

Turning 661

Chapter 661

"...You're not part of the Nukijo gang, are you?"

"No, we're not."

Yuder's terse response caused Elpkins' eyes to tremble mercilessly. Instead of offering a lengthy explanation, Yuder decided to succinctly reveal their purpose and identity.

"We are from the Cavalry, here to destroy this place. How many like you are trapped here?"

Although Yuder asked, he didn't really expect immediate cooperation. Saving someone and being suspicious are two different things. Elpkins was known for his roughness, ferocity, and deep-seated skepticism, so he wasn't likely to easily believe Yuder's words.

However, Yuder's assumption was unusually incorrect this time.

Upon hearing Yuder's answer, tears suddenly streamed down Elpkins' eyes.

"...Sob!"

'...Huh?'

Elpkins, sniffing like a deer, spoke up.

"It can't be... The Cavalry? Are you really here to save us?"

'...Really? He believes us this easily?'

Is this really Elpkins? While Yuder hesitated, Kishiar stepped in with a gentle demeanor to respond.

"Yes. If you can't believe us, would you like to see a token of the Cavalry?"

"No, no. I believe you. I've heard that the Cavalry came to Charloin. Those guys I fought with... they might be dead by now..."

Elpkins' voice wavered before he broke into tears again.

"Sob... sob... Wail."

His crying was like that of a lost child who had finally found his parents, a mix of sorrow and joy.

Yuder, after a brief exchange with the tearful Elpkins, who was eagerly sharing information about the fighting arena and himself, realized something.

The rough, skeptical Elpkins he remembered was not here.

Present was a naive person, having awakened only a few months ago and still not fully accustomed to his own form.

"I was, you know... a woodcutter. Then one day, I accidentally slipped and almost fell off a cliff, and that's how I awakened... Sob... Sniff. But because I look like this, people are scared and avoid me..."

Knowing about the existence of the Cavalry, he had planned to head to a big city to find a way to join them, thinking that a place where only Awakeners gathered might offer some solution for someone like him.

However, upon reaching Charloin, Elpkins was swindled by a con artist he met at an inn, losing all his belongings, and eventually ended up in this fighting arena.

"I don't remember how long I've been here. You can't see the sun rise or set here... But it feels like a long time."

According to Elpkins, since his arrival, he had fought a total of ten times, and spent more time bound here, lying down in pain. He only met other Awakeners in the waiting room right before or after a fight, but that was enough to exchange some words.

"A person who died here before me said there are about 40 rooms here. He was from another country to the west and had been brought here without knowing what it was... He said he would definitely escape alive. Not that it was of any use."

"..."

"When I first came here, there were more people who had been deceived and brought here. But lately, there are more first-time participants temporarily brought in from the outside than those trapped here. One of them told me it was because of the Cavalry's recruitment... I think that person died that day. Never saw them again..."

Elpkins exerted himself to recall every detail he had seen and heard, down to the most trivial aspects. The fact that he sincerely believed in those who had saved him was evidence enough of his efforts.

Among the information he provided, some were already speculated by Yuder and Kishiar based on what they had observed and heard from the outside. However, there were many aspects only someone who had been here for a long time would know, like the detailed structure of the fighting arena and information about the other Awakeners who had passed through it.

After listening to all he had to say, Yuder succinctly summarized the information.

"So, to summarize, the first underground level is a regular fighting arena. The second is for Awakeners and special guests. And from the third level downwards, that's where they imprison the Awakeners."

"Yes."

"The difference between the Awakeners who are locked up and the Awakeners who are not is those who came in unawares and survived the first fight like you, or those who were kidnapped from the outside from the start."

"That's right."

Originally, Yuder and Kishiar too would have been dragged here and imprisoned after surviving their first fight.

'If they hadn't realized we were Awakeners with second genders.'

During a meal, after blatantly inquiring and learning about their second gender status, Nukijo looked at them as if they were golden nuggets, with a sly grin that made his satisfaction and intentions all too clear.

From his previous life, Yuder had heard that the fighting arenas often organized fights specifically targeting Awakeners with second genders. The organizers packaged and sold the concept of second gender beings, something beyond the imagination of non-Awakeners, in a highly intriguing and almost salacious manner.

It was also here that the absurd misinformation that the strong scent the Omega Awakeners emit during their heat period supposedly enhances vitality and sexual arousal, originated and spread widely.

'In a way, this place is where the nightmare of Omega Awakeners began.'

If Yuder and Kishiar had not come here today, it would only be a matter of time before some unfortunate Awakeners with second genders were captured and became the start of that horrific 'new business.'

Even while suffering in this place, Elpkins had diligently observed and remembered everything about it. This was not only because he had better observational skills than he appeared to have, but also because he still had enough humanity in him not to give up hope of escape.

'It's fortunate. If we had arrived any later, when his humanity had been completely eroded... we wouldn't be seeing him as he is now.'

"Everything I know about this place is just this much. Will this be of any help?"

"Yes, it might be of great help. But let me ask you one more thing."

"Oh, yes. Ask away. I'll tell you anything I know..."

"Do you know why the powers don't work here? It seems like it's because of someone's ability among those who are imprisoned. Do you know anything about that?"

"Oh!..."

Elpkins exclaimed loudly upon hearing this. He reflexively startled at the sound of his own voice, then lowered his voice and continued.

"The Nukijo gang just said that powers can't be used here. I thought it was because of some magic installed in this place, but if it's due to someone's ability... I haven't seen it myself, but there's something I suspect."

"What is it?"

"Every time the Nukijo gang brought me back here after a fight, they always had a conversation in front of a certain room. 'That person's not dead yet, right? It'll be difficult to manage the others here if that person dies. If that person doesn't eat, tear open that person's throat and force-feed it...'
Something like that."

"...Hmm."

Yuder's eyes narrowed.

'It's highly likely that an Awakener with the power of suppression is imprisoned in that room.'

"Do you remember where that room is?"

"My mind was always foggy when I was brought back here, and I could barely see ahead... But I do remember the location of that room. It was the first one I passed every time I descended from the stairs to the second underground floor."

That meant it was centrally located on the third underground level.

'Suppression or nullification abilities are often exerted on a targeted basis, but if it's placed in the center, it might be someone with a range-type ability similar to Nahan. It's not incredibly wide, but to continuously exert such power day and night without dying... that's impressive.'

Yuder hadn't heard of such an ability user when he first started dealing with the illegal gambling arenas in the southern regions in his previous life.

'He must have died around that time.'

The Nukijo gang, who had created such a place using an Awakener with the power of suppression, would have gained more money and power by then, devising new ways to more effectively oppress the fighters.

'By that time... everything was a mess, devoid of any real sense of oppression.'

It was a past that would not recur now. Yuder exhaled briefly, erasing the memories of the past, and gazed at the chains still binding Elpkins.

A range-type ability could be broken by exerting a greater power from within. Yuder was confident that his power was sufficient to break them.

However, doing so might shock the unknown ability owner, who could be in any condition now, potentially endangering their life.

"These chains, I can't undo them right now, but after tomorrow, you won't have to wear them again. Just bear with it a little longer."

"I, I'm fine. Since coming here, I've never felt in less pain... I can wait as long as needed. If you need my help, just let me know."

Elpkins answered with eyes brimming with sincerity. His face, once filled with discontent, now seemed unfamiliar yet more pleasant, akin to a large dog wagging its tail.

Yuder nodded slowly.

"Alright. Then, I would like you to lend a bit of your strength to our plan tomorrow... Can you do that? You might be the only one who can."

Elpkins' eyes widened as he answered with a smile.

"Absolutely!"

"Good. After we succeed and escape from here, if you're interested, come to the Cavalry. We're currently recruiting."

Kishiar had painstakingly healed him. Letting him stray off the path again wasn't an option. It seemed like a good idea to properly nurture and develop his abilities right from the start.

Upon hearing Yuder's offer, Elpkins inhaled sharply, as if he had never imagined such a possibility, but he didn't refuse.

After conveying to Elpkins what he hoped he would do the next day, Yuder, supporting Kishiar, leaped up and flew back to the ceiling.

"Are you alright?"

Yuder asked cautiously, and the man, whose pallor had yet to return to normal, nodded with a smile.

"I'm fine. More so, thinking that your recent demeanor is closer to that of Commander Yudrain is truly fascinating."

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'...Commander's demeanor?'

Yudrain Aile was suddenly speechless when a man who had never seen him as the Commander said that.

"I thought you were quiet because you were not feeling well, is that what you were thinking?"

Since revealing the secrets of his past life, Yuder had been proactive in sharing information about upcoming events, but he rarely mentioned anything about his own self from that time.

Especially his time as a Commander, a period he particularly did not wish to speak of.

But was Kishiar curious about Yudrain Aile from that time?

The current Commander was Kishiar, a fact that would never change. A faint sense of perplexity rose in his eyes at the man's interest in something that would never happen.

"Ha ha ha."

Kishiar laughed, seemingly amused.

"I'm sorry, but whatever you were thinking... it would have been completely different from the reality."

