

## Turning 711

### Chapter 711

Hearing the footsteps of people running towards them, Yuder turned to Nathan.

"They'll assume the horses woke up like before and will come carelessly. A battle will ensue, so please stay back to ensure the horse doesn't get injured."

With a bang, the stable door swung open. The first to appear was a southern man, the same one Yuder had spotted from atop the building earlier.

Though Yuder couldn't understand his words, the man's mumbling in his native southern tongue was clearly cursing, indicating his displeasure with the situation.

The moment he reached out towards the rampaging horses, without properly surveying the surrounding, a gentle breeze suddenly blew over his head, tickling his forehead.

'It's impossible for wind to blow indoors. Odd,' he thought, scratching his forehead and reflexively looking up.

Just then, seizing the moment, Yuder, who had been sitting unnoticed on the barn's ceiling beam, leaped down upon him.

"What...!"

Thud. The man collapsed, struck by Yuder's foot, unable to utter a sound. While not enough to knock him out, the attack was sufficient to daze him, followed swiftly by Yuder's precise restraint and binding. After, Yuder stood up, his face unblemished by sweat.

"One down."

"Ugh... ah..."

The southern man writhed in disbelief, now swiftly tied up. Nathan Zuckerman, holding the reins of a white horse and hiding behind a pillar, peeked out calmly.

"Do you think more will come soon?"

"No. It will take time for the second one to arrive."

‘Just as I thought,’ Yuder mused silently, coldly gazing down at the man he had subdued.

Their presence here was all thanks to Yuder's memory of the name 'Conche Barony', where one of its members was destined to become the new Herne Duke in the future. In other words, without the stroke of luck of living in the future and returning, it would have been impossible for them to guess these men's presence here.

‘Right. In ordinary circumstances, this would be impossible. In a situation like this, even the most cautious ones wouldn't come out more than once for something as trivial as noisy horses in the stable, would they?’

The southern merchants hiding under the Conche Barony and the supposedly deceased Second Prince's servant were better off unseen. Especially since a similar incident had happened and had already been deemed insignificant, there was no need for them to react sensitively.

And Yuder, piercing through these thoughts, easily subdued his opponent, gaining time for interrogation. Although it wouldn't have been too disappointing if others had rushed in, this was certainly a more favorable turn of events.

The subdued young southern man breathed heavily through his nose, watching them. Upon closer inspection, he was definitely not the man they had seen in the west. Initially panicking, he quickly quieted down, indicating he was no ordinary individual.

‘He doesn't seem particularly skilled, but he's definitely well-trained. The way his hands hold a sword makes that clear.’

Those raised delicately in a duke's house, like young lords or servants, might mistake his calloused hands and body as a result of menial labor. But the eyes of the two men present could not be deceived.

Yuder knelt on one knee beside the man, bringing his face close. When faced with his dark eyes, so deep in color that their focus was hard to discern, most humans instinctively felt terror or a deep sense of dread. The man from the southern lands, though outwardly unresponsive, was no exception.

"You were the one who accompanied the Second Prince of the Herne family last night," Yuder stated.

The man remained silent.

Without concern for his silence, Yuder pressed on, "Did you kill the Second Prince?"

Silence again.

Yuder had expected as much. The lack of response was an answer in itself.

But would it be the same for the next question? Yuder deliberately paused before asking slowly and clearly, "Was your aim to assist in elevating the Conche family to the position of the next Duke of Herne?"

The man, who had shown no reaction to the previous questions, trembled ever so slightly at this. It was the reaction of someone hearing the unbelievable.

'Of course. It's an unexpected question in this situation.'

Anyone would be startled if their carefully concealed identity and purpose were so abruptly probed.

But Yuder knew all this because he had seen the outcomes that would occur in the future when no one was aware of the conspiracy. This insight, combined with the little information Yuder had provided, allowed Kishiar La Orr to deduce the truth, a feat no one else could achieve.

Kishiar had said earlier, "If we can confirm their schemes this time, we gain additional information – the certainty that they played the same hand in the previous game."

He was sent here with Nathan Zuckerman to confirm just that. And now, Yuder was certain of it.

Of course, he had no intention of kindly informing his current opponent of this.

