

Turning 70

Chapter 70

"Tyranny?"

"Well, isn't that a common tale? So common that it hardly needs explaining."

As the man spoke, the bandits surreptitiously rose from their seats. When Yuder did not bother to stop them, they swiftly ran to hide behind the man's back.

"Boss, how did the mission go?"

"I can't make head nor tail of what's going on. Knights showing up, fires breaking out, and now these characters... something wicked must be afoot."

Knights and fire. Amid their whispered conversation, Yuder picked out these words that tickled his curiosity, causing him to frown.

"What do you mean by 'knights' and 'fire'?"

"You folks, you came here from the capital, didn't you? Looking for someone."

The bandit leader replied with a counter-question. Yuder noticed a strange energy simmering within the man's intact right eye and hesitated momentarily before nodding.

"That's correct. Judging from your words, you seem to know something?"

"I wouldn't say 'know,' exactly. I do recall a man dressed like you all visiting a nearby village a few days ago."

"Devran."

Gakane muttered in a low voice.

"We don't know his name. But three days ago, a sudden fire broke out in that village. By the time it was finally extinguished after half a day, half the village, including the lord's castle, had disappeared."

"Fire?"

Yuder recalled that Devran's power was fire-related. An uneasy premonition swept over him, and a mysterious smile emerged on the bandit leader's face, as if to underline his foreboding.

"The man was captured on the scene as a suspect and was locked up in prison. I went over there briefly to examine the cause of the fire and the situation in the area, and heard stories related to him. Everyone is buzzing that his execution is imminent."

"Could Devran really have...? What should we do?"

Jimmy, at a loss for what to do, turned to Yuder. What he had assumed to be a simple reconnaissance mission had suddenly escalated into an alarming crisis.

Yuder, suppressing his shocked expression better than Gakane and Jimmy, calmed his racing mind. Considering the situation, it seemed highly likely that Devran was the arsonist the bandit leader spoke of. However, nothing could be certain until he verified it personally.

Moreover, the oddly submissive and friendly demeanor of the bandit leader did not sit well with him.

"What about the knights you lot were chatting about?"

"Ah, that's nothing significant. Just yesterday, knights in shining armor passed through here. My brothers, who intended to collect a toll, were completely taken aback at the sight of them, as it was their first encounter with such distinguished guests. However, it turned out that they were not here because of the fire, but for their internal knightly training. They passed through here to a mountain next to the village where the fire broke out."

The bandit leader casually shrugged as he answered.

It was a tradition for renowned knight orders to conduct their training in remote rural areas. It appeared that a portion of them had come here.

"Well, that's all I know. Anything else you want to ask?"

The leader's soft gaze landed on Yuder's face. Yuder felt there was something odd about his eyes but was frustrated as he could not yet pinpoint what it was.

"You and your henchmen, you plan on being half-baked bandits here indefinitely?"

"Half-baked bandits, is that how it appears to you?"

The man retorted in an exaggerated tone, letting out a low chuckle.

"I was actually considering leaving this place soon. I can't live in the empire anymore, with my criminal record and all. There's no other way."

"You make it sound like you had no other choice."

"Because I genuinely had no choice."

A smile surfaced on the leader's face, chilling the observer. It was because his contorted, motionless left side of the face, and his cruel yet beautiful right side composed a disconcerting harmony.

"None of the brothers here believe they've committed a grave enough crime to warrant leaving their hometown. Do you think picking someone's pocket on the road warrants death?"

"What nonsense."

As Gakane sharply interjected, the leader's right eye turned toward him. The gaze was unbelievably soft.

"All my brothers were ostracized, falsely accused, and chased away merely for having awakened their abilities. Granted, we had to leave where we were living and ended up like this, but we have our own rules and conscience. Unlike those who drove us away."

The leader's voice was low and gentle. But at the same time, it held an odd strength. Yuder began to wonder what his power could be.