He admitted that in their conversation, he had spoken to Elpkins somewhat condescendingly, as he used to. But it was nothing compared to his demeanor as a Commander. Back then, he would never have approached anyone directly during a mission.

That was Yudrain Aile's way as a Commander - leave the people skills to others, and focus on what he did best. This meant acting first, smashing everything in sight, and leaving the aftermath to others.

At that time, he hadn't even considered the option of handling things differently. His mind was entirely occupied with the immediate tasks at hand and the subsequent duties that awaited him. Human emotions were unnecessary in his efficient approach to moving forward.

His primary responsibility was to maintain the Cavalry in a strong position for a long time by earning the Emperor's trust and supporting him. Before being a human being, he was the Commander of the Cavalry and the Empire's most potent human weapon.

'Since I worked as the Deputy Commander of Shin for a long time, I hardly ever had a casual conversation with Ever, who I knew the longest.'

He barely knew that Ever enjoyed dancing, let alone her family situation or hobbies, though he remembered how Ever handled battles and injuries.

'Even when people thought I was crazy, I remember she tried to help me, even though she didn't fully believe in my stance...'

Back then, Yuder didn't fully trust even the words of his Deputy Commanders, his peers when joining the Cavalry. He faintly realized that it was an act of kindness only when facing execution.

Even after requesting so many people to believe in his thoughts, he had built walls around those who tried to help, leading to Yudrain Aile's unfortunate end.

In the midst of Yuder's darkening gaze, Kishiar gently but firmly took Yuder's supporting hand.

His train of thought was interrupted, bringing him back to reality. Their eyes met in the darkness.

"Yes. The image I saw and inferred can't be exactly the same as reality. That's obvious. But still, no matter the situation, your attitude towards Awakeners and serving the Cavalry remains the same, doesn't it?"

A soft voice echoed in his ears.

"The one who created a sanctuary for Awakeners with second genders suffering during their heat period, now offers unique tasks and invites oppressed Awakeners to join the ranks. I believe there's no significant difference in these two roles. You do it because it's necessary, not necessarily out of a sense of benevolence."

This time, his speechlessness was for a different reason.

"...I..."

"Of course, I must admit that your change in tone, perhaps due to meeting an old subordinate, was particularly charming."

Kishiar said this, smiling faintly.

'Knowing what I did in my past life... and yet he says such things.'

He wanted to protest, to insist that his time as Commander Yudrain Aile should not be viewed fondly or romanticized, that there should be no similarities between then and now.

But ultimately, Yuder couldn't utter a word. It was always like this with Kishiar La Orr.

An indescribable feeling weighed heavily inside his chest. Gazing at the man's face, shrouded in darkness, he felt his heart pounding fiercely.

"Earlier, I sensed a cold pain, but now it's turned hot again."

Kishiar murmured, seemingly aware of all the unspoken sensations swirling within Yuder.

"It's good to feel each other's intense emotions in moments like this. I wouldn't be able to guess the depth of emotions beneath this face, just by looking."

"..."

Yuder realized then that his emotions had seeped into Kishiar. He exhaled deeply, and Kishiar hesitated for a moment before slowly moving his head closer.

"From heat... to yearning. Right?"

Instead of responding, Yuder gazed into his obscured eyes.

While it felt overly honest to convey emotions so directly, since he already knew, it was time to act.

Slowly curving his lips upward, he gently raised his head and their lips met. The contact was brief but felt simultaneously long.

It wasn't a romantic place or situation, but this brief encounter decidedly cleared Yuder's mind. And it seemed he wasn't the only one who felt that way.

"It seems like my vessel has fully recovered. With such a reward, I could use my divine power twice more."

"Don't even joke about such things."

"It's not a joke, it's true."

Kishiar's face, now smiling, looked genuinely better than before. He stood up without Yuder's support, indicating some recovery and stability, relieving Yuder's tension.

They continued their search, following Elpkins' directions to a room on the third underground floor. Fortunately, it didn't take long to find.

"This must be it."

"Yes. It seems to be the right location."

Lifting a ceiling block, they peered into a small room below, its atmosphere starkly different from the bloodied, horrific room where Elpkins was held.

In a room extravagantly decorated to the point of being suffocating, a woman so emaciated that her bones seemed to protrude lay prostrate. She slowly lifted her head as if she heard the sound of a ceiling block opening and, upon locking eyes with Yuder, opened her mouth as if to scream.

Yuder swiftly leaped down, covering her mouth.

"...Hmph!"

“Hmm. I apologize for the sudden intrusion. Rest assured, I'm not here to harm you. Of course, I understand it's not easy to relax just on my word.”

Following suit, Kishiar descended and continued gently, causing the woman, who had been gasping for breath, to roll her eyes and examine them. Yuder, seeing her slightly calmed, spoke up.

“I've come to verify something, so if you assure me you won't scream and alert the Nukijo gang outside, I will let go of your hand. Blink twice if you agree.”

“...”

After a moment, the woman slowly blinked twice. Yuder removed his hand from her mouth and stepped back. The woman murmured with anxious eyes, “Who are you?”

“We're from the Cavalry, here to fix this place.”

“...Cavalry? What is that?”

Yuder's gaze sharpened. Her response was one of the worst they had anticipated before coming here.

“You don't know the Cavalry? How long have you been here?”

“...I don't know. How long it's been.”

The truth of her words was evident in her hair. The woman, emaciated with a heavy, lavishly adorned dress, had hair so neglected it was a tangled mess.

Her matted hair, gaunt face, bloodshot eyes, and a ridiculously expensive dress that seemed incongruous.

All these factors led to one conclusion.

“So, you're the one using the power to suppress the Awakener's abilities across this place.”

“...”

At those words, the woman's body shook violently.

“H-how...”

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The woman's body shook violently.

“H-how...”

As if responding to her shock, the faint mist wrapping around her body suddenly burst explosively.

"Ugh...!"

A groan of unfiltered pain escaped her lips. Once more, dark red blood trickled down from her already scabbed and bruised lips.

'She's weak. The slightest backlash from her surprised reaction to us could overwhelm her... But if this continues, she'll lose control.'

Yuder quickly assessed her condition and placed his hand on her abdomen. He whispered rapidly to her, whose eyes were wide with alarm.

"Focus on the flow of your power. I'll help you control it. Try to calm your mind, imagine a state of peace. That will help."

As Yuder drew upon his own strength, the woman's power, sprawling throughout the space to suppress the Awakener's abilities, immediately reacted, trying to snuff out the foreign force. However, the power Yuder invoked wasn't his inherent ability, but a pure, formless essence unique to Awakeners.

This was the same power absorbed from the Red Stone, refined and stored in a medium, and recently used to awaken Emperor Keilusa. Astonishingly, as this power surged within him, the strong suppressive force weakened and dissipated.

'Just as I thought. The essence absorbed from the Red Stone can assimilate with any Awakener's power. And I can exploit this opening, however brief.'

Yuder's understanding of manipulating the Red Stone's power had significantly increased after his experiences with Kishiar and Hosanna, and through the awakening of Emperor Keilusa. With an instinctual sense beyond explanation, he intensely focused on calming the woman's power.

The effort was effective, but not without its issues.

"I... I don't know what to imagine to calm down," the woman muttered, her face marred by pain.

"What am I supposed to do...?"

Yuder wanted to respond, but concentrating on the power made it difficult to speak. Fortunately, someone far more adept at this was by his side.

"Think back to the time before you came here. Remember how warm the sunlight felt outside, the sensation of walking along the water's edge, the feelings of running freely across the vast lands. The taste of meals shared with others after a day's work. What foods did you enjoy?"

"..."

"What and whom did you love?"

Despite the urgency, the woman, hearing this gentle voice, slowly closed her eyes. Shortly after, the dangerously escalating power within her subsided.

The weight of the power suppressing her abilities lifted from their shoulders, and a thin breath escaped the lips of the three.

"Phew."

When the woman reopened her eyes, tears silently streamed down her cheeks.

Despite her unsteady body, previously sprawled across the table, she righted herself. Her gaze, clearer than before, fixed on Yuder and Kishiar.

"You said you came to destroy this place. Tell me. What is this 'Cavalry', and how did you know I was here? Tell me everything."

"Of course, we'll explain," Yuder replied. He and Kishiar then spoke about the Cavalry and the purpose of this fighting arena. After hearing their story, the woman cautiously revealed who she was and how she came to be here.

"My name is Reneve. I am not from the Empire... but from Durban in the west."

Reneve lived on the border of Durban, a place that, for several years, had been a frequent site of armed clashes with the adjacent Nelarn. It was less a village and more a reluctant home for refugees who had barely survived and could not find death.

Unlike many who lived there, tormented daily by the fear of being struck by an errant arrow, she sought a path of survival. She chose to flee to the Orr Empire, crossing the Great Sarain Forest instead of succumbing to the dread of blind arrows.

However, the broker who promised to take her safely to the Empire and find her a job, taking her meager savings, turned out to be a human trafficker. Reneve, along with others deceived, were transported helplessly like mere cargo to the south. There, they were selected as sacrificial lambs to enter the random combats of the 'Black Orca' fighting arena.