Yuder saw the man's eyes, which had been wavering in confusion, suddenly close as if he had made a decision. Such behavior usually indicated an intent to self-destruct or commit suicide.

Without hesitation, Yuder used his power. A gust of wind sealed the man's remaining breath as his hand struck a vital spot mercilessly.

The man fainted instantly.

After he fainted, Yuder meticulously tied him up again and pushed him with his foot. Nathan Zuckerman asked with a serious face, "Was that statement just now from the Duke?"

Nathan had come here before Yuder and Kishiar speculated about the southern merchants based on future information. Therefore, it was the first time he heard this part.

"Yes."

"The Tain, followed by the Herne... There's a clear intent," Nathan remarked.

"They infiltrated from the inside, cunningly expanding their influence, draining wealth, and intending to distribute illegal drugs. There's a definite consistency," Yuder replied.

"I had wondered why the Duke suddenly ordered an investigation into the families related to the Herne family's succession rights yesterday," Nathan mused.

Nathan had been involved in that investigation.

Lost in thought with a grave look, Nathan suddenly peered outside and spoke, "I hear the southern language outside. They are angry about something unresolved and are looking for the man who fainted. Prepare yourself."

"I understand. Do you have any idea how many there are?"

Though Yuder's senses were sharper than most and he could amplify sounds with the power of the wind, he was no match for the quickness of a swordmaster. It was only sensible to utilize any useful abilities at hand.

Nathan Zuckerman closed his eyes with ease, focusing on the vibrations of the earth.

"There are two. At least one of them is definitely carrying a sword. I can hear the scabbard moving."

"Understood."

"Shall I help?"

"No need. Just keep a watch on the horses."

Yuder climbed back onto the beam. As soon as he stifled his breath and stilled his presence, two men speaking in the southern language opened the door and entered.

Startled at the sight of their fallen comrade, they exclaimed, "Temash!" "Jaswi Kel!"

Though Yuder didn't understand the southern language, he could tell that the first was a name and the second, a call to alert. And, just as Nathan had said, one of the men was indeed carrying a sword.

'This accuracy is almost enviable, akin to see-through vision.'

Before they could look up, Yuder leaped down, using the power of the wind to slam the door shut.

The two men turned in surprise, and Yuder charged at them, drawing his sword.

The startled Southerner barely managed to draw his sword and block Yuder's attack.

However, in combat, the one who strikes first usually has a decisive advantage, especially when one is prepared for how the opponents might attack.

Yuder pushed his opponent towards a spot in the stable where the ground was uneven due to horse hoof prints, causing the man to stumble and fall backward as he stepped on the uneven terrain.

Immediately, Yuder mercilessly struck at his vital points, then turned to the remaining man. The latter, perhaps an Awakener, was hastily spewing water from his hands, but such a small amount of water was merely amusing to Yuder.

Soon, he too lay beside his comrade, sharing the same fate.

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"You've managed this far quite easily," observed Nathan Zuckerman.

"Typically, in such situations, the ones who arrive first are the weakest and least experienced in the group. Their complacency made it even easier," replied Yuder, tying up the three men he had just subdued.

Yuder mused that these men, who had long masqueraded as a trading company, were unlikely to be overly strong or brutish. Instead, they would likely be more unassuming and intelligent, posing less of a threat and blending in more easily.

It was evident that they had been training for a long time, but individually, they were not particularly impressive. To lose to such men in a surprise attack would disgrace his storied battle history.

"Will we handle everything here?" asked Nathan.

"Certainly not," Yuder responded, as if he already knew what Nathan was thinking.

"From what I saw earlier, six men entered the stable. We've captured three, so the rest are likely higher-ups. Among them, we might even encounter the same man we fought in Tainu."

Nathan remained silent at the mention of their encounter in Tainu.

He must have thought of that man the moment he saw them previously, recalling how he was the first and longest to fight that man in the secret warehouse. His suggestion to retrieve the saddle first before returning indicated he had this in mind.

"Confronting him here would not be advantageous for us. There might be another noteworthy individual among the remaining men, so changing the location would be wiser."

"And who might that be?"

"Don't you remember? When that man realized we had infiltrated our warehouse and returned, he mentioned sensing a movement of power."

