in blue energy, rushed towards Kishiar's chest in the blink of an eye, but Kishiar easily blocked the attack with a simple extension of his bare hand.

As the stone hit his palm and exploded, scattering in all directions, the Shin Division members each cursed and rolled their bodies to avoid the fragments.

"How many times have I said it? When it explodes, we're the ones who suffer!"

"That crazy bastard! I'll kill you first!"

"Let's stop fighting amongst ourselves!"

"Seems like you still had some focus to spare to look elsewhere."

Upon discovering the squabbling members, Kishiar muttered under his breath and sprung into action. He effortlessly dodged several incoming attacks with minimal movements and appeared in front of the brawling members in the blink of an eye, looking as if he had just taken flight off the ground. Everyone gasped, taken aback by his sudden appearance. Although it looked like he had teleported, he had merely moved at a speed that deceived their perception.

"I told you to train, not to fight."

Kishiar, admonishing them like children, lightly patted the backs of a couple of surprised members with both hands. Of course, it only looked light to the onlooker, but the recipients were sent flying from one end of the training field to the other without even having a chance to scream, such was the overwhelming force.

'What the hell...'

Why was Kishiar, who should've been busy with scheduled training, among them, and what exactly was happening? As he watched in stunned silence, Yuder turned his head and saw Jimmy, lying nearby, panting with a worn-out look on his face.

"Jimmy."

"Ah, Yuder."

Upon recognizing Yuder, Jimmy quickly wiped off his sweat and sat up.

"What's going on here?"

"Commander suddenly said he wanted to join the training. He said he's been feeling rusty from not moving for a long time and encouraged us all to attack him."

At first, the Shin Division members laughed, thinking it was a joke, but their smiles quickly faded when they saw the Commander easily take down a few members who had rushed him. Until now, Kishiar had never really shown his full capabilities in front of everyone apart from participating in basic training. Several members who had been under the mistaken impression that he might not be that powerful had a rude awakening.

"You're still on your break, right, Yuder?"

"Yes."

"It's a shame. We could've seen who's stronger, you or the Commander."

"...You wanted to see that?"

"Of course!"

Jimmy, answering with sparkling eyes, suddenly scrutinized Yuder's face.

"Hmm? But Yuder, what happened to your lips? Did you get hurt?"

"..."

Judging by Jimmy and Devran's reactions, his chapped lips were quite noticeable.

"It's nothing. Just a bit...tired."

"Hmm. I see..."

The boy who had been tilting his head started to scratch it and chuckled.

"The Commander also had a wound on his lower lip today. Maybe it's because of the changing season."

Saying that he'd rested enough and was going back, the boy who had been rolling on the ground holding a practice sword walked past Yuder, failing to catch the rare look of embarrassment that flitted across Yuder's face.

"...You're going again?"

"Of course. Opportunities to challenge someone as powerful as the Commander with all our might are rare. I'm going to do it till the very end!"

Hearing the shout, Kishiar, who was far away, turned his head and spotted Jimmy and Yuder behind him. Yuder's eyes tensed at the moment their gazes met, but no one noticed.

And shortly thereafter, Kishiar, as usual, waved his hand and squinted his eyes into a smile. It was but a fleeting moment, barely enough time for him to dodge Jimmy's onslaught and throw himself backward, but it was more than sufficient to calm the chaos that had been swirling in Yuder Aile's head.

'...He hasn't changed.'

A quiet voice echoed in his tranquil heart.

Kishiar's demeanor hadn't changed one bit from yesterday. He was still smiling at Yuder, with no hint of falsehood in his gaze.

He was vastly different from the image of him lingering in Yuder's memory after the manifestation incident during his previous life. Could this man, who had just beamed as if light crowned his head, be the same man who had despaired in silence, forcing a smile onto his parched lips then?

The fact that everything was indeed changing from his previous life had finally hit him.

'...Yes.'

Yesterday's events were not accidents but transpired entirely due to his and the man's will. It couldn't have been the same as before.

A bittersweet sense of liberation blossomed from within his chest. Yuder briefly let slip a smile akin to a sigh, but quickly extinguished it. He bowed his head.

"I feel refreshed after a good workout."

Sometime later, Kishiar approached Yuder, leaving the Shin Division members sprawling behind him, rotating his shoulder. Unlike the Shin Division members smeared with sweat and dirt, he looked composed, with only a trace of sweat on his forehead.

"I'm sorry, you came to watch training, but now there's nothing for you to do."

Yuder responded as usual to Kishiar's ever-composed demeanor that showed no trace of yesterday's passion.

"No, your personal involvement would have been a better experience than mere training. But..."

After confirming there was no one around to overhear their conversation, Yuder lowered his voice.

"Is it alright for you to use your power like this?"

Kishiar's ability as an Awakener was not as flashy or noticeable as others, but each small movement carried an overwhelming power that was unmatched. Even Yuder, who had seen him fight monsters in his previous life, could not fully comprehend the extent of his power. How could the inexperienced Shin Division members stand a chance against him?

The worry was whether he would again suffer physical distress from using his ability, just as he had after casting magic before.

"It's fine. When the heat period is nearing, I need to use it more than usual. Leaving the power idle can be more harmful."

"I see. I apologize if my concern was presumptuous."

"Presumptuous, you say. It feels good to be worried about. I usually don't like it, but when it's you, it feels quite nice."

Kishiar, who made this fortunate remark when no one else could hear, gestured and began to walk ahead.

"Shall we head back together? It's going to take them some time to regain their senses."

Yuder glanced at the Shin Division members, swallowed his slight feeling of guilt, and nodded.

"Understood."

Not long after they left the training grounds, they saw Imperial Knights pretending not to see them while giving them disdainful looks and disappearing into the distance.

'They don't even bother with a greeting.'

Despite being members of a knight's order created to protect the imperial family, their insolence was hard to believe. However, Kishiar didn't pay them any mind. As an assistant, there wasn't much Yuder could do if his Commander did not approve, but he made a mental note of their attitudes.

'Someday, I'll have to deal with all those guys and make sure they greet us eagerly, even at the sight of Kishiar's shadow.'

"Duke."

Not long after they started walking, Nathan Zuckerman appeared with a brisk stride. He walked straight towards Kishiar, offered a silent bow in greeting, and then spoke up again.

"You must return to the office immediately."

"What's the matter?"

"The first son of Apeto has paid a visit."

Chapter 202

"The first son of Apeto has arrived."

Upon hearing the awaited fish had bitten the bait and come, Kishiar's eyes shifted.

"Indeed... he arrived at a perfect time. Has Revlin been informed of his arrival?"

"Yes. He was notified right before the guest arrived. He said he would wait within the lodging to come at your immediate call."

The youngest of the Apeto house, the third son Revlin, was living freely within the Cavalry as a temporary member, but he never forgot his original place. Kishiar had already warned Revlin, anticipating Aishes from the Apeto House would visit the Cavalry sometime.

"Good. It's unlikely I'll need to call him, but just in case."

Kishiar, satisfied, nodded and headed towards the Cavalry quarters.

Aishes Shand Apeto, the first son of the Apeto House, arrived, his face concealed by a cape, accompanied only by a single servant. The young man waiting in the guest reception room, unable to hide his tension, jumped to his feet at the sight of Kishiar in training attire entering the room, flanked by Nathan and Yuder.

"I apologize for visiting so suddenly, Your Highness. Due to avoiding the gaze of my family, I found it difficult to notify you in advance."

"That's fine. It's rather I who should apologize for greeting a guest in such attire due to training. Please, come in."

Yuder followed them, scrutinizing Aishes' face discreetly. His features didn't much resemble his other brothers', but his noticeable golden eyes and sensitive demeanor made their shared bloodline instantly apparent.

He had seen his letters and heard much about him, but this was the first time he had seen Aishes in person, in this life or the previous.

'So this is eldest sibling Aishes... He does look frail indeed. The servant he brought seems quite strong... probably not an Awakener, maybe a disguised knight.'

Though Aishes was trying his best to climb the stairs with dignity, to avoid being underestimated by Kishiar, his increasingly labored breath could not be hidden. It was pitiable to see the noble youth struggling even under the weight of his expensive cape. Yuder, taking his eyes off him, quietly continued his stride.

"Firstly... I'd like to inform you that, upon our independent investigation of Lenore's body, our Apeto family has concluded that there was no discrepancy with what Duke Peletta stated at the funeral."

Finally arriving at the Commander's room, Aishes, looking considerably more tired than before, drained a cup of water before opening his mouth.

"In fact, before Lenore ended up this way, the Bright Palace had sent commemorative gifts for the harvest festival separately to my residence where I stay and to the Apeto main residence. Since the gifts were sent secretly, both my father and I were unaware that the other had received such a gift."

Inside the gifts sent from the Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resided, was a poem subtly implying a desire for a good relationship regardless of the surroundings and expensive medicinal herbs for the body.

Aishes naturally assumed the gift was sent by the Diarca family using the Crown Prince's name. If they were favoring Aishes over Lenore, his competitor, then it was only right to join hands with them.

Duke Apeto also harbored similar thoughts. The only minor difference was that he had perceived his involvement in the trial linked to the Apeto family as a promise of significant assistance from the Diarca family in the future. But circumstances changed following Lenore's funeral.

If the person who had killed Lenore was Kishiar, as initially suspected, they could have exerted pressure on the Emperor by joining forces with the Crown Prince and the Diarca family, tilting the trial in their favor. However, Kishiar himself appeared at Lenore's funeral, dramatically revealing

that he was not the killer and presenting irrefutable evidence that the real culprit was the Crown Prince, who had plotted against him.

The funeral attendees were loose-lipped, and rumors spread rapidly. Some still suspected Kishiar, but the majority believed that the Crown Prince had conspired with the Diarca family to deceive Apeto.

As Duke Apeto thought the same, he was understandably furious. Repeated examinations of Lenore's body only proved Kishiar's innocence. The Crown Prince, whom he had contacted to ascertain the truth, only denied any involvement and did not provide any solid evidence. Even though the Diarca family claimed they were not involved, Duke Apeto did not believe them.

'Of course, Lenore's death might have given me some advantage in the trial! But I cannot accept the fact that that young Crown Prince has belittled Apeto to such an extent! How dare the Diarca family pit us against the Emperor openly? If not for them, this wouldn't have happened.'

Duke Apeto, who had always criticized the arrogance of the Diarca family, especially after the Crown Prince's coronation, hardened his heart against them after Lenore's funeral. His temporary tolerance, thinking that Diarca might assist during the trial, froze over completely.