Those who ascended the stage before her initially wanted to escape, but their demeanor changed when promised a hefty sum for victory, no matter the means.

Their opponent, however, was an 'Awakener.' A man, infamous even before his awakening for his thuggery, now wielded fists hardened like black stone, easily knocking down the trembling sacrificial lambs.

Late pleas for mercy and desperate escape attempts were met with merciless blows. The audience pushed the fleeing participants back, screaming for them to win and not waste the money they had wagered.

The battle ended only when the defeated lay indistinguishable, their bodies beaten into bloody, unrecognizable corpses. Most of those dragged with Reneve died within mere hours.

But as the triumphant thug boasted about the prize money for the final victor, a new, more fearsome Awakener appeared. In a swift move, he split open the thug's back and belly, killing him instantly.

The shocking scene sent the crowd into a frenzied ecstasy.

Countless new stakes were thrown onto the shoulders of the newcomer.

And so Reneve ascended the stage to face him.

On her way up, forced to pick from the armory, she trembled, barely able to lift the heavy sword that did not suit her. The Awakener she faced up close was terrifying. Seeing Reneve, he chuckled dismissively, ready to use his power as if she were mere prey.

In extreme fear, Reneve closed her eyes.

"And then... suddenly, this power came to me."

Reneve did not die. When she opened her eyes, the Awakener, overwhelmed by the sudden loss of his abilities, had crashed into the railing and collapsed. Other Awakeners nearby, whether in other fighting stages or waiting areas, were equally confounded and screamed in dismay.

Thus, Reneve became the winner, albeit inadvertently.

She was immediately taken by the subordinates of Nukijo and imprisoned here.

"At first, I tried to escape. But... they threatened to kill Cyril if I didn't obey."

"Who is that?"

"The only friend I've had since I became an orphan. As good as family. I don't know if it was good or bad luck, but we were brought here together. But since the day we were imprisoned, I've never seen that friend of mine again."

A dry laugh escaped from her strangely twisted lips.

The day Reneve won the fight, Cyril had not yet appeared in the arena. Nukijo's gang used Cyril's life as leverage to detain Reneve, then created a third underground level to confine her there, commanding her to exert her power over the entire space as long as she could.

The captors, it seemed, were not entirely devoid of cunning. In their own way, they had attempted to coax Reneve into willingly joining their ranks. They had bought her expensive clothes and fed her reasonably well, evidently trying to make her life comfortable enough to sway her decision.

But Reneve did not yield to them.

"They never showed me Cyril's face, not even once," she said. "I told them I would stay quietly here if they just let me see Cyril once... but they didn't."

Within her, a torturous cycle of thoughts churned endlessly — the fear that Cyril might already be dead and she was foolishly trapped for nothing, against a slender thread of hope that persisted. The luxury of expensive clothes and meals, once unimaginable, brought her no joy in her current plight.

Trapped in her small room, Reneve withered away endlessly. As each day passed, it became increasingly difficult to exert her abilities. Yet, whenever there was even a slight lapse, the Nukijo gang, like phantoms sensing weakness, would appear to beat her.

"Actually, recently, I've been feeling extremely exhausted... reaching my limit, really. I kept thinking that I wanted to die. That was, until you all came here."

Silence followed.

Reneve burst into nervous laughter, which soon abruptly ceased. Her alternating between crying and laughing was unsettling.

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Reneve burst into nervous laughter, which soon abruptly ceased. Her alternating between crying and laughing was unsettling.

Yuder, observing her seemingly half-mad demeanor, mentally sorted through the information.

‘...Considering what I've heard, she must have been trapped here before the official announcement of the Cavalry recruitment. A time before the Awakener fighters were separated from random combat... Though she was endlessly exploited in a situation akin to imprisonment, her survival owed to her powerful Awakener abilities. But to her, it was more of a curse.’

Given that her homeland was a conflict-ridden danger zone, it was hardly surprising that she knew little about the Cavalry, let alone ordinary Awakeners. Her circumstances were indeed dire.

But that was about to end. Now that he had found her, Yuder had no intention of leaving her in this state. It would be a waste of talent.

‘Her endurance suggests a strong will. If she gets out, she could achieve tremendous growth.’

Yuder highly esteemed Reneve's abilities. Even with her current power, she could be of help to those who had committed crimes or rejected their own abilities.

‘If she advances further... All awakeners struggling with control would seek her help. She could calm rampages far quicker than I did earlier.’

Like all powers, hers had weaknesses. As common to those with mental or emotional abilities, her physical form was fragile, and she remained ignorant of her own potential.

However, as her power grew, her weaknesses would diminish, and she would rise to be a figure feared by many Awakeners, even without a weapon. Earning money would be just a small added bonus.

Suppressing the powers of Awakeners was no small feat, let alone those as powerful as Yuder and Kishiar. She might not yet grasp the significance of her achievement.

Having made his decision, Yuder spoke up.

"Alright, Reneve. We will help you leave this place. We'll also check on your friend's wellbeing. And I believe you could be of great help to us. What do you think?"

"...What do you mean?"

"I suggest we join forces to take down the Nukijo gang."

Yuder needed allies to increase the chances of success and avoid repeating past tragedies. Reneve, as much as Elpkins, was the right person for this.

Reneve was silent for a moment at the straightforward proposal. Then, unexpectedly, she slapped her own cheek.

Caught off guard, Yuder grabbed her hand as a dry voice emerged from beneath her disheveled hair, half-covering her reddened, swollen cheek.

"It's strange. It's all too good to be true."

"..."

"If this is another dream, I might really bash my head against the wall this time. After all, an organization for Awakeners offering to help me, to find Cyril and avenge my enemies..."

"There's no need to slap yourself for that."

"Then what should I do to believe this is real?"

Reneve was unaware of what a Cavalry was, so even showing him the emblem of the Cavalry would be futile. Demonstrating the power of an Awakener might serve as evidence of being one, yet in the current situation, it seemed unlikely to be of clear help.

Yuder paused briefly before turning to meet Kishiar's gaze. Unbeknownst to him, his look was more a plea for help.

Kishiar's eyes softened and curved into a smile.

"Then, shall I show you undeniable proof that this is not a dream?"

Before anyone could question if such a thing existed, the man twisted a magic tool on his hand used for altering facial appearance. The magic overlaying his face dissipated, transforming his brown hair to golden blonde and his ordinary-looking eyes to a striking red hue.

"Ah...."

With his handsome face now honestly revealed, Kishiar looked blankly at Reneve and spoke in his original, elegant manner.

"Now, isn't this a face too extraordinary to appear in a mere dream?"

"...Indeed, it is."

Kishiar's genuine appearance, though an absurd method, proved incredibly effective once again.

Reneve immediately accepted the truth that this was not a dream, but reality.

"I've heard that the nobles of the Orr Empire have golden hair and striking eyes. Someone of your stature wouldn't come all this way to lie to someone like me. Fine. Whether you decide to kill or spare me, I'll be satisfied as long as I can leave here and check on Cyril's well-being. If there's anything I can do, just tell me. I'll try."

Reneve, having been here a long time without ever venturing outside, knew less about the structure and information of this place than even Elpkins. Yet, her mere existence could be of the utmost help to their plan.

Yuder conveyed to her what he hoped she would do. As they leaped back towards the ceiling hole they had come through, Reneve stared blankly and spoke.

"It's amazing. I've been here so long and never knew one could open that and move around. Even if I had known, with my abilities, I wouldn't have been able to climb up to such a high place."

"There's no need to say such obvious things. Then, as promised, let's meet again tomorrow, at the appointed time."

"...Yes, tomorrow."

Reneve murmured the unfamiliar word as if reciting it.

Afterwards, Yuder and Kishiar went on to open all the ceiling blocks in the remaining rooms, checking the locations and identities of those trapped. There were about thirty in total, most bound like animals by the neck and feet. Fortunately, none were as severely injured as Elpkins.

'Apart from Reneve, there are no others from the West. Most came here lured by tales of the arena, or interested in joining the Cavalry. It was wise to cut off the human trafficking attempts in Tainu.'

The longest any of them had been there was barely a month. This suggested that many people were quickly expended and perished.

That Elpkins and Reneve had survived this long in such a place was nothing short of miraculous.

The Awakeners were extremely cooperative with Yuder's request. As soon as they revealed their identities as the Cavalry upon leaping down from the ceiling, most shed tears of gratitude and murmured prayers of thanks. Their faces, soaked in relief at the prospect of escaping this hellish place and joy at the possibility of revenge tomorrow, shone with a similar ecstasy to that of Elpkins.

Yuder, having memorized all the information gleaned from those he had rescued, returned to his own room. Positioned directly under a ceiling block that remained open for quick access, he and Kishiar engaged in a discussion about their plans for the following day.

"The Awakeners have said that we will probably start the first fight tomorrow. We can start our work then."

"That seems to be the best way to minimize casualties."

In this arena of the Awakeners, a cruel tradition dictated that newcomers open the first door of combat. It was a brutal strategy, designed to entertain the spectators with the sight of novices' naive attempts turning into a spectacle of shock and horror.

Therefore, according to this rule, either Yuder or Kishiar would be the first to participate in tomorrow's combat.