"Ah..."

That time, Kishiar, Yuder, and Nathan had entered the warehouse through a hidden passage, not the main entrance. Yet, the men had detected them almost like ghosts.

Yuder was certain one of them was an Awakener who possessed the ability to sense 'power.'

'They probably detect changes or flows of power within a specific area or range. The reason they didn't constantly monitor the illegal drugs was probably because of this ability.'

The extent of their sensing capabilities was unknown. Nathan seemed to share this thought, saying, "If such a person existed, they would have appeared by now if they were here."

"Indeed. However, such Awakeners can sometimes use their abilities from a distance. We never saw the face of the Awakener then. Keep that in mind."

"...True. If they sensed the change from afar and informed an ally who could be or go to the location, their response might be slightly delayed."

"Yes. So, staying here any longer serves no purpose. It might give our opponents more time to gather information on us."

The number of their enemies seemed larger than anticipated, and both of the key individuals might not even be here. However, Yuder, having confirmed the presence of those distributing Calanesa powder in the south at Nukijo's fighting arena, believed that at least the one who took the powder then would certainly be among them.

"In terms of swordsmanship, he was quite exceptional," remarked Yuder, reflecting on their encounter.

Even when facing the sword of Nathan Zuckerman, a Swordmaster, the man had not been significantly outclassed. He possessed the ability to freely concentrate and project his power. At the time, Yuder was unable to fully exert his strength, and Kishiar, to avoid revealing his identity, had engaged the man using only the power of an Awakener and his physical skills. Nonetheless, his prowess was undeniably impressive.

'But now, the power I can wield has changed, so it doesn't matter. If I can expose his identity, even if he escapes, today's mission will be deemed a success.'

While Yuder was lost in thought, Nathan Zuckerman sighed, furrowing his brow.

"I always feel it, but facing an Awakener really requires preparedness for every possibility."

"Well... you're not entirely wrong there."

"The way sir Aile identifies, handles, and responds to such individuals sometimes seems mysterious to me, though..."

Suddenly, the knight who had been observing Yuder intently turned away, having briefly interrupted their conversation.

"If you keep watching, perhaps you'll eventually find the answer."

But, would that day ever come?

Nonetheless, he found it somewhat commendable that Nathan hadn't completely abandoned his vigilance towards him.



'To earn such admiration from Nathan Zuckerman... unimaginable in my previous life.'

'Perhaps it's the time we've spent together that's changed things...'

Yuder watched the profile of the Southern knight with a complex mix of feelings.

Kishiar had once said that Nathan and Yuder had quite similar personalities and could become good friends. If Kishiar had heard their current conversation, he might have felt somewhat bitter, but Yuder was content with the level of their relationship as it was.

With a sense of willingness, Yuder suggested to Nathan, "If you wish to better understand how to face Awakeners, encountering as many of them as possible is the best way. Would you consider joining the Cavalry training when we return to the capital?"

"Me?" Nathan asked.

"Even if you're not an Awakener, a knight of your caliber should have no trouble."

"..."

"Merely sparring should be fine, right? Besides... if you join the training, you could spar with me."

It was the last part that elicited a response from Nathan. His face lit up with interest as he silently loaded the three Southern men onto the horse. The white horse seemed unbothered even with three men on its back.

"I'll consider it."

"Good. Let me know once you've decided."

Yuder was looking forward to sparring with Nathan, who had gained experience fighting various Awakeners.

"But is it alright to load three men on a horse at once?"

"This breed is strong enough to carry another one if needed."

Nathan stroked the horse's nose, calming its previously annoyed snorts.

As they were about to leave the stable, suddenly, a concentrated ball of energy flew towards them.

'...Was there no sign before?'

Yuder instinctively dodged it, and Nathan did the same. The energy hit the stable door, causing a loud explosion, and the horse screamed in fright.

"You finally show yourself."

Three figures, faces hidden by thick clothing, stood not far away. Yuder realized they had been waiting for them to emerge.

And Yuder realized that the power just unleashed by their assailant felt eerily familiar.

'That man. He was indeed here. I had a feeling this could happen, so I tried to leave quickly... but it ended up like this.'