'How much of a laughingstock must we have been for them to pull something like this?'

Rationally, even after this incident, it might have been right to collaborate with the Diarca family or the Crown Prince. But the Crown Prince's cruel and humiliating assassination of Lenore, and his subsequent casual contact with the Apeto family as if seeking an opportunity for friendly relations, added insult to injury for the already fiery Duke Apeto.

The undercurrent of conflict surrounding the Crown Prince's nomination had already severely upset him years ago, and this incident opened those wounds again. Duke Apeto was adamant that the issue was directly tied to the family's honor.

'How can we trust their words when the foundation of our trust has been shaken? Rather than focusing on winning this trial, Apeto should aim to minimize losses. Fighting fiercely would only drain our energy and benefit Diarca! Preserving our strength for the future should be our priority.'

Aishes, the heir to the family, agreed with Duke Apeto. But at the same time, he saw the family decision to not confront the trial head-on as the perfect opportunity to overthrow his father.

Following Lenore's funeral, there were discussions within the Apeto family about revitalizing the family atmosphere through this incident and adopting a healthy heir from outside the family.

The apparent reason was the frail health of Aishes and the absence of Revlin, which were deemed inadequate to secure the succession. But everyone knew the real reason - Duke Apeto had pulled strings to promote his illegitimate child.

Feeling pleased with the established succession, Aishes was deeply unsettled by this maneuver. He knew the Duke of Apeto had no affection for any of his children, but he didn't expect him to strike him in the back like this, especially when the succession was practically decided.

In the end, it seemed both parties had used the trial as an excuse to attack each other. Upon learning this, Aishes' resolution quickened.

His perennial weak body was always a hindrance. He felt a sense of urgency to claim the dukedom as soon as possible when his body was in better shape. What came to mind then was the healthy-looking Revlin he saw at the funeral, and Duke Peletta standing beside him.

'After all, considering teaming up with him was part of my initial plan.'

Aishes briefly reported this situation to Kishiar.

"My father has been greatly affected by this incident, and his judgment has declined considerably. He is constantly worried about my health and speaks oddly. As his child, it is quite distressing. Therefore, if the Duke remembers the letter I previously sent, I'd like to offer some help on this matter."

"I've always thought so, but you really are a filial son."

Kishiar responded with a soft smile. Aishes was momentarily mesmerized by his smile before he frowned and regained his senses. That skinny duke certainly had extraordinary looks.

"I appreciate your sentiment. Seeing you again reminds me of the funeral day. Even when the Emperor expressed concern about the incidents that day, the Duke of Diarca refused to stop spreading false rumors, despite being asked to halt."

"I have already heard about this from Apeto."

Aishes nodded, furrowing his brow. Yuder, who had not known about this matter, listened carefully.

"If you intend to apply the old saying that silence is the closest brother to oblivion here, I would disagree. Apeto's pride won't go down that easily. How could Duke Peletta, whose honor has been damaged, just bury this matter?"

"If it's your wisdom, I believed you would come to such a conclusion. I have no doubts about your intentions."

He was convinced that they could continue to have a good relationship. Kishiar extended his hand to the side, and Nathan Zuckerman, as if waiting, respectfully placed a small box in his hand. It was one of the two boxes Yuder had seen the day before, the one containing the thirst-inducing poisonous mushroom.

"Do you know what this is?"

"No."

"It's a mushroom that a servant of the Bright Palace smuggled in the day before the party. If you dry it, grind it, and dissolve it in water, it's absorbed into the body and induces thirst."

Aishes's eyes narrowed at Kishiar's words.

"I see. This is... We tried to find the ingredient, but the news was slow and it was frustrating."

"I'll give this as a gift in celebration of today's meeting. Will you accept it?"

Chapter 203

"Are you... giving this to me?"

Kishiar nodded, catching sight of Aishes's skeptical gaze. His smile was simply beautiful, free of any discernible intentions. For a moment, Aishes's golden eyes wavered, revealing a greedy gasp.

The mushroom, as Kishiar described it, was a poison yet unknown to the world. Meaning, as he'd said just before, if dried and turned into powder, it could be used to kill anyone in the same way that Lenore had been killed.

Even his father, Duke Apeto.

"But... how can I accept something so precious that Your Highness must have had trouble acquiring?"

Unabashedly exposing his greedy eyes, Aishes showed a hint of refusal as a matter of courtesy. Kishiar, knowing his intention, responded with a warm smile.

"You've gone through a lot of trouble to come here, shouldn't I at least offer this much? After all, I've merely managed to obtain something earlier than it would've been available in Apeto. Consider this a small favor from me. Please, don't decline."

"In that case..... I accept. I am deeply grateful for Your Highness's consideration and wisdom."

Aishes accepted the box with more grace and courtesy than anyone else. He struggled to keep a cold smile from creeping onto his lips.

"I will investigate this thoroughly, even if only to avenge Lenore's death."

"I would be pleased if it helped."

"In fact, I also brought a gift for today's meeting, albeit a small one."

"Oh? What is it?"

Showing interest, Kishiar watched as Aishes accepted something from a servant standing beside him.

"Here."

The object he placed on the table was a folded piece of paper that seemed rather ordinary at first glance. To show that it had no traps or devices, he broke the seal and unfolded it right in front of Kishiar's eyes.

"It's a request sent to my father at the time when Lenore and my uncle Beltrail decided to study the Awakeners together. It includes the proposed research site, resident servants, material supply routes, and the estimated costs and items needed. My father gave his approval with a seal. It could be useful in the trial."

"Incredible."

Kishiar admired softly as he picked up the paper.

"Where did you get it from? It would've been the first thing your family tried to get rid of."

"Originally, it was something my uncle Beltrail had hidden in his own room within the mansion. After his downfall, while cleaning his room, a priest who happened to be connected to me found it first."

He was lucky, Aishes simply stated, but Yuder standing behind him subtly sensed the bloodshed that lay hidden behind those words.

'He says it like that, but he must've shed a lot of blood to find that and keep it safe until now.'

That piece of paper was the most concrete evidence that Duke Apeto had openly supported the research of Lenore and Beltrail. A chill involuntarily ran down his spine at Aishes Shand Apeto's calm demeanor, who was passing the weapon to strike his father's back to his enemy, all the while wearing an unaffected smile.

"Thank you. I gratefully accept this valuable gift."

Kishiar folded the paper and flipped it over to Yuder. It was Yuder standing on the left, not the formidable Nathan on the right. Yuder involuntarily turned his eyes toward Nathan. It was a situation where Nathan could have been upset, thinking that their lord had rated Yuder's strength higher than his. However, Nathan only nodded his head silently and showed no significant change.

'...The Red Stone Incident really made a lasting impression.'

Yuder silently accepted the paper from Kishiar's hand.

"And this, I haven't fully confirmed yet, but I thought I should mention it just in case."

As soon as Yuder took the paper, Aishes lowered his voice and opened his mouth.

"There are rumors flowing within the family that my father might secretly send a nocturnal visitor to the Bright Palace soon."

"A nocturnal visitor?"

"Yes. Isn't it well-known that people of the Apeto family have a temperament as volatile as fire for generations?"

As if he were talking about someone else, even though he was one of the Apetos, Aishes spoke.

"From this incident, I heard whispers of several servant corpses being secretly cleared out from that room. It suggests that he is quite upset. His judgment seems clouded, so he might really do it. It's just a rumor, but it's truly worrisome."

Aishes was talking in a roundabout way, but the 'rumor' he spoke of was hardly just a rumor.

'So the Duke of Apeto is planning to send an assassin to the palace where Prince Katchian lives. He's giving this information in such a way.'

The smile on Kishiar's face grew even deeper.

"That's... quite worrisome indeed."

"Yes. As his son, it's not my place to step forward, but I hope that you, Duke Peletta, will reveal the clear truth on our behalf."

"I will make sure to do so."

To an outside observer, it was a truly beautiful conversation.

'So, is it over now?'

They had exchanged gifts, confirmed each other's intentions, and now it seemed time to stand up. But for some reason, Aishes did not rise from his seat just yet. He requested a warm tea instead of water and kept glancing around the room. His eyes seemed to be looking for something.

Kishiar, watching him, casually opened his mouth.

"Speaking of which... you've come all this way. Would you like to meet Revlin? It was so sudden, I didn't even think about arranging a meeting between you two."

"Ah..."

Aishes flinched slightly, a subtle expression on his face at the mention of Revlin. Yuder did not miss the hint of jealousy that crossed his eyes.

"No, rather than that. Well....."

The frail young man, his eyes shifting, seemed to make a decision and opened his mouth.

"Your Highness, you said that you were deeply impressed by the letter I sent you some time ago."

"I did."

"At that time, I mentioned that while it's essential for those who deserve punishment to receive it through trial, our Apeto heritage....."

Something seemed difficult for Aishes to express aloud, and he paused momentarily, moistening his dry lips.

"... I said that the foolish acts committed by Lenore and Beltrail due to our 'Blood of Blessing' should not be made known to the outside. Do you remember that?"

"I do. Didn't you ask if I could hand over the confiscated research records in the future because of that?"

Aishes' eyebrows twitched at the brisk and direct response.

"Yes... Indeed. You did not provide a clear answer on that matter at the time. Might... might you be able to provide an answer today?"

The conversation unfolded precisely as they had anticipated while reading Aishes's letter earlier. Kishiar had criticized Beltrail, who callously sacrificed the lives of the Awakeners in search of a cure for his frailty, as foolish. But in the end, Aishes was no different.

'Didn't it cross his mind that if Beltrail had succeeded in his research, he wouldn't be in his current predicament?'

The self-serving desire apparent in his gaze made Kishiar's insides churn.

Aishes probably didn't realize it, but the Kishiar sitting before him was also enduring a hereditary issue, fighting persistently. Knowing this fact, the sight of the two sitting across each other appeared even more peculiar in Yuder Aile's eyes.

Yuder silently observed the back of Kishiar, lost in thought. Only after a considerable amount of time had passed, time enough for Aishes to grow anxious from the wait, did he open his mouth with a sigh, resting his chin on his hand.

"Well... it's hard to say for sure right now. Although it's a record I've seized, wouldn't it be difficult to decide such a significant matter at my own discretion? To win the trial, we can't overlook this fact. You know this, right, First Prince?"