'Of course, I plan to be the first to go out,' Yuder thought to himself.

"What about the message you sent before entering this place?"

"The ring artifact briefly responded earlier. It seems Nathan has checked it properly."

Right before entering the Black Orca Tavern, they had sent a message to the Cavalry. The message, from Kishiar, intended for Nathan Zuckerman and the Cavalry, was to be confirmed and then responded to using a one-time use magic tool belonging to the Peletta Knights, which Nathan possessed. Fortunately, it seemed that they had promptly and properly received the message.

'Everyone will be busy tonight,' Yuder mused.

The crux of tomorrow's plan involved coordinated efforts both inside and outside the illegal betting arena. Inside, Yuder and Kishiar, along with other detained Awakeners, would work in tandem with the Cavalry and their external allies outside, squeezing their enemies like a ham sandwiched in bread.

'To take them all down at once, this is indeed the best way. I'm looking forward to it.'

All that was left was to wait for that moment tomorrow.

Before leaping back to his room, Yuder turned his head towards Kishiar.

The man was smiling at him from the same spot, seemingly no different from usual. However, Yuder felt that he might be experiencing a mix of worry and regret.

"Is there something you're regretting?" Yuder inquired.

"Caught me, huh? Somehow, after coming all this way together, the thought of returning alone to a cramped room feels a bit lonely," Kishiar admitted.

Yuder silently gazed downward.

Their current room, akin to a tiny prison cell with nothing but a bed made of old straw wrapped in cloth, seemed slightly better compared to the shack they had previously shared.

"Would you like to come down with me then?" Yuder offered.

"That would be nice," Kishiar quickly agreed.

'Considering the start of tomorrow's plan, this should be fine,' Yuder thought.

Together, they descended to Yuder's room. While sitting side by side on the narrow straw bed, Kishiar chuckled repeatedly.

"You've exerted a lot of unexpected effort today. Now, don't do anything else and just rest," Kishiar said.

"Alright."

"You have to promise."

"Would I ever break a promise to you?"

Kishiar pulled Yuder close, resting his head on his shoulder. Despite the cramped room, it felt more than sufficient for them.

Yuder exhaled deeply and closed his eyes for a moment, preparing for the day ahead.

The next day, the sound of Nukijo's gang unlocking the door echoed through the space.

As Yuder slowly opened his eyelids, he met Kishiar's already open gaze. Kishiar placed a finger over his lips and smiled mischievously, signaling 'shush.'

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The next day, the sound of Nukijo's gang unlocking the door echoed through the space.

As Yuder slowly opened his eyelids, he met Kishiar's already open gaze. Kishiar placed a finger over his lips and smiled mischievously, signaling 'shush.'

The gang's coarse laughter filled the air as they grumbled about the warped door, cursing the fate of a fallen comrade who had caused them such trouble. They speculated about the new arrivals, assuming one to be an Omega, and talked about conducting a thorough examination before sending them out, their words dripping with crude intentions.

As the door finally swung open, two of Nukijo's men peered in, snickering. "Let's see, they said he took the drug, but he couldn't have died already... What? What's this?!"

Inside, they were met with a shocking sight. Not only was the black-haired Awakener, the second guest, sprawled out as if dead, but the first guest, who should have been securely locked in the adjacent room, lay boldly beside him. The gang members nearly fainted in astonishment.

"How did this happen? Why are you two together?"

"Who knows? I just woke up here," the first guest replied nonchalantly, yawning. He then criticized the poor conditions of Nukijo's lodging, mocking its unsuitability for a long stay.

While the gang members were still processing how the first guest had ended up there, the second guest, who had risen leisurely, swiftly struck them under their jaws.

Thud.

A bone-shaking sound echoed as the two men flipped their eyes and collapsed together.

Kishiar, who had been watching quietly, whistled softly and clapped in amusement. "Impressive. They might have to give up on chewing bread with those jaws."

"Shall we go?" Yuder suggested after rifling through the fallen men's belongings and seizing a bunch of keys. After ensuring the coast was clear, he exchanged a glance with Kishiar, who had elegantly stepped over the unconscious men to join him.

"Is your hand okay?" Kishiar asked, looking down at Yuder's hand.

"It's fine," Yuder reassured. The Nukijo gang, blinded by greed, had overlooked the most crucial item: Yuder's enchanted gloves. Relying solely on the power of drugs and Reneve's abilities, they had carelessly left the gloves, which protected his hands with magic power. Those punches were easier than splitting a piece of wood with his bare hand.

Swiftly, they unlocked the surrounding doors. The first they opened was naturally the one confining Elpkins.

"Ah..."

"I promised I'd come. Stretch out your hands for me to unbind the chains."

"You really came..."

Elpkins extended his bound hands and feet, his eyes brimming with tears. He gazed at the heavy chains falling to the ground before following Yuder with a fierce and determined look.

"How do you feel?"

"Thanks to your treatment yesterday, I'm feeling much better. My wings have reattached... I think I'll have no trouble completing the task you assigned me!"

Elpkins vigorously fluttered his wings, sending feathers flying. His feathers, restored to their original color, were large and strong enough to be used as daggers.

"Good, good. Once everyone else is freed, you know what to do next."

"Yes!"

Shortly after, most of the Awakeners were released. While they moved their newly freed limbs with a mix of tension and joy, Yuder and Kishiar headed toward the last room near the central staircase.

The key, inserted into a lock that seemed never to have been opened before, turned with force, unlocking the heavy door to reveal Reneve inside.

Reneve gazed unwaveringly at Yuder standing beyond the door, without even blinking. Yuder extended his hand towards her.

"Retract your power, and come out now."

It was as if she awoke from a dream. Reneve shuddered slightly. She slowly moved her weakened body, grasping the edge of the bed to take one step at a time, approaching the doorway.

The thin line dividing the inside and outside of the door.

After staring at it for a long time, Reneve finally bit her lip and stepped over the line, coming outside.

A deep breath, filled with numerous emotions, escaped her lips. She murmured, holding back tears.

"I've realized it now. Not using my powers feels like this. It's incredibly, comfortable."

Reneve was barefoot under her long, flowing skirt. Yuder frowned, guessing why the Nukijo gang had provided her with everything else but shoes.

'They meant to say, don't even think about escaping.'

"Wait here a moment."

Yuder returned to his room and took a pair of shoes from one of the unconscious men. They were slightly large for Reneve, but not too big to wear.

As she put on the shoes, Reneve finally smiled genuinely.

"Thank you."

"No need for thanks. But, I searched for your friend among the other Awakeners captured here yesterday, and couldn't find your friend. They might be somewhere else, so I'll keep looking."

"Ah..."

Reneve relaxed her clenched fist.

"I see. That's alright... I thought as much. If my friend had been here, they wouldn't have hidden my friend's face from me until the end. Just knowing that is enough for me. I'm truly grateful you searched for and informed me about Cyril. I may not be able to repay this debt even in death, but I will never forget it."

Yuder hadn't done anything deserving such grand words. He shook his head briefly and led her to where the others were gathered.

Reneve, with her unusual attire, drew many glances, but the Awakeners said nothing. Seeing her emaciated form, barely alive, it was clear that she too was a victim of this brutal arena.

"Now, everyone is out as planned."

Kishiar surveyed everyone with a deliberately casual tone, addressing them with a voice lighter than usual. His face had been transformed, but his speech and mannerisms were no longer that of the ordinary mercenary he had adopted earlier; he was now back to his usual self.

"Now, we have the freedom to use our powers here as we please. This means you can use your abilities freely when necessary. The means Nukijo used to suppress the powers of those trapped here are now gone."

As he spoke, Kishiar turned to Reneve, flashing her a sly smile, which she returned awkwardly.

"However, as you informed us yesterday, there are still many difficulties inside the arena that could prevent our escape. Therefore, the two of us will head up first. You should move as instructed yesterday, but do not act alone and wait at the agreed-upon location until you receive a signal."

"Ah, yes, yes!"

The Awakeners responded naturally to his commanding tone, their expressions bewildered. Observing their awkward reactions, reminiscent of the first members of the Cavalry, Kishiar's lips curved up gently.

"Our goal is to escape from here without leaving anyone behind. Remember, those standing beside you, though forced to fight against each other until yesterday, are now survivors and comrades from the same peril. Our enemy lies above us."

With these final words, he quietly raised a finger above his head.

Above them. That was where the arena lay, where countless Awakeners had perished.

The eyes of the Awakeners blazed red. They responded with firm faces, their voices strong.

"Understood!"

"We got it!"

Yuder watched from a step behind, recalling the day Kishiar had first greeted the members of the Cavalry.

Though much had changed since then, some things remained the same.

A quiet yet distinct smile curved the corners of Yuder's lips as he looked upward.

The two then leaped upwards towards their destination.

What followed was not difficult. They boldly ascended to the second floor, easily overpowering most of those they encountered. Most were caught off guard, assuming they were fellow members of the Nukijo gang, and for those who recognized their faces, it still posed no challenge.

"Huh? What are the Awakeners doing here instead of preparing for the fight?"