Though he had exchanged a few words with Nathan Zuckerman while preparing to leave, it hadn't taken long. In that short time, their enemy had meticulously killed their presence and waited outside, ready to attack. The fact that they evaded detection even by a swordmaster like Nathan suggested that the other two were also Awakeners of no small skill.

'Let's see. The one in the middle, he's the one who sent the energy. The one I saw in the west...'

The Southerner, under scrutiny from Yuder, returned a piercing gaze, sharp enough to be felt even through his almost completely concealed face. A tense chill ran down Yuder's spine.

"I thought the way you infiltrate so effortlessly seemed familiar, and indeed, it's an old acquaintance."

"..."

"You won't surrender and release them, even if I ask nicely, will you?"

"That sounds more like my line."

Yuder responded nonchalantly, to which the Southerner let out a quiet, warmthless laugh.

"Yes. I thought you'd say that."

The moment he raised his hand, the battle began.

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"Sir Zuckerman, please take the horses and retreat."

Yuder skillfully deflected the oncoming condensed energy with his sword, then summoned the power of the wind to create a small whirlwind. Dust flew everywhere, obscuring the enemy's vision. Nathan Zuckerman shook his head in response to Yuder's hurried command.

"I cannot do that."

"Then who will protect the horses?"

Scanning the surroundings quickly, Nathan Zuckerman released the reins and energetically patted the white horse's hindquarters while blowing a high, short whistle. Amazingly, the horse, as if responding to a command, hurriedly turned and galloped towards the back of the stable, away from the front where the battle raged. Yuder felt a momentary confusion, unsure if it was right to let the horse go like that.

"What have you done?"

"There's no time to explain. It's better to let it escape on its own than worry about who will protect it."

'...He has a point.'

Realizing Nathan Zuckerman was determined to join the fight, Yuder refrained from further argument and withdrew his power. Through the settling dust, the southern swordsman sharply called out.

"Bahram!"

A subordinate to his right, unnoticed despite continuous observation, suddenly stepped away from the group and stomped the ground. As he moved, a translucent aura surrounded him, partially obscuring his form.

Wrapped in that aura, his footsteps became silent. Even the light overhead and the natural sounds of movement hushed, and his speed increased dramatically, like a nearly invisible phantom.

Nathan immediately chased after him.

'He must be the Awakener who can conceal his presence.'

Indeed, with such a skill, from the stable, he and Nathan weren't even able to notice the three adversaries.

'But its weakness is too obvious.'

The power only worked when unseen by the enemy.

A regular person might find such stealth threatening, perfect for slipping away unnoticed.

However, Yuder and Nathan Zuckerman had previously encountered the ultimate stealth abilities in an arena.

'Compared to Cyregina's complete invisibility, this is just child's play.'

Nathan Zuckerman, with his formidable observational skills, had even captured Cyregina. How could he miss someone still visible? Yuder, confident in Nathan's pursuit, completely lost interest in that direction.

"Aren't you going to follow your comrade?"

The southern swordsman, noting Yuder's swift disinterest, inquired. Yuder replied impassively.

"Why should I?"

His faith and certainty that Nathan would handle it allowed such a response. However, his stark expression perhaps led the enemy to misunderstand.

"Are you saying it doesn't matter if he dies? You facing the two of us alone is sheer arrogance."

Yuder remained silent. While the latter assumption was correct, the former was not. He had no intention of abandoning a talent like Nathan Zuckerman to death, but saw no need to explain. The unknowing southern swordsman smirked coldly, sword in hand.

"At that time, I was unsure where you intruders had come from, leading to several misunderstandings. It wasn't until after escaping Tainu that I understood your true nature. How you discovered our location is beyond me, but it doesn't matter."

As he spoke, he lifted his sword and charged at Yuder.

"You won't be leaving here alive."

Yuder raised his sword to block the attack. The clash of the two swords produced a loud, sharp sound, and Yuder felt a sensation as if his grip might tear apart. Just this single exchange was enough to give him a thrilling sense of his opponent's skill.

'Indeed, he's not just all talk. His strength is more impressive than it appears.'

His gloves, always worn for protection, proved helpful in this moment. Without the magic-infused gloves, his palms might have split open from that initial clash.