"I am aware. But don't you think it's cruel to easily expose the history of pain that a family has carried for a long time, especially a family like Apeto?"

Aishes pleaded, clasping his hands.

"Your Highness, do you not know how much those in the name of Shand Apeto have devoted their bodies and minds to serving the Orr Empire? Even though I could be accused of betraying my father and family, I have carried this pain and come this far. Won't you pity me?"

It was a splendid performance, enough to deceive anyone who didn't know his ulterior motives. But Yuder knew that Kishiar was just as good at playing the game.

"What should we do? This is quite... My heart truly aches."

Kishiar, deep in thought and touching his temples, exhaled deeply. In an instant, a scene unfolded before everyone's eyes, akin to a masterpiece painting dubbed 'The Sun God's Sigh of Despair'.

"No one knows better than I do that the First Prince has come this far, prepared for great sacrifices. How could I ignore such dedication?"

"Then... if that's the case..."

Aishes mumbled blankly. It was pitiful to see him trying hard to focus his eyes, not to faint.

"I can't guarantee, but I will try to convince the court to minimize the reference to that issue. And though it's difficult to hand over the official record..."

Kishiar, who had been trailing off and gazing into space, broke into a smile.

"Don't you know? The way to see the evidence doesn't necessarily involve receiving it from me."

"..."

For a moment, Aishes' expression changed peculiarly.

"I've already sent Beltrail's research records to the court. That's all I can tell you."

"I understand."

Aishes couldn't hide his joyous expression as he quickly stood up from his seat. Yuder felt as though he could guess his next move as clearly as the back of his hand.

'He probably thinks that he can easily get his hands on the evidence submitted to the court by bribing someone.'

"I appreciate your advice, Your Highness. I should be on my way. Given that I had to avoid the family's prying eyes to come here, I cannot stay long..."

"I am aware."

Aishes swiftly disappeared with his servant. His unconcerned demeanor was striking, even though the tea he had requested hadn't arrived yet.

"Yuder, would you return that paper to me?"

As soon as Aishes was gone, Kishiar, who had been tense, relaxed back in his chair and extended his hand toward Yuder. Faced with Kishiar's playful, childlike eyes sparkling with mischief, Yuder handed over the paper and finally broke his silence.

"Sir, did you really send the research records to the court?"

Chapter 204

"Commander, did you truly send the research records to the court?"

"I did. The judges should see the evidence, shouldn't they? Although, they won't get the results that the first prince expected."

Kishiar replied, chuckling as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

'As expected.'

He knew it. He had speculated that the reason Kishiar, who said he wouldn't hand the records over to Aishes, openly threw him a bone was that he'd already tampered with them.

"Did you omit some parts before sending them? Or maybe..."

"I did that, but well... I paid attention to some other areas as well."

A meaningful look surfaced on Kishiar's face. Yuder probed further to confirm the details.

"What other areas are you referring to?"

"I erased some sections, including the observation records of the test subjects who were sacrificed, and replaced them with false information to ensure that those who saw the records wouldn't entertain useless thoughts. I left room for Beltrail's delusions, thinking they might somehow be useful."

Beltrail had not obtained the results he initially desired through his research. Yet the detailed records left behind from the experimentation on the Awakeners had too much potential for misuse. Hence, Kishiar explained, he had not hesitated to remove that part.

"If they accept that the research was in vain, nothing will happen. But if they can't and get greedy, they'll experience something rather unpleasant. And, while I've taken care of this and that... we don't know how things will turn out, so I plan to observe the situation."

In his previous life, there had been no trial revealing the dishonors of the Apeto family, and Lenore's records had disappeared without ever coming to light after he became a duke. But this time was different. The future was unpredictable, with no idea what changes the trial would bring. However, seeing Kishiar's secretive smile, Yuder wasn't worried about what might come next.

"If the first prince accepts his uncle's failure and looks for a different answer, the same thing won't happen again. But who knows?"

Many people can't let go of their desires, even when they discover that the path they've found is a bloody, worthless one. Yuder recalled Aishes, who was delighted at the thought of getting Beltrail's records. Perhaps he would walk the same path as Beltrail and Lenore, even after witnessing their failures.

'And if nothing changes, he will die again.'

Aishes might be thrilled now at the prospect of getting Beltrail's records. It might be unfortunate, but Yuder didn't feel sorry for him.

"I must say, going through and filtering all those rubbish writings was quite a difficult task, even for me who can read and memorize dozens of books overnight. It felt like my mind was getting polluted."

Whether he intended to change the subject or not, Kishiar steered the conversation elsewhere. Yuder pulled his thoughts away from the dark future awaiting Aishes and looked at Kishiar.

"The Awakeners who will live in the future should be thankful to you, Commander."

It was a thoughtless response, but for some reason, Kishiar blinked in surprise a few times before breaking into laughter.

"If you say that, it makes me feel embarrassed for having been so petulant. I just did what I should've done; there's no grand significance to it."

"I didn't mean any grand significance either; I was just stating the facts."

"..."

The laughter on Kishiar's face, who had been looking up at Yuder from the couch, suddenly vanished.

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes."

A moment of silence passed. Only then did Yuder notice the small wound beneath Kishiar's tightly closed lips. It was quite eye-catching now that he recognized it, though he hadn't noticed when Kishiar was laughing.

'Ah, so that's what Jimmy was talking about...'

Why hadn't Kishiar treated it? Why had he been walking around like that? Some members might not have noticed it, but some, like Jimmy, must have recognized it at first glance.

As he tried to avert his eyes from the slender red line, his heart oddly fluttered, and Kishiar's low sigh penetrated his ears.

"Hmm... I thought I was pretty good at not letting personal feelings interfere when I work."

"It's getting harder and harder."

The last sentence was so small it was doubtful whether he heard it correctly. As he blinked, caught in a paradoxical feeling of wanting to ask but knowing he shouldn't, Kishiar let out a short breath that sounded like a chuckle.

"Yuder."

"Yes."

"Could you come here? Closer."

Suddenly, the previously soft atmosphere shifted. His deeply attached voice brought back the events of yesterday that Yuder had tried to erase from his mind.

Without realizing it, Yuder swallowed and looked behind him. It was an instinctual reaction. Nathan Zuckerman, who had gone to get the tea Aishes had requested just before leaving, had not yet returned. There was no sign of him.

"Why are you like that?"

"...No reason."

Only after confirming that did Yuder slowly move his steps closer to Kishiar, who seemed to be waiting and extended his hand.

"Turn your face this way."

Yuder hesitated for a moment, then chose to kneel instead of bending his waist. As he silently lowered his body, his knee touching the ground next to the chair, the approaching hand touched the area beneath his lips. It was a touch as light as a feather, but his sensitive lips registered it as a sharp pain.

As he scrunched up his brow several times, as if this was amusing, Kishiar chuckled.

"Did you walk around like this all day?"

"...Yes."

"It must have hurt."

"It was okay."

Even though he said it was okay, he lacked the usual confidence.

"You're aware you present a rather provocative image, aren't you?"

"..."

Shouldn't that comment be directed more toward Kishiar himself?

Yuder, looking down at the fingertips brushing his lips, impulsively opened his mouth.

"Commander, why didn't you treat it?"

"Hmm?"

"The wound under your lip."

"Oh, this?"

Kishiar slowly touched the area under his lip with his other hand. It was such a small movement, yet confronting it made his heart feel constricted, a difficult sensation.

"Of course, to remember."

His heated gaze stared directly at Yuder.

"To remember what...?"

"Yesterday's moment."

Suddenly, the inside of Yuder's lips touched by Kishiar's hand felt searing hot, as if it had been touched by a flame. His throat burned sharply as if he had swallowed hot sand, too astonished to react. The sudden thirst startled him, the sensation of his lower tongue swelling and becoming wet caused him to unconsciously open his mouth, and as if he'd been waiting for it, Kishiar leaned in.

"..."

The kiss this time was brief, yet it was as hot as it had been the previous night.

"Did it hurt?"

"...No."

"Then, I suppose it's alright to do it one more time."

Answering his question was a mistake because the moment he answered, Kishiar delved into his lips once more, nibbling lightly on the bottom lip.

A moment later, Kishiar entirely released him. Yuder, unable to meet Kishiar's amused gaze, let out a sigh.

‘...This is driving me mad.’

Last night, he was half inebriated with heat, but today, even while sober, he couldn't think of anything else. Was he always this vulnerable to desire? No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't tear his eyes away from Kishiar's moist lips.

“What do you think about getting treated before Nathan comes back?”

Yuder saw her reflection in his eyes. He inevitably couldn't refuse his suggestion.

“Your Highness.”

Ignoring the voice calling out to him from beyond the door, Prince Katchian continued to gaze out the window. Still, the voice, persistent, kept resonating.

“Your Highness, Crown Prince, please open the door. I heard you have not eaten anything since last night. I brought your favorite food; please do not harm your precious body.”

Your Highness, Your Highness. Although it appeared as if the person was concerned about him, Katchian knew well that the feelings underlying those words were closer to anger and irritation. Blocking out the noisy voice, he rose from his place.

The one servant, who had always stood faithfully by his side in Bright Palace, tracked his movements with anxious eyes. Even that loyal gaze was now distasteful to him. In fact, nothing was to his liking at this moment.

“Your Highness... It's been several hours. Please, at least eat something...”

“If you don't want to be kicked out, you will keep your mouth shut.”

“...”

Katchian walked past the bowing servant and approached the large, beautiful mirror, made to reflect one's entire figure. Everything in Bright Palace seemed old and ordinary, except for this mirror, which stood out as a new object. It was the only item he had brought when he first moved to the palace after becoming the Crown Prince.

Katchian stared at his reflection. Brilliant golden hair fitting for the imperial palace, a face as beautiful as a flower, thin limbs of a boy not yet fully grown. There was not a single aspect that wasn't radiant.

Except for his eyes, captured by a cold fury.

“Do you know who gave me this mirror?”

“It was... I heard it was His Highness, Duke Diarca.”

“Yes.”

Katchian's lips curled into a derisive smile, reflecting in the mirror.

“He sent me this, telling me to reflect on my status every day.”

“...Excuse me?”

The servant trembled and questioned, but Katchian didn't reply.

Chapter 205

Katchian, who had silently been staring at his reflection in the mirror, finally turned away when the ceaseless knocking from outside finally stopped.

"At last, some peace."

The gaze of the boy, slowly moving away, was noticeably colder and darker than before. He stared at the now silent door for a moment before shortly directing his order to his servant.