The bewildered barrel manager, who had taken the two guests to Nukijo the night before, turned to them.

"We were told to come this way."

Yuder responded curtly, a question dawning on the man's face.

"Who told you?"

"My instinct."

"What?... Ugh!"

The manager was promptly taken down by an object thrust into his back.

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The manager was promptly taken down by an object thrust into his back. It was Kishiar who had effortlessly drawn the old, heavy candlestick that had viciously struck the back of the manager's head, without even touching it.

Yuder, paying no attention to the groaning manager rolling on the floor, opened his mouth.

"Although the information provided by Elpkins and others was useful, this place is indeed structurally complex."

"Well, at least we have someone with a good sense for finding the right people, don't we? That's all that matters."

Their current task was simple. Before the fight began in earnest, they were to identify and individually defeat the few gangs roaming around for welcoming guests or patrolling.

The Nukijo gang, though numerous, were not always present in the fighting arena. Especially now, during the 'waiting time' when participants were supposed to come up, change into the day's designated attire, and select their weapons, there were fewer people around.

Elpkins, who had fought in the arena ten times, explained the Nukijo gang's security policy for guarding the arena and suppressing the participants.

"On the day of the fight, you're blindfolded and taken to the second basement, which leads to the waiting room behind the stage. The only thing you encounter on your way there are narrow, complicated storerooms, and Nukijo's minions periodically patrolling. All these men are non-Awakeners, but... knocking them down is useless. There's no way to go upstairs from behind the stage."

To escape, one must go upstairs. However, the way up was in front of the stage, which meant crossing the spectator stands.

According to Elpkins, 'all sorts of terrifying things' existed between the stage and the spectator seats.

"I've seen it a few times. People who suddenly try to flee the stage during a fight. When an escapee appears, a magic wall around the stage blocks them first. Even if they're lucky enough to break through, arrows rain down from all directions, and numerous creatures guarding in front of the spectator seats charge at them."

Most couldn't even withstand the arrows and ended up horribly dying like porcupines riddled with arrows. This was due to the large crossbows equipped with formidable arrows, installed at the very top of the spectator stands.

But what would happen if someone managed to withstand all that and still tried to escape?

Elpkins knew the answer.

"I saw it happen just once. A really strong person. He nearly escaped by taking a hostage among the esteemed guests, but... He suddenly died."

"Suddenly died?"

"Exactly. As if killed by something invisible."

Visible attacks could be countered, but invisible ones, unknown and therefore more frightening. Elpkins, naively unfamiliar with magic, believed it to be a tremendous magic power, but Yuder thought otherwise.

‘There's only one guess. An awakener with excellent stealth skills hidden among the guards.’

Kishiar also asserted that it was exceedingly difficult to execute such an attack and murder with the current magic powers.

"Setting up a protective magic circle around the fighting stage is easy. But for today's mages to acquire a stealth magic tool made by mages centuries ago and use it to perfectly conceal and attack... that's nearly impossible."

In this manner, the number of Awakeners hidden in stealth guarding the front of the stage remained unknown. This was mainly because most, like Elpkins, perished before they could discern this much.

Therefore, Yuder and Kishiar decided to first clear the area behind the stage, then wait until enough guests had arrived to execute a pincer movement both inside and outside the arena.

The backstage, intricately narrow and complex, was designed to hinder the escape of the fighting participants. Conversely, this meant it was also an ideal structure for them to isolate and defeat their opponents one by one.

"It's actually a blessing in disguise that no one notices even when their comrades disappear one by one."

The Nukijo gang, likely relaxing upstairs at that moment, couldn't even begin to imagine what was unfolding beneath their feet.

"Uh... Ugh..."

Just then, the manager, who had been unconscious for a while, let out a groan and lifted his head. Feeling the blood flowing from the back of his head, he screamed in terror.

"Ugh... Aaaaah! These bastards... trying to escape...! Hey...! Is anyone there? Help me!"

But no matter how loudly he cried, no one came. The manager's voice gradually faded and finally silenced, realizing the strangeness of his colleagues' absence.

Yuder, who had been quietly observing, finally spoke.

"I was curious how long you'd call out, but you have even less stamina than Elkins."

The manager, not knowing who that name belonged to, was too frightened to ask by the dark, emotionless eyes that coldly observed him.

Those eyes, more impassive than if they were staring at a ball, filled him with utter terror. They looked down at the bleeding man without pity or thrill of violence, just as one would look at a mere task to be done.

"Did-did I introduce you to the boss yesterday and that's why you're doing this? I had no choice! It wasn't me who decided to lock you down there, it was the boss's orders and I didn't do anything...!"

"..."

"Really, I didn't do anything..."

After desperately trying to justify himself for a while, the manager once again fell silent under Yuder's gaze.

"Is that it? Go on, say more."

"Uh... Ugh..."

He instinctively realized that whatever he said would not get through to the men before him. They were merely curious to see how long he would keep screaming, nothing more, nothing less.

Yesterday, he thought they were just simple, gullible fools, but now, looking up from his prone position, their faces seemed as emotionless as death itself.

Giving up on feigning pity, the manager screamed in defiance.

"Damn... You filthy homosexuals, catamite! I don't know where you came from, but there's no need to bother hiding from me! The boss will catch and kill you!"

"Is that so?"

And then, the reaper finally passed his judgment on the manager.

"Whether there's anything to come out of dealing you, we'll just have to see. It's fortunate that you still have some energy left. I had many questions to ask."

Yuder, genuinely pleased, grabbed the manager by the scruff of his neck as he tried to spew more insults. The manager flailed in pain as Yuder's hand wrapped around him like the wind.

"Ugh... Aaaaah, Aaaaah! Help me!"

"Sure. The Awakeners you tricked and dragged here probably said the same."

Behind Yuder, who stood with his fists clenched, the water and fire, air and earth simultaneously shimmered in an eerie dance. Witnessing this spectacle, the manager's face turned ashen, as if he was on the verge of fainting.

Soon, a scream echoed through the empty warehouse, unheard by anyone else.

"Feels refreshing to have used my body after a while," Yuder mused.

He cracked his neck and looked down at the sprawled manager. In the hellish predicament of facing punishment whether he responded or not, the manager quickly abandoned all loyalty and, begging for his life, readily spilled all the information he knew.

"Where is Nukijo now?"

"Up... upstairs..."

"Do you know when he comes down to the fighting arena?"

"When the first fight starts, he will come down... It's always been that way."

As is often the case with those from the backstreets, the Nukijo gang had a very weak sense of solidarity and lacked anything resembling loyalty.

Thanks to the manager, Yuder learned that Nukijo had been vigorously promoting their 'first fight' scheduled for today, and as a result, numerous 'esteemed guests' were expected to visit overnight. Everything was going as he had hoped.

'Nukijo hasn't noticed the movements of the Cavalry yet. Seems like everyone on that side is doing well.'

"I... I've told you everything now... Please, let me live... That's all I know..."

"Who said anything about killing you? I have one more question, so answer it correctly."

The final question was about the Awakeners with stealth abilities guarding the arena.

"There are Awakeners among those guarding this place, right? Who are they?"

Yuder deliberately asked as if he already knew the fact, rather than merely speculating. The bewildered manager, his mind not functioning properly, took the bait as Yuder had anticipated.

"I don't know much about that... Even the boss doesn't tell me..."

'So, it was a shot in the dark, but it turns out I was right.'

As Yuder quietly scraped his foot against the ground, the manager screamed and responded.

"I've never seen them, I really don't know! How can I know who they are when they have the ability to become invisible!"

'The ability to make themselves invisible, huh?'

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"The ability to make himself invisible, huh?" pondered Yuder, his eyes narrowing. As he gazed towards Kishiar, the latter met his gaze with a solemn expression.

There were various types of stealth abilities. Most commonly, they involved remaining motionless in shadows or amidst the terrain, briefly concealing one's form. The kind that allowed movement while hidden was exceedingly rare. Even rarer were those abilities that enabled attacking while unseen, requiring extensive training to be practically useful in combat.

Among these were Nahan's illusion abilities, which blurred the observer's perception, and Gakane's skill to hide within his shadow clones.

"A capability to become completely invisible and launch unseen attacks, you say," Yuder mused. "That must be a form of stealth. A rare ability indeed."

An adept practitioner of stealth could erase not only their presence but also anything they touched, including weapons, clothing, and even their presence. This made them capable of deadly attacks with minimal effort, standing as the pinnacle of stealth abilities.

'I hadn't thought such a talent existed at this time yet... but it appears I was mistaken.'

The manager admitted to knowing only of the ability, with no knowledge of the wielder's name or appearance. Prodded for more information, he finally recalled a crucial detail amid tears and sobs.

"Nobody knows when and where that Awakener appears, only emerging when needed... Rumors suggested he might even be among us. I, too, believe it likely, given the boss' nature..."

"Are you saying this Awakener works among you, only revealing his power in dire situations?" Yuder inquired.

"Yes, exactly," the manager affirmed, tearfully insisting his limited encounters with the Awakener were genuine, despite his broken speech.

Yuder and Kishiar exchanged glances once more.