His adversary seemed to quickly realize that Yuder's strength was slightly inferior. Observing the slight tremble in their locked swords, the man spoke.

"You wield a weapon too grand for its master. Be thankful for your sturdy sword."

"..."

"The one I fought before had a much better sword than yours... Didn't he come? Or was it the one who just disappeared?"

"..."

"Seeing you use the wind earlier, you must be the one who used wind and... water before. Is that the extent of your abilities? Or..."

Unable to bear it, Yuder finally sighed.

"You really do talk too much."

"What?"

Engaging in a pointless contest of strength here would be as good as offering his back to the other guy and asking him to kill him. However, if he could lure the enemy into acting prematurely, even a disadvantageous power struggle can be a useful decoy.

'Now!'

Yuder let his clashing sword slide away and jumped back, scattering the power of the wind in all directions.

"Ugh!"

The southern swordsman, and the other attacker who was approaching from Yuder's blind spot, staggered as they were mercilessly hit in the face by the wind carrying dirt and dust. Seizing the moment, Yuder extended his hand holding the sword upward, then forcefully brought it down. The enemy's swords, momentarily weakened in their grips, followed Yuder's movement, rising and then plunging downward.

"Ah...!"

They must have felt the illusion of their swords becoming momentarily lighter and then unbearably heavy, slipping from their grasp. The southern swordsman, despite losing balance, managed to cling to his sword hilt, but his ally, who had tried to ambush Yuder from behind, was not so fortunate. The sword slipped through his loosened grip and rolled on the ground with an undignified clatter.

In that moment of shock and disarmament.

That brief span was more than enough for Yuder to drive his sword into his opponent's body.

Yuder instantly leaped up, stepping on the wind, and threw a small dagger he had drawn from his cloak. It was a new dagger given to him by Sunz and Emon.

'Proving useful right from the start.'

"Kuhk...!"

The southern swordsman's ally, pierced in the shoulder by the dagger, fell with a stifled scream. The fact that he didn't cry out disgracefully showed that he, too, was well-trained, despite appearances.

"You...!"

Just as Yuder heard the southern swordsman's voice, laden with intensified emotion, he leaped back again, stepping on the wind. The forces hurled by the southern swordsman in pursuit, carrying a fearsome momentum, suddenly collided with each other in mid-air and exploded violently.

'...He could do even this?'

Despite his relatively calm mind, Yuder's body, caught in the blast radius, was flung to the ground as if hurled from above.

"Ugh..."

Reacting instinctively, Yuder wrapped his head protectively and rolled, using a falling technique. There was no significant impact, but he couldn't fully shield himself from the continuing onslaught of attacks.

Boom, Crash! Bang!!

In the midst of the relentless onslaught, Yuder summoned a wall of earth and wind that swiftly enveloped and protected him.

‘Think only you can launch such frenzied attacks?’

He had thought this before, but the southern swordsman used his power in a way not much different from the aura attacks utilized by knights. The mid-air collision and subsequent explosion were somewhat surprising, yet the long-range attacks, merely quick and straightforward attempts to target the enemy, lacked any element of novelty.

Even as he fell, Yuder didn't lose grip of his sword. Planting it into the ground, he unleashed his strength.

-Rumble, rumble...

A much larger and more immense force surged through him, and crimson veins pulsed across the gloves and clothes covering his skin. A golden glow flickered brightly inside his left eye.

As the power of the earth intensified, the southern swordsman, sensing the abnormal movement, paused his attack momentarily. Seizing this opportunity, Yuder got to his feet but was momentarily distracted by something that had fallen from his torn outer garment.



What captured his usually unwavering focus during battle were colorful pieces of wrapping paper and translucent, candy-like fragments, shimmering like colored glass.

'...Ah. This.'

It seemed his pocket had torn during the blast. The issue was that it contained candies Kishiar had given him before coming here.

'...I had only eaten one of them.'

For the first time, Yuder felt an unfamiliar emotion as he looked down at the shattered candy pieces. He didn't need to feel around to know; there was nothing left in his pocket now.

"..."

The rumbling from beneath gradually subsided.