"I have a headache. Bring me the cold tea brewed with Ponegri."

"B-but your highness, you've had nothing else, if you drink the potent Ponegri tea again..."

"...You."

Already seated, Katchian called out to the servant with a blank expression.

"The sole reason I let you in here wasn't for your trivial concerns. Just do as I say."

"..."

In the end, the servant could not respond, retreating to bring the Ponegri tea, the only thing the Crown Prince had sought since yesterday. Ponegri was a substance made by diluting the potent narcotic components of the Ponesa plant to edible levels, famed for its ability to subdue severe pain instantly. The cultivation and distribution of Ponesa were strictly controlled and naturally illegal, but the aristocracy secretly procured it, adding it to tea or alcohol for its mood-enhancing effects.

And Crown Prince Katchian was one among them, seeking Ponegri whenever he felt discomfort. With a long sigh, he closed his eyes after gulping down the tea laced with Ponegri, smuggled from the Diarca Duchy. The muscles of his face, which had been tense, began to relax as the effects of the drug kicked in, his eyelids quivering slightly.

"... How in the world did they find out?"

The servant, startled by Katchian's low, muttered question after a few more sips, bowed his head.

"What are... what are you referring to, your highness?"

"The powder made from the Dudureli mushroom you brought from the Western Valley."

With his eyes still closed, Katchian murmured vaguely, gently touching his teacup.

"There's no way any of the aristocrats knew about its effects... How did they catch onto us so quickly? I've thought about it over and over since that day, but I still can't figure it out."

How did they find out? Who revealed to Duke Peletta the nature of the not-so-toxic poison and helped exonerate him from the false accusation of killing Lenore? Ever since Kishiar appeared at Lenore Shand Apeto's funeral and turned everything upside down, Katchian had been locked in his room, incessantly pondering over this.

"No matter how much I think about it, there's no way they could've suspected anything from the letter I sent to Lenore Shand Apeto. Nothing happened on the day of the party either. Everything concluded just as expected, except for a few fools fainting upon meeting the armored knight..."

In fact, a few of them had fainted due to being hit by the button of Yuder, but Katchian did not know that all of it was bundled together as the fault of the armored knight that appeared afterward. As he kept tapping the end of his teacup and gnawing his lip, he soon succumbed to the dizziness induced by the drug and sprawled out. The servant, surprised by his state, approached cautiously and lightly grasped his shoulder.

"... Your Highness, are you alright? Your Highness."

"Quiet... Don't touch me."

Despite his slightly slurred speech, his eyes were still fiercely intimidating. He harshly brushed off the servant's hand and slumped down, burying his face in his palms. With every deep breath he took, his head became increasingly foggy.

There was nothing more comforting than this tea when he did not want to think about anything. Especially when he wanted to escape from the noisy world outside and hide away inside his shell.

"Did I start things too early?"

No matter what he thought, the end was always the same. It was regret for the recent incident when he decided to step forward for the first time to put Duke Peletta away.

"I was certain it would be successful."

After becoming the Crown Prince, Katchian was always behind the Diarca family, no matter what happened. It was only natural, since Diarca had put him in that position. But, in reality, he had faith in the immense power of Duke Diarca. He always observed everything from behind Duke Diarca and learned political maneuvers over the Duke's shoulder that would be useful when he became the Emperor.

However, ever since Duke Peletta created a ridiculous Cavalry and took the lead, the influence of Duke Diarca, which he believed would remain unchanging, began to wobble strangely.

New winds blew into the capital continuously since he successfully retrieved the Red Stone. Duke Diarca, who had a lot, talked about passing it over as if these matters weren't significant, but it wasn't the same for Katchian. For him, there was only the precarious position of the Crown Prince. The feelings he began to experience after the Cavalry was formed were different from the irritation he had felt occasionally from the Emperor and Duke Peletta until now.

"His Highness may be worried, but if we act excessively, it may rather give them a chance. Now, the answer is just to wait. Victory will come to you if you just stay still."

What did he know? To Katchian, these words only sounded like a relaxed caution of someone whose footing was stable.

On the festival day when Duke Diarca failed in front of Katchian for the first time, the young Crown Prince was greatly disappointed inside. He began to think for the first time that Duke Diarca, who always seemed so immense, might actually be nothing special. The plans for that day were not prepared over a long time according to Duke Diarca's way. It was a messy plan hastily created to soothe Katchian, who was wary of Duke Peletta. It was impossible for it to be successful.

Even afterward, Duke Diarca's plans continued to fail throughout the festival. Each time he heard news that the accusations he tried to frame on the Cavalry had come back to them, Katchian was not amused.

Yet, Duke Diarca chose to step back again.

"It's regrettable, but it can't be helped. We can find a better opportunity next time based on this incident."

When Katchian heard these words, he finally showed the discomfort he had been holding back in front of Duke Diarca.

"You always say the same thing."

"Your Highness?"

"If you always step back, when and how can we bring down Duke Peletta? Will it be possible only after I'm dead?"

Dismay flickered in Duke Diarca's eyes at Katchian's words, who had always just smiled and listened. However, the emotion that appeared in his wrinkled eyes a moment later was a deep disdain and irritation that was bone-chilling.

"Yes, you might think that way. You're still young, so it can't be helped. But, Your Highness, please think carefully. Think about the incidents before the Crown Prince was appointed... and who held your hand and brought you to this capital."

In an instant, Katchian felt the color draining from his face. It was a story that resembled a forbidden tale between them.

"Lately, others have often been talking about whether the Crown Prince position should be chosen again. The important thing is not just the Emperor or Duke Peletta, but rather, isn't it about this very fact? I am truly worried," said the aged duke, looking at the pale face of the young Crown Prince.

The old Duke stood up from his seat, smiling kindly. "I shall withdraw. Rather than concerning yourself with such complicated matters, wouldn't it be better for Your Highness to focus on imperial studies for a while and turn a blind eye to external affairs?"

Katchian carefully kept the emotions he had never revealed to the Duke, who had always defeated him. Even long after he had left, the coldness in his heart remained unhealed.

After the forbidden barrier was broken once, the emotions between Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince began to rapidly escalate. It grew so intense that it felt as if the past had forcibly glued together shattered fragments. A stifling frustration and anger seized Katchian in an instant.

He had never intended to hold hands with Duke Diarca for a lifetime. His life had been a series of desperate struggles to survive. So, what would change if he made the same choice once again?

He couldn't stay behind Duke Diarca. It was too late to start distancing himself after becoming Emperor. The time was ripe to gradually expand his influence both inside and outside the palace, and to thoroughly examine the relationships between nobles. The incidents involving Duke Peletta, the Cavalry, and Duke Apeto happened to be the perfect catalyst for Katchian's determination.

He would show Duke Diarca that he was right. He would thrust a sword into the heart of Duke Peletta and the Cavalry and join forces with others who possessed power equal to Diarca. It would be a dangerous tightrope act, but he believed it was better to be on that side than to trust just one person like Duke Diarca.

Alone, he planned and organized everything using only his own strength, utilizing the paths and information he alone knew. The mushrooms were part of that scheme as well. However, Katchian had failed in an unexpected aspect, and he couldn't figure out the reason.

"No, perhaps it was an anticipated failure from the moment I didn't know that Lenore Shand Apeto had passed a letter to his younger brother...?"

Even now, there were continuous contact requests from Apeto Duchy and Diarca Duchy, but Katchian didn't want to meet them.

He judged that it would be better to meet and talk, even if it meant playing dumb. However, the fear that arose from shattered pride and the lack of experience in facing a proper failure made it difficult for the immature young Crown Prince to accept it immediately. With even Duke Diarca not visiting, Katchian found it hard to determine how to overcome this obstacle.

And Katchian La Orr couldn't face such a fragile side of himself.

"...In the end, I should lower myself to Diarca's level, reveal the truth, and ask for his help. I will have to give up on building a good relationship with Apeto Duchy from now on."

Just the thought alone sent chills down his spine. If he considered that even Duke Diarca would not come to visit Katchian, his heart grew even colder.

Chapter 206

Meanwhile, Duke Diarca, who was on Crown Prince Katchian's mind, was with his confidant, Baron Durmand.

"His Highness the Crown Prince is still locked in his room, is he not? This is a serious matter indeed."

As Baron Durmand clicked his tongue, Duke Diarca stroked his beard and spoke.

"Indeed, he is. If he was going to withdraw like this, he should have just remained in my shadow as always. Instead, he's caused a ruckus and doesn't even show the will to rectify it. Who is supposed to fix this mess while he remains silent? Thanks to him, I'm stuck dealing with the bloodthirsty Apeto and Duke Peletta at the same time. I feel like I'm at my wit's end."

"Isn't it a rule of life that, no matter how well-behaved a child is, they tend to cause trouble around this age, due to their overconfidence in their abilities? It's a time when the world seems absurd to them."

"Yes... He just turned 18, didn't he?"

Duke Diarca muttered, as if calculating the Crown Prince's age, and then continued his thought.

"I knew he had become quite arrogant, but I thought he was an asset who knew his place and would exercise patience until he ascended the throne. Yet, he was shaken by such a trivial matter and acted recklessly, without even the slightest hint of shame needed to address the situation. It's a massive disappointment."

"Perhaps the issue was that I always treated him like a child."

Duke Diarca mumbled and lit the pipe that was placed on the stand. As the incense within it began to burn, producing smoke, a dizzying aroma filled the room.

"Why on earth did he have to stir up the Apeto? It would have been better if there were no traces left... If due to this incident, those who had stopped mentioning the Crown Prince's qualifications start speaking again, it will truly be a problem."

"There's no way to reverse what has already happened. However, His Highness the Crown Prince will certainly learn a valuable lesson from this terrible failure. Duke, you also got to see a side of him you hadn't known before because of this incident. Isn't it rather fortunate that this happened sooner rather than later?"

"You're right."

A cold smile spread across the aged Duke Diarca's face.

"I will ensure that he properly learns his lesson this time. If he dares to dream beyond his station, it is my duty to bring him back to reality."

"Ah... so that's why you sent a request to suppress discussion about this incident, even though you knew it would be rejected."

"Indeed. Thanks to that, even those beneath us are chattering more."

Duke Diarca took another puff from his pipe and exhaled the smoke with a soft chuckle.

"He has been hiding behind me all this time, only hearing good things and never experiencing defeat, so it's about time he gets a real taste of the heat," Duke Diarca said.