'There's a possibility... I can't recognize every Awakener on sight. If he blended in with the Nukijo gang without using his powers, it's understandable I wouldn't know,' Yuder thought.

Until now, those they had encountered and defeated were all non-Awakeners.

According to Elpkins, the stealthy Awakener had appeared among the audience, particularly near the esteemed guests. This suggested he was assigned to protect important spectators and only acted when necessary.

'Such an individual is most effective as a hidden asset rather than an overt force. It makes managing the fighting arena easier and keeps the subordinates alert. They've thought this through,' Yuder noted.

Yet, there was still a way to deduce his identity.

Breaking his silence, Yuder spoke again. "Do you know when this Awakener first appeared? If not, when did you first see him?"

"It was after this underground second-floor arena was completed. The first time an escape attempt was made, that's when I saw him. That much is certain."

"Are the guards in the audience always the same people during these fights?"

"Indeed? Ah... Yes. We occasionally rotate the guards, but the boss prefers using proven ones in such places..." the manager hesitantly began.

"No need to share his opinions," Yuder interjected sharply, stepping firmly on the manager's hand. As the hand seemed to sink into the ground, the manager screamed and writhed in agony. Despite his struggles, the ground engulfed his hand like a swamp, drawing more of him in.

"Tell me everything you know about those guarding the VIP seats."

"I'll tell you, just please, release my hand!"

"I believe I said answers first."

"Aah!"

Only after a harsh retribution for his stupidity did the manager stammer out a coherent response.

"The guests in the VIP seats are quite particular about faces... So, the same few always get assigned... Today, it was definitely Regina, Jagg, Vic, Kess, Persaila, and...!"

There were about 100 seats in the VIP section. The manager mentioned approximately ten guards.

"Were all the ones you named working there since the second floor was first established?"

"Not all of them... Some have been there since the beginning, others were added a few months ago..."

The manager spewed out everything he could remember about the guards in the VIP section. At this point, he couldn't even think why he was being questioned so; all he desired was to escape the clutches of this devilish man.

Though the information was somewhat disorganized, Yuder wasn't particularly concerned. He had someone by his side capable of making sense of even such scattered details.

"It seems we've extracted everything of use."

"So, now that I've told you everything, can you please... release my hand?"

"Very well. I'll let you go."

Hope flickered in the manager's eyes at Yuder's cool agreement. However, the next moment brought a swift kick to his face.

"Never said I'd let you go while you were conscious."

Leaving the now unconscious manager behind, Yuder turned to Kishiar. The latter, who had been watching Yuder extract information with a smile, spoke up.

"If the stealthy one is guarding the VIP seats, then he must be among those who joined when this second floor was established. According to the manager, there are three such individuals. We'll soon find out which one is the Awakener."

"The Awakener might possess more than mere stealth abilities, perhaps even true invisibility. Be cautious if it comes to a fight."

Yuder then left the warehouse, using the information extracted from the manager to navigate effortlessly to a small armory near the waiting rooms. This place housed weapons loaned to participants without their own.

Among these, Yuder's sword lay abandoned.

'The manager mentioned that Nukijo only cared for the jewels inlaid in the weapons, neglecting the swords themselves. Fortunately, I retrieved it before they could discard it.'

Had the Nukijo gang had any discernment, they would have realized that the most valuable part of this sword wasn't the red gem but the sheath itself. Plain and unadorned, the sheath was crafted from materials formidable enough to be used as a weapon in its own right.

Yuder, having retrieved his sword, did not initially worry about its potential loss, but once it was secured at his waist, a sense of reassurance washed over him.

'I shall make them pay dearly for daring to take my sword,' he vowed silently.

The weapon storage was close to the fighting stage. The distant clamor of voices suggested the audience was steadily filling the seats.

It would likely take some time before they discovered what had transpired behind the stage.

"So, what's next... the waiting room?" Kishiar, who had helped Yuder dust off his sword, asked with a sly smile.

"Yes."

"I suppose I should pick a weapon for myself as well."

Kishiar surveyed the area and picked up an old, rusty sword from the ground. It was so corroded and notched it could have been mistaken for a club, but in his hands, it might as well have been the finest weapon, unbreakable by anyone in the world.

"Will that suffice?" Yuder inquired.

"Yes, this weight is just fine. It's perfect for what I have in mind."

Swinging the sword lightly a few times, it cut through the air with a fearsome sound, quickly fading away. They then headed towards the waiting room, which remained oblivious to the events that had unfolded.

Meanwhile, Nukijo was receiving an unusual report from a subordinate.

"What? The Southern Army of the Empire has entered Charloin? What are you talking about? Their main force is in Lakota, not Charloin."

Chapter 668

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"What? The Southern Army of the Empire has entered Charloin? What are you talking about? Their main force is in Lakota, not Charloin."

"That's what I'm saying. For some reason, they entered without any prior notice. The Charloin garrison reported it. So I came to inform you right away, boss."

"As long as the Lord of Charloin holds his ground, they shouldn't have been able to just enter like that... This is troubling, Urachil. The unknown cause is concerning. And it had to happen today of all days, when we have a big fighting event with many guests..."

The revered Swordmaster, General Gino Bordelli, led the main base of the Orr Empire's Southern Army, located far from Charloin in Lakota. There were Empire troops stationed in Charloin as well, but they generally got along well with the Nukijo gang. They had been exchanging favors through backdoor deals for years, so there was no worry about enforcement or punishment.

However, the Empire troops that suddenly entered Charloin today were from the main base in Lakota. They were strangers to the Nukijo gang and could pose a threat if things went wrong, stirring Nukijo's anxiety and caution.

In fact, Gino Bordelli, known for his integrity, had long wanted to crack down on the crime syndicates in Charloin. But the Lord of Charloin, deeply in love with money and equally disdainful of Bordelli, had been firmly resisting, preventing any such misfortune from happening so far.

'They wouldn't have come for small fries like us... But better safe than sorry.'

Today was a special day with important guests. Keeping their identity secret, ensuring their safety, and ensuring they had a good time was crucial for Nukijo.

First, he needed to find out why the main Southern Army unit had come here.

Nukijo frowned, deep in thought. He preferred to offer praise to his underlings rather than resort to violence.

"Good job coming to inform me right away. Who exactly told you this news? Til? Or maybe Bains?"

"It was Mehill. From the garrison's entry and exit security team."

"Ah, that guy. Right. So he heard the news early because of the security team. Tell the boys to give him 'sweets and alcohol' as a token of gratitude. And ask him for more details when they deliver it."

"Understood."

Nukijo's men quickly moved, taking money hidden in cigarette packs and expensive alcohol, heading to the Charloin garrison's security team. Soon, new information reached Nukijo's ears.

"Boss. I've found out the identity of the Southern Army unit that arrived today."

"Let's hear it."

"They're a newly formed unit called the Awakeners or something."

"What? Awakeners?"

"Yeah. It's a temporary unit, made up only of soldiers who have 'awakened'. It hasn't been officially announced yet, but it seems they were sent for a light visit to the Cavalry's branch. Since General Bordelli is a supporter of the Emperor, the Lord of Charloin permitted their entry."

"I see..."

"They went straight to the Cavalry's branch upon arrival. The unit is small, not even thirty men, and the guy leading them is a young lad, who was just a soldier until recently. Should we send someone to investigate more?"

"No, that's enough."

Nukijo finally let his guard down. Even with just this much information, it was clear that the issue had nothing to do with them, so he felt no need to investigate further.

However, had he chosen to delve a bit deeper, he would have heard the astonishing news that the once noisy front of the Cavalry Southern Branch building had become eerily quiet since that day.

Also, there were reports of the Southern Army Special Forces Unit, who visited the Cavalry 'on a courtesy call,' exchanging serious greetings with the Cavalry members before entering as if they were about to start 'work'.

The Cavalry Southern Branch was enveloped in a heavy and silent atmosphere.

Among those in Cavalry uniforms, there were some in slightly unfamiliar uniforms. These were members of the Imperial Southern Army Special Forces Unit, who had rushed to their aid upon request. The team leader was a young man with sky-like hair and black eyes, exuding a pleasant demeanor.

"Hello, Cavalry members. I am Sunz, Commander of the 23rd Special Forces Unit 'Awakener Brigade' of the Imperial Southern Army. This is Deputy Commander Emon. Ideally, we would take our time over a meal and discuss how to assist you in your life down south, but circumstances make that difficult."

As Sunz introduced himself with a gift in hand, Kurga of the Cavalry extended his hand for a handshake. Kurga's bear-like stature made the handshake appear as a small human making contact with a giant bear.

"It's not important. Just the fact that the Southern Army sent you so promptly upon receiving the Commander's message is enough for us."

"Hahaha. Truly, you are members of the Cavalry."

"I read about you in a letter from the Commander. It mentioned you've previously worked with us on a mission."

"Yes, that's right. I can't divulge the details of the mission, but it was a great experience. It was there I first met a remarkable Cavalry friend who has greatly advised Emon and me."

"Who might that be?"

At Kurga's curious inquiry, Sunz turned his gaze towards Emon standing beside him. Both men smiled simultaneously, recalling old times.