'He probably wouldn't tell me even if I asked.'

"Are you one of those who was driven out?"

"Me? Ha-ha. Maybe I am, maybe I'm not."

"Do you think we'll just sit back and watch you guys leave?"

Gakane cut in, and the leader tilted his head.

"Then what else can you do?"

Gakane's eyebrows twitched, as if he hadn't expected the leader to retort that way.

"What?"

"I've given you all the necessary information. If you don't find the person you're looking for right now, that person will soon be executed. Yet, you have time to catch small-time thieves like us? Ha-ha. There's a priority in everything, brother. If you try to catch us first, we'll resist with all our might. You can't catch two rabbits at once."

"Why am I your brother?"

"If we have the same power, aren't we all brothers, if not sisters?"

Not making any sense, this guy must be crazy. Yuder read such thoughts from Gakane's eyes, which turned to him.

'...Definitely cunning. He figured out why we're here in such a short time and played it this way.'

Moreover, the fact that the leader wasn't wrong provoked Yuder's wariness even more.

Yuder glanced at the leader's face for a moment, then exhaled briefly. If he used all his power here, he could capture those in front of him. But it was clear that it wouldn't end there, not knowing where the bandits' hideout was.

As they said, they were small-time thieves, for now.

'And they don't show hostility towards us.'

"Are you angry? Or surprised? It's nice to finally see some change in that icy expression of yours."

The leader, noticing the slight change in Yuder's expression, asked with a laugh.

"I was just thinking."

"Thinking?"

"How many days do you estimate it would take to solve this matter, return, and round you all up?"

"..."

His voice was soft, but the implications were as chilling as a well-honed blade. The bandits who had been lurking behind their leader and watching the proceedings jumped back with a start when their eyes met Yuder's. They instinctively felt that his words were not in jest.

"...Ha, ha. Look at that. We have a formidable brother amongst us today."

"I have no brother like you."

‘That's it, Yuder! Way to go!’ Gakane clenched his fist and cheered silently, his face beaming with satisfaction.

"Shouldn't there be a comeback if there is a departure? We never harm the innocent. My brethren, at my request, do not lay hands on those who share our powers. We are the losers who have lost everything for the past two years, and all that's left for us is to flee and survive. Even so, you want to arrest us?"

His tongue, soft as a velvet snake, stirred guilt that lay dormant. Jimmy appeared to be moved by his words, his face grimacing as if he were about to cry.

But who could vouch that his words were true? As long as it was unclear what truths and lies he hid within his cunning words, it was impossible to believe everything he said.

Yuder Aile had seen too many scenes play out to be swayed by such sentimental manipulations.

Yuder stood, blocking Jimmy's view, and spoke.

"If I were you, I'd use the time you're wasting on wordplay to flee further. Don't misconstrue your priorities. It seems that my priorities might change at any moment."

At Yuder's fierce words, the leader's eyes widened a bit, followed by a burst of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Le, leader, let's go."

"Why do you keep provoking him? He's not ordinary."

"You go first."

The leader quietly commanded the bandits who tried to hold him back. His voice, following his laughter, was both warm and chilling.

"Huh?"

"I think I have something more to say to these people."

"Wh, what do you mean? How can we go somewhere without you? How can...."

"I can catch up later. Go back and tell Ersi to leave first. I'll be right there."

"Leader...!"

The bandits wore confused expressions, but after a moment, they nodded. Despite their lack of understanding, their obedience suggested that their leader had their absolute trust.

"We'll wait for you, so make sure to come, leader!"

As the bandits called out desperately and disappeared, the leader, who had lightly waved his hand at them, turned his body and looked at Yuder. Despite being left alone, his gaze was remarkably relaxed.

"Thank you for not capturing my brethren."

"There's no need to catch the tail when you can go for the head."

Hearing Yuder's reply, the leader smirked, his left eye gleaming with an inscrutable light in the darkness.

"So, what is it that you want to say to us?"