"Hahaha. I fear the Crown Prince might end up never leaving the palace, just like His Majesty," Baron Durmand said, laughing with a face that showed no fear.

"But if you intend to rectify this, wouldn't you have to drag the Crown Prince out of the palace at least once? Please share a bit of your wisdom with me."

"Hmph. Well, there's nothing special. Just do as we always have."

The gaze of Duke Diarca, who dusted off the ash from his pipe onto a beautiful dish, grew cold.

"Let those Apeto fools destroy themselves, and find someone to take the fall for what the Crown Prince has done."

"Have you already thought of who it will be?"

"Shouldn't I tell the Crown Prince to choose directly, so he doesn't repeat such a reckless act?"

A cunning and cruel glint appeared in his wrinkled eyes.

"He won't forget the lesson of having to cut off the hands and feet he just made, realizing he did something he shouldn't have."

"Indeed... You are wise. So, what will you do about Duke Peletta?"

"I plan to propose to help him win the trial for sure, as he has put quite a bit of effort into this trial."

"Will he accept it just like that? The evidence is so clear that it's not a losing trial."

"What if he doesn't accept it? Although it's not a losing trial, sentencing Apeto without our help would be difficult. Apeto lost his child, but all Duke Peletta lost was a bit of dignity he never had. We can't equate life with dignity. That's sufficient."

The tone of Duke Diarca was so sarcastic, it was hard to believe he was speaking about Imperial family members. Baron Durmand nodded with a refreshed expression.

"If Your Highness says so, then it shall be."

"Ah, flattery suits you as you age."

Despite his words, a brief smile crossed Duke Diarca's face. Baron Durmand quickly seized the moment to express his concerns with an even more anxious voice.

"Truthfully, hasn't Duke Peletta been quite arrogant since creating the Cavalry? I was genuinely worried during the funeral incident, I thought I might see him again."

"Yes. This incident made me become alert about him too. It was indeed a series of surprising events."

Duke Diarca's dark, smoky eyes stared into the hazy void.

"He has become quite arrogant trusting the power of the Cavalry, but they're merely a collection of common ruffians. They must be quite excited now, but what will happen when that power crumbles?"

"You've thought about that part as well."

"Isn't it best to topple those who rely on power with power?"

Duke Diarca's voice echoed in the dark room.

"You've probably heard that monsters keep appearing in the West recently."

"Yes. Ah, then...?"

As Baron Durmand seemed to understand something, Duke Diarca continued to explain in a leisurely tone.

"The nations there are already in chaos. I've pricked up my ears as it seems even Duke Tain is quite troubled."

"Indeed... An unavoidable request for help, I presume."

"If the Cavalry that played such a large role this time doesn't step forward, then who will?"

A laugh wafted through the smoke from the incense.

Finally, the day of the second trial concerning the forced kidnapping and research of the Awakeners at the House of Apeto dawned. A scandal and trial involving the four major Dukedoms was an event that could be counted on one hand throughout the entire history of the Orr Empire.

In particular, the first trial, forcibly adjourned after causing a great commotion from an external incident, further ignited the interest of the imperial citizens.

Did the Apeto family really commit such a horrifying act? And were the rumors true about Duke Peletta, the leader of the Cavalry that brought them to court, harboring personal grudges and killing Lenore Shand Apeto?

The appearance of Duke Peletta at Lenore's funeral, where he personally attested his innocence, had spurred even more interest, as it resulted in the shocking revelation that the true culprit was the Crown Prince.

The curiosity palpably emanating from the faces of those filling the grand imperial courtroom, even before the trial had officially begun, evidenced this intense interest.

And there stood Yuder, observing this fervor with his own eyes, standing alongside the Deputy Commanders behind the high seats on the right side of the courtroom where the imperial family sat.

"All seats are filled even before the arrival of the seven judges. Such an event is rare in the thousand-year history of the empire."

Kanna muttered, unable to hide her excitement and worry.

"I'm a bit worried about Devran and the others who should be in the waiting room. They need to testify without getting nervous."

"It'll be alright."

Yuder recalled Devran's face from a few days ago, blazing with the determination to land a punch on Apeto, and responded.

"He seemed more energetic due to the abrupt interruption during the first trial."

"That's a relief then."

"Aren't you two nervous?"

Sul's Deputy Commander Steiber, standing next to Kanna, interjected, tapping his cheek with tense expressions.

"I, even though I've lived in the capital, it's my first time here, so I'm really nervous. Even more than during the party. Look at Ever, she hasn't said a word since a while ago."

As she said, Ever was perfectly standing in attention, looking straight ahead. Even if someone was talking right next to her, it seemed like it wouldn't reach her ears.

"I'm certainly nervous too, but talking helps me feel better. Of course, it doesn't seem like that's the case for Yuder..."

Kanna, turning towards Yuder, crinkled her nose slightly and chuckled. She wouldn't know, but Yuder wasn't having the best time in this space either. The last time he was here, he was arrested while attempting to acquire the World Sphere in his past life. He was immediately dragged here, dismissed from his position as the Commander of the Cavalry, and imprisoned.

Nevertheless, Yuder took a moment to think of something helpful to say while looking at Steiber's pale face.

"You have nothing to worry about if you haven't committed a crime, Steiber."

"Huh?"

It seemed to backfire as Steiber's face turned even paler. Yuder quickly added another line.

"If someone looks this way, they'll be looking at the Commander, not us. No one will pay us any mind."

"Ah. Right. Of course. Haha. That makes sense..."

Steiber, letting out a bitter laugh, took a deep breath.

"Hoo. I mustn't be nervous."

"The seven judges who uphold the laws of the empire and His Highness Duke Peletta will soon enter. Everyone, please rise and show your respect."

At that moment, a loud announcement echoed, drawing everyone's attention toward the entrance. The grand door named 'The Gate of Truth' opened, and the judges dressed in black robes marched in one by one. As they took their respective seats, finally, the figure of Kishiar, adorned in white official uniform, was revealed.

Chapter 207

Yuder watched as Kishiar straightened his shoulders and approached with impeccable strides. His mere existence there made everything seem infinitesimally small, his tremendous presence overflowing. At the sight of his relaxed face adorned with a leisurely smile, the spectators in the stands stirred slightly.

"That's the Duke of Peletta."

"His appearance really does live up to the rumors..."

"Who would've expected him to come here himself? Duke Apeto didn't even show up... Is that a sign of his confidence?"

While the murmurs from the amphitheater-style stand surrounding them overhead were enough to warrant attention, Kishiar never once looked away until he reached his destination.

Upon reaching the chair, Kishiar met eyes in turn with the three Deputy Commanders who were bowing in courtesy. His gaze finally landed on Yuder, standing to his right. After receiving Yuder's greeting, he whispered in a low voice, audible only to the four of them.

"I hope you weren't too bored waiting for me."

"Not at all."

"You won't have a dull moment from now on. I have diligently prepared for this, so let's watch."

He winked lightly at Yuder and took his seat. Shortly after, the seven grand judges introduced themselves, declared their commitment to render a fair judgment based on truth, and took their seats as well.

Yuder studied the faces of the grand judges, who wore solemn expressions. Despite introducing themselves as substitutes for the Emperor, not all of them necessarily acted solely according to the Emperor's will. There could be those seeking to rule in favor of Apeto, or perhaps some influenced by others' intentions.

Regardless of the grand judges' inclinations, it was certain that Apeto would not triumph in this trial. The leisurely smile on Kishiar, sitting at ease, assured such an outcome.

“May we bring forth true glory to dispel blinding lies before the light that impartially illuminates all things. Let there be not a speck of darkness.”

As per tradition, a priest dispatched from the Divine Palace began with a brief prayer towards the holy symbol.

“The trial begins.”

Following the proclamation, two grand judges who had been presiding over the case stepped forward and briefly explained the case's summary.

The well-known case regarding Revlin Shand Apeto, the third son of Apeto's entry into the Cavalry, which led Kishiar to visit the Apeto house with a few members due to the incident. The horrific truth they happened upon by chance that day, suspicions related to the corruption of the Apeto house, and their subsequent investigation and accusations led to the present situation.

"...And so, His Grace, the Duke of Peletta, under the authority as the Cavalry Commander has expressed his wish for a rightful punishment for Lenore Shand Apeto and Beltrail Shand Apeto, who perpetrated this horrific incident, their accomplices who assisted them, and the Apeto family, who knew everything and remained silent."

Although everyone knew this story and had experienced it firsthand, hearing it from a third party felt peculiar. As Yuder reflected on past events, one of the grand judges raised their hand, calling in the first witnesses and representatives from both sides in turn.

“We’ll begin with the Apeto family's side.”

The Apeto family, accused by the Cavalry, was granted the first opportunity to defend their stance as per tradition. Yuder shifted his gaze towards the faces of the few individuals emerging from the Apeto family's waiting room.

Today, the representative who was to speak on behalf of Duke Apeto, who was absent due to poor health, and the people who were to support their opinions, stood in place with exceedingly arrogant and insincere expressions.

Amid the curious gazes of the crowd filling the gallery, they made a declaration to speak only the truth in front of the Sun God and began to speak.

"Firstly, we want to clarify that His Grace, Duke Apeto, has no relation to this matter whatsoever."

Just as Yuder had expected, he was trying to wriggle out from the start. Yuder swallowed a cold laugh as he watched the representative talk as expected.

"It is true that a family head should be responsible for everything, but there is a stark difference between bearing responsibility and directly committing a wrongdoing. Surely, no one would argue that it is only natural for His Grace to know everything happening within the family."

Even after that, he went on to mumble lengthy and convoluted opinions. To summarize, it didn't matter what else happened; Duke Apeto had no involvement and there was no reason to implicate him. The people who claimed to support his opinion also simply repeated similar statements.

"Apeto has never been involved in a similar incident before this one. Outside, there are a number of rumors aiming to defame Apeto in relation to this incident. Even the death of the key figure of this incident, the second son Lenore, did it not happen at too opportune a time? With the mouth to tell the truth gone, some people must be quite pleased."

One of them didn't hesitate to make a sly comment, glaring straight at Kishiar. Kishiar merely narrowed his eyes and smiled calmly, but his Deputy Commanders standing behind him were quite angry.

"What the hell is that bastard blabbering?"

The kind-hearted Steiber clenched his teeth and murmured curses, while Ever showed ominous signs, flexing and clenching her fists, and Kanna's face turned red with anger.