"It's Yuder Aile. Ah, he has received a title now, so should I address him as Baron Aile?"

"Ah... Yuder wouldn't mind that. He always told us to call him as we always have."

"Just like Yuder. The last time I saw him was at the Harvest Festival a few months ago when we were summoned to the capital. I'm very happy to think that I will be able to see him soon and congratulate him in person."

At the mention of Yuder being an old friend who had once helped Sunz and Emon, the faces of all the Cavalry members softened. The same was true for the faces of the Awakener Brigade soldiers standing behind Sunz and Emon.

With a good first impression established, the conversation continued smoothly.

"The Commander is currently on a secret reconnaissance mission with Yuder, infiltrating an illegal betting fight club. It's a dangerous place, and he believes it's best to eradicate it immediately."

"The illegal betting fight club has been a thorn in the south's side for years. It's heartbreaking that it's now targeting Awakeners and expanding its scale to be more provocative."

"Don't worry. They made a grave mistake by messing with the Awakeners and the Cavalry."

"We will certainly help as well! But even if we manage to defeat those scoundrels today, dealing with the aftermath could be more challenging, especially with the nobles and the stationed army, including the Lord of Shaloin, backing them up. How does the Cavalry intend to handle this aspect?" Sunz asked, his face etched with concern.

"It is well-known that our General Gino and the local Lord do not get along. Everyone is more worried about the aftermath than the actual fight," Sunz added.

"You need not worry about that either," replied Kurga, his expression impassive.

"The Commander has already instructed us on every aspect of that matter. To elaborate a bit more... the solution to such issues was almost completely resolved as soon as Yuder arrived yesterday."

"Really?"

"What does that mean...?"

Sunz and Emon blinked in confusion, unable to fathom the meaning of his words.

"It's too lengthy to explain now, but you'll understand in due time. Just know that you don't need to worry about that part. Trust in our Commander and Yuder, and when the signal is given, just do as you please."

Sunz smiled awkwardly, wondering if it was really alright to be so unconcerned. He looked around at the faces of the Cavalry members and, seeing their unworried eyes, he inwardly admired their confidence and faith.

'Everyone's morale and belief are truly remarkable... How long will it take for our unit to reach this level? We still have a long way to go.'

"Now, it seems it's about time. Shall we get going?" Sunz proposed.

"Oh, yes."

"When you arrive there, you will also meet the Peletta Knights, waiting in position. You will be introduced to Nathan Zuckerman, the Adjutant of the Commander. I'll make sure you get a chance to greet him."

"The Peletta Knights are here too? That's impressive."

During the hasty journey in response to the sudden request for assistance from the Cavalry yesterday, Sunz's heart had been pounding. But now, it felt like it might burst out of his chest.

He was about to meet Yuder Aile again and proudly show him his promotion, this time as a supporter of the Cavalry. Sunz rose eagerly from his seat and, after changing his attire under their guidance, he joined the Cavalry members and quickly stepped outside.

Something felt amiss.

Not long ago, Jack, a boy who had escaped from the Star of Nagran's southern stronghold, now a successful candidate in the first round test of the Cavalry's second recruitment, looked at the scenes unfolding before his eyes and thought to himself.

'It seems like things are going well, but why does something feel off?'

To the boy, yesterday seemed like a day where all hardships were washed away, leaving only success.

He had successfully escaped from the base with his older brothers and sisters who were with him from the west, arriving at Charloin without anyone getting hurt, and confidently submitted his application to the Cavalry. He was very nervous just before entering the branch building, but the anxiety disappeared like washed away after receiving the first round acceptance.

Later, returning to the lodging, the owner suddenly said, "With many visitors to the city, we are running out of space. Either pay more, or you'll have to leave," which did strain his finances, but luckily, he found a good solution.

In this bustling southern metropolis, there existed a betting arena where anyone could earn money by winning fights.

With no difficult rules to follow and just winning to earn money! For them, who had survived the harsh western jungles and even faced monsters, this seemed all too easy.

'We owe a lot to Dagon and the others for bringing us this far. It's our turn to repay them! I just need enough money to stay until the final pass of the second test. A few fights should do it. It won't take long, and nobody will notice.'

Jack went to the place with several other Awakeners of similar age. Upon learning they were Awakeners, the arena suggested they participate in an exclusive fight for Awakeners. Apparently, it was much riskier for non-Awakeners to fight against Awakeners, hence the separate arena, and the prize money for winning was incomparably higher there.

'This should be enough with just one fight!'

The young, naive Awakener, not yet tainted by the world, excitedly agreed to participate and signed the contract. The manager, Regina, who helped them with the contract, seemed somewhat distrustful of their ability, asking several times, "Can you really fight?"

It was fine. Once they saw them fight, they would realize how needless their worries were.

'So, it was good to come here today under the pretext of looking around the lodging...'

Regina, whom they met yesterday, had taken the first-time participants to the underground waiting room for fighters. Seeing their faces, she made a slightly complex expression and said, 'Well, now that you're here, you have to figure out the rest,' and then she took the lead.

From that moment, Jack felt a subtle sense of strangeness.

Upon arriving in the waiting room, they received slightly embarrassing clothing, like something out of an old tale. They were told to wear it because today's fight was set in ancient times. The costume, revealing the chest, belly, and legs, seemed odd, but they wore it, thinking it was just for once.

While they struggled with the clothes they had never worn before, Regina was also very busy moving around.

"It should be about time for them to come up. Why haven't they yet? Something's odd..."

Looking at the inner door of the waiting room, Regina kept saying something felt strange. Jack approached her and asked quietly.

"What feels strange to you?"

Regina suddenly turned around, startled. For a moment, her figure seemed to blur and distort before becoming clear again, leaving Jack blinking in confusion.

What was that? But before he could voice his question, she warned him with an uncharacteristically cold face.

"Sorry, but it's a very busy time right now. Could you refrain from approaching without notice? You might startle someone enough to get stabbed to death in a place like this."

"Ah, yes... I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. The problem lies with the participants who haven't arrived yet."

"Ah... So we weren't the last ones?"

"Of course not. If there was a problem, we would have been notified. But I can't go beyond this point..."

Regina, with her hand on her forehead, murmured something, her eyes darkening for a moment. Jack felt a chilling sensation, but she soon regained her composure.

"Anyway, this is not something first-time participants like you should worry about."

Jack acknowledged her statement, but internally, he still felt something was off.

What was this feeling? His friends and he were here in this grand and magnificent place for just one fight to earn some money and leave. But everything, from the attitude of Regina, the manager, to the atmosphere of this space, felt strangely eerie.

He was about to express his uneasy feeling to his friends when the door to the waiting room opened.

Several people entered all at once, their experienced aura indicating they had spent a lot of time in a place like this. The eyes of the first-time participants widened in awe.

'Wow... Are we supposed to fight against these people?'

Suddenly, the monsters they faced in the great wilderness seemed trivial. While Jack and his friends were feeling intimidated, Regina approached them. It seemed these were the 'yet-to-arrive participants' she mentioned.

She looked around the back of the participants as if searching for someone, then sighed in frustration.

"Did they send up the participants and go off to drink again..."

Apparently, another manager who was supposed to escort them hadn't shown up, and that annoyed her. Regina counted the newcomers with a sharp gaze. They all looked extremely dark and exhausted, brimming with a killing intent.

Jack felt an indescribable chill as he observed them, all silent as if bound by a rule of absolute silence.

'...Why does this feel so wrong? Is this arena really okay?'

Suddenly, he felt a piercing gaze. Turning, he saw it came from a particularly grim figure among the silent Awakeners, wearing a dark hood, exuding an ominous presence.

'What... Why is he staring at me?'

It felt like a persistent, sharp gaze, as if he had caught something that shouldn't be there.

Jack, overwhelmed by the intense and frightening scrutiny, the likes of which he had never felt before, discreetly hid among the others. He sincerely hoped that this dark-hooded Awakener wouldn't be his opponent in the fight.

"Everyone's here now."

After counting all the participants, Regina clapped her hands to gather attention and began briefing them on several points. Her words, seemingly rehearsed and emotionless, appeared well-packaged on the surface but subtly implied, 'If you die here, the arena is not responsible.'

"Right next to this place is the weapons depot. Participants who need weapons can choose from there. Once the fight starts, those who are called can head out. There's no one to guide the proceedings; you'll figure it out once you go out. That concludes my role here."

Regina no longer smiled. Turning her back on the participants, she left without any formal farewell, her demeanor as cold and unceremonious as could be.

As if she would never see them again...

The waiting room, now left only with the participants, became as quiet as the depths of the ocean. Jack, rubbing his sweat-dampened palms on his trouser legs, seriously considered whether he could still withdraw from the fight.

'...But I can't. Dagon and the others have put in so much effort to bring us here...'

Jack reflected on how much he and the others owed to Dagon and their older companions. He also thought of their happy faces when they would return with the money earned here.

'My parents abandoned me, calling me a monster, but my brothers and sisters accepted me. I can't run away. How can I become a Cavalry member with the spirit of someone who runs away even here?'