Yuder turned his head to look directly at the southern swordsman. Both of them were in a sorry state, but the appearance of the southern swordsman was now completely different from the beginning.

His face, previously meticulously concealed, was now exposed due to the torn clothing, revealing deep copper-brown hair and bright denim-blue eyes. His physique was imposing, contrasting with a noble and delicate appearance that would surprise anyone. However, none of these details mattered to Yuder.

"Those eyes..."

The southern swordsman, noticing Yuder's differently colored eyes, spoke with a furrowed brow. At that moment, the golden light flickering in Yuder's left eye suddenly burst forth with an intensity incomparable to before.

Simultaneously, the vibrations of the earth, thought to have died down, exploded anew.

Chapter 714

Yuder Aile's power, reputed to be stronger than any other Awakener in the world, was in fact neither infinite nor perfect.

Using opposing elements like fire and water simultaneously would halve their strength. Moreover, employing more than two attributes at once led to excessive power consumption, significantly slowing mobility and decision-making.

Although capable of handling multiple attributes, using them all at once or indiscriminately would inevitably lead to limitations for a human. Overexertion often resulted in significant repercussions and aftereffects, much like other Awakeners.

Thus, Yuder typically focused on a single attribute or combined two that enhanced each other's power for maximum efficiency. This approach was proven and established through extensive training and combat.

In situations requiring the decisive suppression of an enemy with a single attribute, none was as formidable as Earth.

Earth did not possess the inherent damaging power of fire upon contact, nor the delicate control of water beneficial in daily life. Nor was it like wind or metal, which enhanced mobility or created opportunities when integrated into different combat styles.

However, everything in the world ultimately rests upon the Earth, originating or connected to it. Even monsters not native to this land appear by treading upon it.

Hence, Earth had a broader range of use than any other attribute, and using it for attacks had a very low failure rate. The realization that the seemingly perpetual solidity beneath one's feet was not a given often led to an instinctual fear for life.

-Krrr-krrr-krrr...!

Therefore, when Yuder's eyes burst into golden light and the ground began to tremble, the southern swordsman did not hesitate to swing his sword toward him. Though not as complete as that of a swordmaster, his aura's fragments, mixed with the power of an Awakener, surged toward Yuder with intensified force.

But the attack did not reach Yuder. As the mass of energy almost struck him, a sudden wall of earth rose, blocking it.

-Bang!!

The earth wall shattered, exploding. Despite expecting a significant impact, Yuder emerged from the dust unscathed. Seeing his pale, cold face, the southern swordsman furrowed his brow, then gripped his sword and leaped to the side.

His sword, moving at a speed difficult for ordinary eyes to follow, continued its attack. But earthen walls, as tall as a man and square in shape, emerged here and there, perfectly blocking every assault.

-Bang, bang, bang-bang-bang-bang!

No matter how unexpectedly the attacks came, what crumbled was not Yuder but the walls. The collapsing earth returned to its place unharmed, making it feel as if throwing fragile eggs against an opponent clad in an earthen armor.

"Resorting to tricks, I see. Then how about this...!"

After hurling a mass of energy, the southern swordsman leaped over the rising earth wall in a blink, aiming a downward strike at Yuder, who was supposed to be behind it – a feint targeting close-quarters combat.

The audacious attack, executed with incredible speed, left no time for preparation, but Yuder was not beneath the descending sword.

'...What?'

Within the slowly unfolding vista, the southern swordsman saw Yuder standing farther away than he had anticipated.

'When did he get there...?'

Their eyes met, and Yuder's golden irises shone vividly. Yuder opened his mouth and murmured softly.

"Try rolling around yourself."

Captivated by those eyes, which seemed not of a human but of another being, the southern swordsman silently landed below on the seemingly solid ground.

Or, he had attempted to.

"Uh?"

Just before his feet touched the ground, it suddenly gave way beneath him.

He nearly plummeted into a pit, swamp-like in its nature, before hastily catching onto a firmer section and leaping out. But as he moved, the earth continued to soften and collapse beneath him, making it impossible to find solid footing again.

"What is this..."