"Can he say such things freely?"

Of course not. But no one jeered at his words. Only a low-ranking judge explained with a somewhat awkward expression that 'the remark is out of the scope of the testimony.'

Yuder looked at the face of the speaker with a cold gaze. He had been a stranger until now, but from this moment onwards, he wouldn't be.

'What was his name again.'

Anyway, he said he works for the House of Apeto. Yuder made sure to remember everything about him.

Next came Beltrail Shand Apeto, the former Elder Priest from Apeto, who started this whole thing. As his name was mentioned, there was a ripple of murmurs among the crowd. Seated in his wheelchair, Yuder failed to recognize Beltrail emerging from the waiting room at first glance.

Beltrail, who looked much older and more haggard than the last time he saw him, stared blankly into space, muttering something under his breath. Despite being a criminal, he was not shackled and wore clothes made of expensive fabric, but his appearance was far from appealing, causing everyone to frown. A regular priest, pushing his chair, opened his mouth on his behalf.

"As you can see, Beltrail is not in a state to freely testify. However, when asked about the events of that day, the direction of his remarks is always consistent."

The priest claimed that he had been taking care of Beltrail on the day when Kishiar had gone to the Apeto mansion with his Cavalry members. He had not been able to witness the incident firsthand, since he had been guarding Beltrail's room in the mansion. However, the lack of sincerity was evident as he endlessly praised how excellent Elder Priest Beltrail was.

"Though he has been caught in a scandal this time, he is a person who has served the Temple and the Empire for a long time. He lost a beloved nephew that day and witnessed the death of priests who were like his own children. He's been wounded at heart. I fail to see how such a man could have inflicted wounds upon others."

Yuder thought it fortunate that the Alpha Awakeners they had rescued then had not personally heard these words. If they had, there might have been a serious uproar in the court.

"Now I will show you one last thing. Elder Priest Beltrail."

The priest knelt and asked Beltrail, who was sitting in a wheelchair.

"...Eh... Heh... Heh..."

"Elder Priest Beltrail, what happened that day?"

"That... that day... that day..."

"Please confirm your innocence, Elder Priest Beltrail."

"Innocent... innocent... I... am... Ahh..."

Beltrail, who had been mindlessly repeating after the priest, began to shake spasmodically, dribbling saliva and looking fearful. Suddenly, when his eyes caught Kishiar, they widened in terror. He started to thrash his arms and legs, screaming.

"Ahh! Awakener! Awakener! Monster! Monster! Monster!"

Following the direction of Beltrail's screams, everyone turned to look at Kishiar. Kishiar watched Beltrail's fit with disinterest, resting his chin on the back of his hand that was placed on the armrest.

"Monster!"

Beltrail was eventually led away after repeating that one word over and over. The courtroom became silent in an instant. The one who broke the silence was one of the representatives who had come from Apeto.

"While he was still alive, Lenore repeatedly argued that he did not think this matter was serious enough to warrant such severe punishment. As we all know, Beltrail's research records have been submitted as evidence. To be honest, I believe some consideration should be given to the fact that this matter involved people who had agreed to participate in the research for money through contracts."

"Contracts, you say? Is there evidence?"

"Of course, there is. Please forgive us for the time it took to find and bring them."

A stack of contracts was handed over to the judge by the Apeto side.

"Elder Priest Beltrail has been wanting to study the Awakeners since they first appeared two years ago. He's an outstanding scholar who has uncovered many facts about the Awakeners and named many of them. He paid a considerable sum of money and made research contracts with the Awakeners."

"He's an excellent piece of garbage."

Yuder heard Kanna mutter next to him. His sharp nerves felt a little relaxed at her words.

After a much longer time than expected had passed, the long and verbose excuses of the Apeto family to reduce their crimes finally came to an end. Due to tradition, after a certain period of time, there was a break. A recess was declared for the time it took for one hourglass to run its course.

"There was nothing unusual after all."

In Kishiar's brief comment as he rose from his seat, there was no hint of a reaction to those who had tried to defame him. Yuder felt a measure of relief in the fact that no one, including the deranged Beltrail, had managed to mar Kishiar.

"Then I should also pay a visit to the waiting room. Yuder, follow me."

"Understood."

Leaving behind the three Deputy Commanders, Yuder followed Kishiar into a small corridor on the left. The waiting room, where the witnesses and representatives taking part in the trial were resting, was located there. As they opened the door and entered, familiar faces turned to look at them all at once.

"Commander!"

"His Excellency Duke Peletta, to come all the way here..."

"We're, we're sorry for the inconvenience."

Devran and Revlin quickly stood and greeted him with bright faces, and the commoner Awakeners from Hartan and the Awakeners rescued from the Apeto family all bowed deeply at once. Among them, Yuder felt a touch of joy upon seeing Zachlis Hartan, who was standing tense next to Devran's younger sister, acting as the representative of Hartan's lord.

'I didn't expect him to be here.'

And Nathan Zuckerman emerged from among the Peletta Knights, who stood as if guarding them, at the very back of the room by the door.

"You're here."

"There were no issues, I presume."

"Yes. There were a couple of attempts to enter, but all were blocked."

"And below?"

Below the court, there was a temporary space for keeping prisoners who were needed for the trial but needed to be confined to a jail. Recognizing the question that hinted at that place, Nathan promptly provided the answer his lord sought.

"The ones we captured from Hartan are all well."

"Good. I'm looking forward to it."

Kishiar's lips curved upward in a smile.

Chapter 208

Under the watchful eyes of everyone gathered in the waiting room, Yuder watched Kishiar as he turned away. A myriad of tangled emotions trailed fervently on his face.

"Our turn is coming soon."

Kishiar, having surveyed everyone in the room, quietly opened his mouth.

"Each of us has swallowed many grievances to stand here today. The situation that will soon confront us may be frightening. However, once you are here, you are no longer a lone fighter."

Despite the numerous people gathered, the waiting room was so quiet that not a breath could be heard. Without raising his voice, Kishiar's words struck the deepest chords in the hearts of those assembled.

"When we leave this place, remember that I will always be behind you. Trust in me and you will not regret having come this far."

It was a speech of sorts, albeit just a few short phrases. But those words had a surprising power to stir the heart.

Over the uneasy and anxious faces of those gathered, gradually only calmness and well-crafted emotions remained. The eyes of the poor and ordinary people, who were not used to fighting, appeared so firm that it was hard to believe. It was a sight akin to a miracle.

Even after his speech, Kishiar spent the remaining time comfortably chatting with those who approached him timidly. At Yuder's side, someone lightly tapped his sleeve as he watched Kishiar silently.

"Yuder."

The one who approached him was none other than Revlin Shand Apeto. Still doll-like in beauty, the vibrant-eyed boy stood with a taciturn boy at his side and a servant, quite different from before. Yuder greeted them with a silent nod.

"Revlin."

"This is my lover, Nion. You already know, right? And this is Pip, the servant whom Lenore had entrusted with his final letter."

Yuder was already aware that the boy accompanying Revlin was his lover, Dandenion, as he had been introduced before. But this was the first time he had seen the servant who had brought Lenore's letter. Upon receiving Yuder's gaze, the servant turned away, stuttering slightly, his face slightly crumpled.

"Did all three of you come to testify?"

"Yes. It's all thanks to you and Commander. You told us that we didn't have to come if we didn't want to, even as of yesterday, and that helped all of us make up our minds."

It could be dangerous. But Revlin said it was fine, a necessary act to repay a favor and a choice he had made willingly.

"But..."

As Revlin was looking up at Yuder, he murmured with a sudden smile.

"This reminds me of when we first met."

"At the Grand Worship, right?"

Yuder recalled the moment when Revlin first sought him out at the Grand Worship during the Harvest Festival. Revlin, who was much better now than when he had been pale-faced, pleading for help that day, looked up at him.

"If you hadn't taken me seriously back then, Nion and I wouldn't be here now."

"No, I didn't really..."

"Thank you."

Yuder's mouth, which was about to say that he didn't do much, suddenly fell silent due to an unexpected onslaught.

"I just wanted to say that now."

Yuder silently looked down at the boy. His feelings were odd. He didn't know how to respond. As if to say he didn't need to, Revlin lightly tapped Yuder's arm. His smiling face looked incredibly bright.

They watched Kishiar, leaning against the wall side by side with them, converse with others. He held the hand of Devran's aging father, asking if there was anything inconvenient about his stay, and exchanged words of joy with Zachlis Hartan, their relationship having evolved from only exchanging opinions through letters. Even those who were intimidated by his imperial family member status, once they had a few words with him, swiftly relaxed.

Revlin, observing this, smiled.

"The Commander is truly remarkable. I've never admired or thought anyone to be amazing before, but now I can understand what it feels like."

"...Yes."

Could the term 'remarkable' truly encapsulate Kishiar La Orr? Yuder pondered briefly, letting out a soft breath. At that, Revlin suddenly widened his eyes in surprise and blinked several times.

"Ah. Did you just smile?"

"What?"

"I think it's the first time I've seen you smile."

Had he smiled? He wasn't sure. Yet Revlin insisted with certainty that Yuder had smiled.

"I felt when I was in the Cavalry that the Cavalry members followed and liked the Commander sincerely, but it seems even more amazing that Yuder does too. I'm sorry. You're his assistant, so it's natural... but still..."

Before Revlin, who couldn't hide his sense of wonder, could say anything more, fortunately, a voice announced the end of the break. Yuder followed Kishiar back into the court. As soon as Kishiar took his seat, the three Deputy Commanders who had silently been guarding the chair Yuder was to sit in, urgently motioned to him with their eyes and hands, asking him to tell them what had happened inside.

It was only after Yuder reassured them that those in the waiting room were fine and there were no issues that the expressions of all three brightened simultaneously.

"It's the turn of His Grace the Duke of Peletta and the Cavalry side to be the witnesses."

A voice announced the new order. All who were sitting on Apeto's side turned their gaze in unison to Kishiar and the entrance of the waiting room behind him. The first to come out following the dark corridor were Revlin Shand Apeto, Dandenion, and the former servant of Lenore.

"My goodness, the third prince of Apeto!"

"Even though he said he would sever ties with the family and leave, to come this far..."

The unexpected entrance as the first turn caused a momentary uproar inside. The representatives of the Apeto family also had perplexed expressions. However, they soon composed themselves, quickly hiding their flustered faces.

'It seems they had anticipated Revlin's appearance.'