Clenching his fists, he looked around and saw other Awakeners from the Star of Nagran nodding in agreement. They took deep breaths and wished each other good luck.

Suddenly, the sound of a large instrument burst from the concealed stage, accompanied by a noise like exploding fireworks. Enthusiastic cheers penetrated even the waiting room.

Startled, Jack quickly calmed his racing heart with a hand pressed to his chest.

'I just hope I'm not the first one up...'

"The first up is~!! A special guest that everyone here is eagerly awaiting~ The second gender! The second gender Awakener~!!!"

Exclamations of surprise, cheers, applause.

And then, Jack looked up in shock.

'Second gender Awakener? Who is that?'

The answer came quickly from a loud voice echoing from afar.

"Whether he's an Omega or an Alpha, you'll see with your own eyes! His name is, Yudrain!"

"..."

In the waiting room, cold as if in another world, one person let out a low, short breath. It sounded almost like a scoff. Turning his head, Jack realized that it was the same Awakener who had earlier stared at him for no apparent reason, and his shoulders tensed in alarm.

'That person...?'

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'That person...?'

During his stay at the Star of Nagran outpost, he had seen several second-gender Awakeners. Consequently, he knew well that those possessing second genders were not particularly special, whether they were Alpha or Omega Awakeners, and it was impossible to distinguish them just by appearance.

However, the Awakener now being called to step forward... He was a bit doubtful whether he truly had a second gender.

The atmosphere was so menacing, and the air so oppressively heavy, that it raised his suspicions.

A man standing beside the person called Yudrain was incredibly tall and had a vague expression. His arms crossed, he said,

"Oh, what a pity. I was hoping to be the first to go."

...Was this an open provocation? As cold sweat formed on Jack's back, Yudrain turned his head and replied,

"It wouldn't have mattered if I wasn't the first; I would have made myself the first anyway."

Good heavens. This was an escalation.

Fortunately, the tall man seemed not too upset by this, as he let out a low chuckle and then...

"Hmm. In that case, I hope fervently to be your opponent."

...He openly expressed a desire to fight!

Before the combat competition even began, Jack tensed up, fearing these two might start brawling. The focus of others in the room covertly shifted to them.

Yudrain said nothing for a moment, just gazing at the tall man. Jack thought he looked like a fearsome beast, sizing up whether his opponent was bite-sized or not.

"...Do you truly wish for that?"

Do you really want to fight me? What a laughable fool. I'll accept your challenge anytime. This was how Jack interpreted Yudrain's words.

"I always do. An opportunity like this at such a venue isn't common. Of course, what I'll offer isn't something mundane like a sword or fist."

Yes, I've always wanted to fight. Now is the perfect time. I won't face you with ordinary, common weapons. Wait and see! The tall man's words were interpreted in this way.

A slight twist appeared at the corner of Yudrain's lips.

"Given what you've said, I'm starting to look forward to the next turn."

"Indeed. Let's see how my luck plays out."

With that, their conversation came to an end.

Jack didn't even consider the possibility that they knew each other. He just fervently hoped he wouldn't be Yudrain's opponent.

'He looks incredibly strong. I definitely don't want to face him!'

But fate did not favor Jack. Historically, he had always been the unlucky one, invariably ending up in the very situation he hoped to avoid.

"And who shall face him—let's see the result of the first draw—! Oh!"

With an exaggerated voice, the name of Yudrain's opponent, the Awakener to inaugurate the stage today, was announced from outside the stage.

"The one who will start the stage today with the Second Gender Awakener is~!—a young newcomer challenging this fighting arena for the first time! An Awakener with beast-like power, able to freely reveal ears, tail, teeth, and claws! His name is—Jack!"

A cacophony of sounds, almost deafening, reached the backstage. Jack was so startled he nearly jumped off the floor. His friends around him cast anxious and worried glances at him.

"Jack! It's you!"

"...Are you sure you're okay? If it's too hard, you might consider forfeiting..."

Jack felt terror at the predatory gaze Yudrain fixed on him, as if assessing his prey. He wanted to retreat, but the thought that emerged in his mind was the joyful faces of his comrades when he returned with the prize money from winning here.

Silently, Jack clenched his fists and, with gritted teeth, stepped forward.

Just as he was about to head towards the stage, a door opened behind him. Entering were a skeletal woman dressed in a floral dress and, in stark contrast, a winged man with a very distinctive appearance.

'What's this? Weren't all the participating Awakeners already here?'

Like Jack, the other first-timers who had entered from outside were puzzled, but the Awakeners who had come up from the lower floor said nothing.

'...Well, I don't know. It's not my problem; they must have a reason for arriving now...'

Jack's brief wonder quickly dissipated. He was too preoccupied with the immediate challenge ahead. With stiff limbs, he moved towards the stage, following Yudrain. The tall man who had provoked a confrontation earlier spoke slyly from behind.

"It's a pity I'm not your opponent."

He was truly detestable, consistently displaying hostility towards Yudrain, seemingly harboring a deep grudge.

"We'll meet again soon enough."

"Yes... Be careful. I'd be really sad if you were even slightly injured when we meet again."

This was a traditional curse of hatred, implying 'Stay healthy until you die at my hands, not someone else's.' Jack wondered why he hadn't been chosen first, looking slightly downcast...

Fortunately, Yudrain moved on without responding further to the man. Jack hurried up the stairs, following him. As they ascended to the stage, the bright lights and cheering grew louder, making Jack's heart pound so hard it felt like his ribs might break.

"How old are you?"

Yudrain, whom Jack hadn't expected to speak, suddenly asked. Though his gaze remained forward, the question was clearly directed at Jack. Was he trying to gain the upper hand already? Jack flinched, then straightened his shoulders, trying to appear as strong and fierce as possible in his reply.

"I'm eighteen! Why do you ask!"

"Why try to earn money here at such a young age? There must have been other things you could do."

"...What's it to you? It's none of your business!"

"Does everyone else know you're here?"

...What was this about? It almost seemed like Yudrain knew Jack had companions other than his family. Though something felt off, Jack tried to brush aside the odd feeling and showed an even fiercer expression.

"I don't need anyone's permission! I'll just win, take the money, and leave!"

"So you sneaked out without permission. You're really clueless, aren't you?"

"...Are you insulting me?!"

"Yes."

"And you're here to make money just like me!"

As Jack retorted heatedly, Yudrain narrowed his eyes. His expression was cool, almost smiling, but not quite.

"Well..."

"What now?"

"This is a fighting arena where killing is allowed. Do you understand what that means?"

"..."

"If you had ever seriously considered what might happen to you after death, even once, you wouldn't have come here. You had your last chance to turn back after signing up yesterday, but you chose to ignore it. If things were as they should be, you wouldn't have had the chance to ponder such things before dying."

In that moment, as Yudrain spoke, his aura settled into an indescribable stillness. Despite his presence right in front of Jack, it felt as if an invisible blade hung just above his throat.

The gravity of his words left no doubt that they were no jest...

Jack, unable to ponder how Yudrain knew of his contract from the previous day, stopped in his tracks. Yudrain, halting alongside him, slowly turned and began to speak.

"However... as the person who taught me said, everyone can make mistakes. What's important is what comes after."

"..."

"So, observe carefully the mistake you've made today. No one can be sure if such an opportunity will come again in life."

Yudrain looked older than Jack, but the difference seemed only a few years at most. Yet, from him emanated an overwhelming pressure that couldn't be denied.

What were those eyes, bearing the weight of years like an elder with snow-white hair?

What was this dreadful feeling, like standing before high-ranking figures, impossible to refute?

As Jack remained speechless, Yudrain turned away and moved towards the place filled with low curses and cheers.

"He's out!"

"Finally! Is that the Second Gender Awakener?"

Yudrain had stepped onto a stage that had claimed many Awakeners' lives. The square stage, adorned with bright strings and fences, resembled a plate holding a cake.

'Too many people to distinguish each face.'

Candles overhead emitted a provocative scent. Someone wielding a magic device to amplify their voice spun around the stage's perimeter, stirring up the atmosphere.

Yudrain, indifferent to this, quickly scanned the surroundings. The spectator seats formed a semi-circle around the stage, and the highest section, shielded by partitions, seemed to be the 'VIP section' for nobles and the wealthy.

Here and there, members of the Nukijo gang, armed with knives, watched Yudrain with gleaming eyes.

Spotting a Nukijo laughing uproariously, Yudrain narrowed his eyes.

'That position. I must remember it.'

Soon after, Jack emerged and stood before him. Perhaps due to the earlier conversation, the freckled boy's face looked worried and pale. His eyes, filled with confusion and fear, revealed his inability to fathom Yudrain's true nature and intentions.

'Don't worry. This won't be your grave today.'

"Take off your clothes! Strip!"

Before the match began, jeers were directed at Yudrain's hooded figure. With a short breath, Yudrain tossed off his hood, revealing an outfit almost identical to Jack's, eliciting a burst of cheers.

'I never really wanted to wear these clothes... but had no choice.'

It would all be over soon, anyway.

As the bell signifying the start of the fight rang out, Yudrain slowly raised his hands above his head. Jack, startled, flinched noticeably.