With no time even to speak, as the ground kept collapsing, he desperately used his abilities to leap, trying to land on still intact patches of earth. The entire garden of the Conche Barony seemed like a notorious desert quicksand. Large ornamental rocks and tall trees were engulfed and unsightly disappeared into the sinking earth. Every time he managed to land on a slightly firmer patch and launch an attack, another earthen wall would rise, block it, and burst into oblivion.

It felt unlike fighting on a small boat adrift in a vast sea, more like facing a vast, untamable force of nature.

'How can a human wield such power?'

This was unthinkable. He had never heard of a human wielding power in this manner, let alone manipulating such a vast expanse of land as if it were his own limbs. It was a level of power impossible unless one was prepared to die right there.

'There's no way he can go on forever. If I just endure, he too will reach his limit.'

With this thought, the southern swordsman ceased his attempts to attack Yuder, focusing instead on dodging the crumbling ground and buying time. Sure enough, as soon as he started to hold on for a while to see if it was really effective, the speed at which the ground collapsed began to slow down little by little.

'Just a bit longer...!'

But then it happened.

"Sir Aton!"

Startled by the sudden shout, he turned to see his comrade, who had been struck down by a dagger, now laying half-buried in the collapsing earth.

While he was attacking Yuder, his comrade had regained consciousness and retreated, but was swept up in the collapsing ground, unable to escape due to severe wounds.

Despite desperately enhancing his body's strength to escape, the relentless, dragging pull of the sinking earth rendered it futile. The terror in his face, as he was inexorably drawn down, betrayed his disbelief at dying in such a manner, despite being trained to do anything to achieve his objectives.

Grinding his teeth, the southern swordsman leaped high, using his power to land on the stable earth. His fingertips, transformed like the paws of a mighty beast, barely grasped the collar of his comrade, still precariously clinging on. But as his own footing began to shake and sink, his comrade, panic-stricken, cried out.

"You mustn't! Get away, get away! At this rate, Sir Aton will..."

"Quiet! Don't open your mouth!"

Opening one's mouth was an invitation for the earth's debris to enter – a death sentence even before being rescued.

As the southern swordsman began to exert more strength, he suddenly heard footsteps from behind.

The sound of a hunter approaching to claim his prey, driven into a corner.

Turning his head, he saw Yuder approaching, his sword arm dangling. Yuder's torn clothes and dirt-covered body resembled theirs. Seeing Yuder's face, paler than before, the southern swordsman believed his guess was right.

As a human, Yuder too had naturally reached his limit.

Proving his conjecture, the collapsing earth dragging his comrade also began to subside gradually.

'He's exhausted too. There's no doubt about his limit. Then...!'

The southern swordsman looked down at his comrade he was pulling. To increase his own chances of survival, the best course seemed to be to abandon his comrade and regrip his sword to attack Yuder.

Even though the sinking had slowed, the ground was already deeply hollowed. It was uncertain whether his half-buried comrade could survive.

The southern swordsman looked down. There was only one choice to make.

"...I'm sorry."

With gritted teeth, he released the grip on his comrade's collar.

"Ahh...!"

He regripped his sword while hearing the screams of his comrade being swallowed back into the hollowed ground.

However, in that moment of decision, when he turned his head again, what he faced was a wave of earth rising like a high mountain, with Yuder standing atop it.

Yuder, gazing emotionlessly at the southern swordsman, stood with his feet on the ground that was eerily calm, as if all these events were of no concern to him. His pale face, unchanging even while moving an unimaginable, almost inhuman strength, resembled a grim reaper watching someone facing death.

In that instant, the southern swordsman realized.

'He wasn't using his full strength until now. And even now...!'

Yuder had deliberately set a trap, playing with him cruelly and flawlessly.

He had made him roll on the ground, just as he had done, but with an even more overwhelming force.

As this realization hit him, a wave of earth, like a tidal wave, engulfed the southern swordsman, burying him deep below.

Chapter 715

"Huff..."

Yuder exhaled deeply, surveying the land on which he stood. Until moments ago, this had been a noble house's garden, but now, it was barely recognizable as such.

Where once were valuable flowers and ornamental rocks, now lay a desolate, flattened wasteland. Only a few branches protruding from the brown earth weakly claimed its former glory.