But they would not have expected him to be the first. In trials of the Orr Empire, the most crucial witnesses were usually placed last.

Revlin, who showed a small smile towards Kishiar and Yuder behind him, stood at the witness stand for the Cavalry side and introduced himself.

"I am Revlin Shand Apeto. I swear before God that I will not feel a shred of shame for the words I am about to utter."

Dandenion and Pip also made the same introduction and pledge. Revlin, unflinchingly facing the numerous scrutinizing gazes directed at him, looked around and then slowly opened his mouth.

"It's an undeniable fact that my uncle Beltrail and brother Lenore committed a wrong they should not have. They clearly knew what they were doing. It is not something that can be downsized."

"Prince Revlin!"

"It's a lie! As if betraying our family isn't enough, how could you do this?"

"Duke Peletta, aren't you ashamed? How could you bring a young prince who can't yet discern right from wrong into this situation!"

A sharp outcry erupted from the Apeto side. Revlin, without even glancing in their direction, held his chin up confidently.

"You claimed my brother and uncle have made a legitimate contract with the contractors for research. However, this is contrary to my understanding. Dandenion, who was placed as my guard and playmate, and Pip, who took care of my brother Lenore until the end, will testify this more clearly."

The audience section buzzed louder once more. Revlin, who had stepped back, lightly grabbed and let go of the fingertips of his lover stepping forward. Then, he sighed deeply and glanced back. As Kishiar nodded and smiled, a faint smile also appeared on the boy's face.

'Of course, he must be nervous.'

It was a situation that would make anyone nervous. But Revlin did better than anyone else, displaying a demeanor befitting a noble boy who stepped forward to expose the truth. The reactions of those seated in the audience proved it.

Following him, Dandenion, who was originally an ordinary commoner boy, told the story of how he was sold to the Apeto family by his parents after his awakening, in a manner close to abduction. If Lenore had not capriciously chosen him as a playmate of Revlin after overhearing his age and birthday, his fate would have ended inside the mansion as well.

Even after that, he was imprisoned inside the mansion for angering Lenore and was only rescued when the Cavalry came to meet Revlin. At the time of his rescue, his condition was near death.

However, in today's trial, more important than his relationship with Revlin was proving how cunningly the Apeto family lured Awakeners and committed atrocious deeds. Hence, the boy explained his experiences as concisely as possible, as prepared beforehand.

Although he had been well fed and rested and had received care, Dandenion was still a small and skinny boy that evoked the sympathy of those watching. Of course, that was only in appearance; his abilities were outstanding enough to give Ever, who went to rescue him, a hard time. But those watching didn't know that.

Next, Lenore's servant, Pip, who had worked for the Apeto family for seven years, told his story, including the fact that he brought Lenore. His testimony was particularly focused on, as he was the servant who received a letter on Lenore's last day and delivered it to Revlin.

"Prince Lenore often spoke about his work with Lord Beltrail. He frequently became angry about the supply and demand of Awakeners despite the Apeto family's influence, which was reaching all over the empire. Because they often died..."

"You rascal, do you know where you are to be spreading such lies!"

"Please remain quiet in the court."

The judge hastily stopped the representatives of the Apeto family, who were showing their anger in front of the stammering witness.

Chapter 209

There had been an uproar for a while, but at the conclusion of the tumult, Lenore's servant, Pip, managed to finish what he had to say. Having served by Lenore's side for a long time, he knew more about the entire situation than expected.

When Lenore decided to support Beltrail's research to gain an advantage in the family succession struggle, Pip, as a servant, delivered messages between the two several times. He had also frequently escorted Awakeners brought from various places all the way to the mansion. As he narrated every detail, including dates and names of all those involved, even the representatives of the Apeto family had to grit their teeth, unable to completely deny the veracity of his claims.

As Pip rattled off the names of the fellow servants he last worked with, and further revealed that many of them had been killed for their silence or as scapegoats, the gallery was filled with shock and excitement. His daring act of exposure, to the extent that it was hard to understand what he was relying on, was so audacious that even the grand judges opened their eyes wide, shattering their stern expressions.

It was not unusual for servants in noble houses to die without apparent cause. However, it was also certain that if such events became publicly known, they deserved criticism and investigation.

It was a historic moment when the justification and dignity of the Apeto Ducal family, which had always enjoyed various privileges while bragging about their sacrifices for the Empire, was being trampled upon by a servant who was less significant than their toes.

Amidst everyone's excitement, Pip caught his breath and wiped his sweat. He looked terrified, but there was a sense of relief within him.

"Do you think it's okay for him to say so much?"

Ever whispered with concern, to which Kishiar turned his head slightly as if he heard.

"He's planning to leave the Empire with his family as soon as the trial ends today. Several of the Peletta Knights are waiting nearby to assist in that."

"Ah..."

Including the Deputy Commanders, Yuder finally understood why Pip was able to expose everything as if shaking off his burdens.

"But still! Lenore is already departed from this world. The former Elder Priest Beltrail is nearly dead, now you're saying the innocent members of their families should pay for their sins?"

A representative of the Apeto family far away stood up and burst into a passionate argument. Despite the witness's turn not being over, he pointed at Revlin, Dandenion, and Pip, arguing that their testimonies were too exaggerated.

"How can you believe just the words of a common boy and a resentful former servant and claim that the Awakeners were forcibly brought here? It makes no sense for the Apeto family to do such a bothersome thing! It is even uncertain if the Cavalry properly investigated this matter from the beginning, let alone without any valid evidence...!"

"Valid evidence, good point."

Then, for the first time, Kishiar, who had been sitting leisurely, raised his voice so everyone could hear.

"That's why we're here, aren't we? If it wasn't for someone's impassioned rant, we would have already presented more than enough evidence. It seems like we have a representative here who doesn't even know the rules of a trial. If he had a bit of manner, everything would have been done by now. What do you think?"

"..."

As soon as everyone recognized the implication of Kishiar's words, which were not loud but clearly pointed, all fell silent at once. The face of the representative, mocked as someone who doesn't even know etiquette in front of everyone, turned beet red.

"I got excited and... I rudely interrupted. I apologize."

Taking a deep breath, he gritted his teeth and slowly took his seat. Kanna smirked faintly as she observed the representatives and witnesses of the Apeto family, taken aback. The other Deputy Commanders also seemed a bit relieved, wearing smiles on their faces.

Taking the attention in stride, Kishiar slowly rose from his seat. Standing in place of the retreating group of Revlin, he opened his mouth again to address everyone.

"The Cavalry and I have thoroughly investigated this incident upon His Majesty's order. Based on the testimonies of the Awakeners we rescued from the Apeto House on that day, we were able to find substantial evidence after a lengthy investigation."

"..."

"Did the Apeto House say there was no need for them to commit such a troublesome act? They themselves would know better than anyone why they had to do so. That's an interesting statement."

The representatives of the Apeto family, who wanted to yell something at Kishiar, furrowed their brows in unison. They recognized the implied meaning in Kishiar's words.

Kishiar slowly smiled at them. His mouth opened and a statement that the Apeto family least expected flowed out.

"I, Kishiar La Orr, the Commander of the Cavalry, will call the victims from Hartan, one of the places where the Apeto family systematically kidnapped and recruited Awakeners, the acting Lord of the place, and the arrested criminals as the next witnesses. Additionally, I request the reading of part of Beltrail Shand Apeto's research records, which were submitted confidentially as they were deemed to contain too secretive information, only for the grand judges to view. That's all."

At Kishiar's words, everyone buzzed even louder. The representatives of the Apeto family froze. They had only planned to cause enough trouble to minimize the punishment of the Apeto House, not to make the issue bigger.

"What on earth is going on? Wasn't this trial supposed to only deal with the case related to the third prince Revlin?"

"That's all a ploy to drive the atmosphere. Didn't they say that there won't be much in Beltrail's records? Prince Aishes said so...!"

"Where on earth is Hartan? Hasn't the Duke of Apeto never mentioned such a region?"

"It's in the east. The east."

"The east? Isn't that the power of the Diarca family? Could they have conspired with the Duke of Peletta...?"

The representatives gathered to urgently discuss, but no one could come up with a countermeasure. Unlike the opposing side where Kishiar himself stood, they did not have the Duke of Apeto or Prince Aeshes on their side.

While they were hurriedly sending a letter to the Apeto family through a servant, many people appeared from the inside of the corridor. Their appearances were truly diverse. There were old men with weak legs, young women, young noblemen in armor, and ragged middle-aged men.

A young man with chains around his ankles, trembling in fear, and two Awakeners, both equally scared, were led by people in Peletta Knight's uniforms. The first to step forward in the chaos was Zachlis Hartan, the acting Lord of Hartan.

"My name is Zachlis Hartan. I am currently the acting Lord of Hartan and was formerly a Knight of the Silver Cross Knights."

Zachlis, with his righteous visage, gave a knightly salute, prompting whispers among some about the Silver Cross Knights. It was a well-known order in the east, and many recognized the name.

"First, I would like to discuss the dreadful crimes committed by my naive younger brother, and those who manipulated him into action."

Zachlis recounted how his younger brother, Zakail, had conspired to usurp their father's position as the lord, framing it as a fatal accident involving fire that resulted in the deaths of his father and sister. The crowd gasped as he mentioned how Devran and his family were wrongly accused and almost entirely abducted due to the incident.

As Devran, his family, and those who were rescued from the kidnap site each shared similar testimonies, the faces of the grand judges grew increasingly grave. It was clear to everyone that the Apeto House had committed organized atrocities.

Kidnappings, human experimentation, and murder over a long period of time. Everyone gradually began to wonder what the Apeto House had hoped to achieve through all these heinous acts.

"Had I not returned to the village once again, my brother might have achieved his vile intentions. Zakail wasn't inherently evil, but over the course of a year, someone had twisted him."

The witnesses finished their testimonies, and a grave Zachlis turned his gaze towards the Apeto representatives.

"Do you know that many young people in the East, like Zakail, are now turning against their families in pursuit of power due to someone's manipulations?"

"Do you mean to imply that this is related to the current case?!" an Apeto representative bristled, to which Zachlis just tilted his head with a serious expression.

"I just meant to say such incidents have been on the rise. The tension is making me say other things as well."

"What kind of wordplay are you...!"

"While everyone involved in the kidnapping at the time died, luckily, two mercenary Awakeners and a few Awakeners survived. I brought them here at the request of Duke Peletta. Listen to what they have to say."

Ignoring the representatives' interjections, Zachlis finished his piece. The Peletta Knights stepped forward, leading the restrained mercenary Awakeners. They had been bound with a magic oath and spell that prevented them from using their abilities.

Humbled, barely able to raise their heads, they began to speak with a tone of deep subjugation.

"We... we did not know who our employer was serving. He was called the warden, and he occasionally communicated with the 'main house'... Sometimes, people directly from the main house came."

They described the Apeto warden they knew by name and appearance and those who came from the main house. The Peletta Knights who brought them forth passed on the information about the Apeto employees they had identified based on this information to the grand judges.

"We lived in fear every day. None of the Awakeners who were taken to that so-called main house ever returned alive. They claimed to give us work, but anyone could see that wasn't the truth!"

The Awakeners rescued from Hartan cried out, trembling, their words echoed by other Awakeners who had suffered even worse at the Apeto estate.

"I still bear many scars from that time. Some died vomiting blood due to the drugs they were forced to consume, drugs that were purported to induce heat period. And you say that none of this happened?"

The representatives from the Apeto estate turned their heads in defeat, their expressions fallen, as they listened to the outraged voices of the rescued Awakeners. Any claims of the stories being lies weakened and finally faded away.

Had the victims of the kidnapping been the only ones to come forward with their testimonies, they could have easily dismissed them as lies. But starting with the composed testimony of Revlin, a blood relative of Apeto, then through the incident in Hartan, the situation had grown so tense that it was impossible to quell it, like a dam that had burst.

The spectators were no different. Being able to sit in those seats signified that they had a certain status and power. Normally, they would look down on these individuals as mere commoners, their problems being of no concern. But the stories of Revlin Shand Apeto and Zachlis Hartan had sequentially resonated with them.

The conflict between the Apeto and Diarca houses was what truly drew their attention, but that was enough.

There was no better weapon when assessing the severity of a crime than to draw sympathy from those around. Yuder recalled the crowds at the public execution site, cheering and throwing flowers without judging whether the crime was real or not, and then brushed it aside.

As the heated atmosphere resembled that of his memory, the judge once again stepped forward.

"The testimonies are now concluded. Next, we will decide whether to accept the reading of the confidential evidence that Duke of Peletta had requested. The seven grand judges will take a brief moment to share their opinions. We will take a short break. This time, no one is allowed to leave their seats."

"What did he just say?!"

Chapter 210

"What did you say!"

The representatives of House Apeto cried out, but the judge's declaration that no one could leave was firm.

"It's to protect all those gathered here and prevent any involved parties from fleeing. Please wait a moment."

"So you're implying that we would run away from here! How rude."

"What family are you from? If you dare to disregard Apeto to this extent, surely..."

'They have a notable ability to interpret everything in their favor.'

Yuder, watching these scenes play out like a farce, turned his head toward Kishiar. He was observing the seven grand judges who were locked in conversation. As it happened, it seemed the evidence they'd requested had arrived, as lower-ranking judges rushed in with paper bundles tied with string.

Not long afterward, one of the judges approached Kishiar and politely bowed his head.

"The seven grand judges have sent this to ask for His Grace Duke Peletta's opinion on the matter of reading the confidential evidence."

In his hand was a rolled-up piece of paper and a pen.

"I'll check it first."

Yuder stepped forward to receive them, making sure there were no problems in anticipation of any unforeseen circumstances.

'There's no issue, the content... they want to know which part of the submitted evidence we wish to designate for reading.'

Having confirmed, he passed the paper to Kishiar. He quickly read the content and briefly wrote his response at the bottom. The judge took the reply and immediately returned to the seven grand judges.

"Do you have any idea which part I designated?"

Kishiar opened his mouth leisurely. Yuder blinked a few times before replying softly.

"I didn't read the entire record, so I can't be sure... but since House Apeto has requested this to clarify why they've committed such acts, shouldn't it relate to that?"

"Correct."

A soft smile spread across Kishiar's face as he leaned back in his chair.

"I tried to gloss over and skip the sad history of House Apeto for the sake of Prince Aishes, but if they insist on this, what can I do?"

They have no choice but to reveal the truth to defend themselves. With that remark, Yuder instantly had an inkling of which part Kishiar had requested.

'It must be the part related to the Blood of Blessing.'

How would House Apeto react when the sins they had long hidden came to light? They probably wouldn't be able to keep posturing so boldly.

Even the mere thought brought a sense of satisfaction, but Yuder was slightly curious if the seven grand judges would indeed permit the reading of such a secretive part in front of everyone.

"But if it's that part, might not the seven grand judges refuse to accept it?"

"The reason there are seven grand judges is to decide the verdict by majority vote. It's the same in this case."

Kishiar lightly gestured toward the seven grand judges with the hand resting on his knee.

"As long as four or more agree, it can be read. Two of them took bribes from Apeto this time, and two others, though not bribed, have deep connections with other ducal houses. And the remaining three were personally appointed by His Majesty the Emperor right after his enthronement."

"So then..."

A majority of four out of seven was necessary, but if the Emperor's faction only contained three, how could the remaining one be fulfilled? It was an unfair selection process, even if it wasn't a quality trial. Seeing Yuder's furrowed brow, a slightly colder smile than usual played on Kishiar's lips.

"Yesterday, the Duke of Diarca sent a secret letter to His Majesty the Emperor. He said he would like to help, in some small way, with this matter."

"Help? Are you implying that among the grand judges from the ducal houses faction, there is one with connections to the House of Diarca?"

"There has to be."

Kishiar's crimson eyes scanned the faces of the grand judges.

"Their influence reaches everywhere in this country."

The Duke of Diarca wouldn't have reached out without a reason. Yuder speculated on the meaning behind Kishiar's brooding expression.

'Is the Duke of Diarca trying to cover up the crime committed by the Crown Prince in exchange for his help in this trial?'

It was indeed wicked. It was a proposal that would have been impossible if he had not previously understood the tendencies of the grand judges.

"Did His Majesty accept his offer?"

"No."

Kishiar curtly responded and continued.

"But they won't care about our refusal."

Of course, they wouldn't. Even if their help was rejected, they could boast about their offer once it was given. Kishiar turned his gaze towards Yuder, lost in thought. He was now smiling, a playful one unlike before.

"Truthfully, it wouldn't matter even if they didn't help. One of the two judges linked to the Apeto family had accepted money from Prince Aishes."

'...Aishes Shand Apeto?'

His frantic thoughts stalled for a moment. Yuder silently performed calculations in his head.

'Wait. Three of the seven grand judges belong to the Emperor's faction, at least one person is from the Diarca family, and one person is from Prince Aishes' side. That means.....'

Four votes, easily enough to win by majority rule.

'Had he anticipated this and held back until the Apeto faction had no choice but to reveal the evidence in a decisive argument?'

Indeed, it was Kishiar. There was no match for his method of obtaining his goals through acting and patience. Yuder let out a small breath and calmly smiled.

"You took great care to prevent any relevant issues from arising, Commander. Even if permission to read is granted, Prince Aishes will likely understand."

"I hope so."

Kishiar extended his hand, feigning regret. The Commander and his assistant locked eyes, their faces full of complicity. Eventually, the grand judges, who had been discussing amongst themselves, seemed to reach a conclusion and returned to their seats.

"As a result of our discussion, six out of seven grand judges agree to the request of His Highness, Duke Peletta. The designated section will be read by the judge shortly."

"That's preposterous!"

"Six votes? How could such an absurd...!"

Although shocked voices arose from the Apeto side, the judge stepped forward undeterred. He raised the document in front of the excited and curious spectators and began to read the written words.

"...Lately, I feel my illness is deepening. It has been like this since I was born, but now I truly do not know how much longer I can live. The incurable disease that doesn't respond to any medicine or divine power, and can't be cured by magic, has long proven our Apeto's glorious and sad history."

The section he had read was part of a record that Beltrail had written in diary format. While not directly mentioning the Blood of Blessing by Apeto, he knew that the nobles in the capital were well aware that many frail individuals had been born generation after generation in the house of Duke Apeto.

In the midst of everyone holding their breath, a representative from the Apeto side hastily ran out to stop him.

"You can't! Apeto did not agree to this! Can't you stop at once!"

"What is this nonsense in a sacred courtroom! Take him out."

"No way!"

Despite the Apeto representative struggling and shouting, he was unable to overpower the soldiers holding him.

Taking advantage of this, the judge read the remaining part.

"Anything to survive, even if it means becoming a devil. I want answers, regardless of the sacrifices, since we are born to survive. The First Prince said that no answers can be found with the power of the Awakeners, but the Second Prince trusted me. Together we will definitely see the end of this research... That's it."

"..."

Everyone was speechless, except for the Apeto representative shouting in protest.

"...So that's why."

Someone sitting in the gallery muttered in a stunned voice. He was not the only one with such thoughts.

As if woken up from a dream, the people started stirring all at once, and not just the detained representative of the Apeto family; other representatives also rushed out to protest. Echoing around was the Apeto side's refusal to agree to the disclosure of this information, and allegations that it was an outright lie.

Yuder turned his eyes to the oldest man who was banging on the desk in front of him with a husky voice.

"Regardless, it's already not an issue for the Second Prince and Elder Priest Beltrail! Duke Apeto has nothing to do with it! Don't drag him into this disgraceful affair!"

"No involvement. Really?"

Once again, when Kishiar opened his mouth, the angry glances of the Apeto family's representatives turned back to him.

"Even if the late Second Prince Lenore helped Beltrail, do you think all of this could have been possible without the tacit approval and help of the Duke?"

"Don't speak without evidence!"

"Evidence. I will, of course, present it."

"What? What are you..."

Whether they were speechless or not, Kishiar did not rise from his seat but instead smiled. As he raised his hand, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing silently beside the witnesses, approached and pulled out a piece of paper from his bosom.

"This is a document with the personal seal of Duke Apeto, intended to support the terrible research of Beltrail Shand Apeto."

For a moment, Yuder heard a roar that seemed to shake the entire imperial court.

"We didn't hear such a thing! It's a lie! It's a lie!"

"It's a manipulation by Duke Peletta! It's definitely a fake!"

"Whether it's fake or not, you'll know when you see it."

Kishiar elegantly twisted his hand and extended the paper toward the grand judges.

"I will submit the final piece of evidence."

'It's over.'

Yuder, watching the Apeto representatives in chaos and despair, and the murmuring crowd, had a feeling that everything was over.