The transformation seemed beyond human capabilities, yet Yuder's expression was far from triumphant or joyful.

'I didn't intend to use so much power.'

Just as he realized all of Kishiar's candies, of which he had eaten only one, were gone, his plan to subdue the opponent vanished from his mind. Even during his time as a Cavalry Commander, he rarely resorted to such ruthless measures. It was only after he had relentlessly crushed and buried his opponents that Yuder acknowledged his own deep frustration and anger.

Frustration and anger. He was surprised to find such juvenile emotions still lingering within him, yet the reality before his eyes was undeniable.

'At least I kept my sanity to keep my power within the garden's bounds.'

Even in the midst of overwhelming his foes, Yuder's power had not extended beyond the garden. The peaceful and quiet world outside seemed oblivious to the chaos within.

Yuder, glancing down at his torn coat pocket with a dark gaze, found it empty. As he was about to succumb to a sinister glint in his left eye, the sound of approaching horse hooves caught his attention.

"Sir Aile."

Nathan Zuckerman, holding the reins of a white horse, looked different from when he had chased after the enemy earlier. His attire was in disarray, though he seemed unharmed.

"The garden... What happened here? And the enemies...?"

"I used the power of the earth, and I won."

"Just 'used'?"

Nathan's gaze swept over the devastated garden.

"Such power is far from ordinary. It's clear you used more than a moderate amount."

"I did use more than usual, but it wasn't excessive."

"What do you consider excessive?"

"It would be difficult to repeat what I've just done, but I still have enough strength to defeat a few more foes. That's not excessive."



"I see. That's your standard."

Yuder hadn't exerted himself to the point of losing control over his powers. Though significantly drained, he could still defend himself and escape if more enemies appeared. This was his assessment, though Nathan seemed less convinced.

With a complex expression, Nathan surveyed the garden again.

"So, where are the fallen enemies now? They're not in sight."

Yuder quietly lowered his gaze to the ground, followed by Nathan. They looked at the flat land, indistinguishable from the rest, covered in brown dirt.

"They're right there."

"...You mean they're dead?"

"No, they're not dead. I simply buried them."

With a casual flick of his hand, Yuder caused the earth to tremble slightly and open up, revealing two figures buried within. Covered head to toe in dirt, they resembled corpses, but a closer look revealed they were indeed breathing, thanks to the small air holes Yuder had considerately left.

Despite his deep frustration over the shattered candies, Yuder couldn't recklessly kill these significant figures, especially the one who appeared to be the leader of the Southerners.

'I remember someone calling him Aton. If I recall correctly, that's the man responsible for the downfall of the Tain ducal family.'

Yuder strained his memory. If he was not mistaken, he had heard that name twice before.

The first time was after the mission in the West, when the Duke of Tain stood trial. Yuder had heard from Pruelle, who had attended the trial, about a Southern merchant who had manipulated the Tain family.

“That despicable man, whom I hesitate even to call 'father', told me about Aton. It seems he represented the Southern merchants, seizing all of the Tain family's wealth and authority. Even the orders to send merchants to the West were issued through him.”

The second time was in a report from Steiber and Devran, who had been undercover at a gambling house to monitor the Duke of Tain. Unlike Steiber, the unfortunate chef who rarely went outside, Devran, who served tables, had seen the Duke of Tain intimately interacting with an unidentified Southerner, showing a serious dependence on him.

Though the report didn't focus on the man's name, as the priority was on the pursuit, it did briefly mention the name Aton.

However, all that was known was his name; information about his appearance was difficult to obtain. The primary reason was that he always concealed his appearance thoroughly when with the Duke of Tain.

During the trial, it was mentioned that the Duke of Tain didn't care whether the Southerners concealed their appearances or not; in fact, he preferred them keeping their identities hidden. As a result, even in the courtroom, no one could properly describe Aton's appearance.

Even when the Duke of Tain, claiming to have been deceived by the Southern merchants, tried to shift the blame, he couldn't provide any details about Aton other than his name. It was a situation so absurd that it made one wonder if the Duke was deliberately protecting the Southerners' identities.

Had the Duke of Tain shown even a slight interest or taken care to recognize the Southerners, Yuder might have immediately recognized Aton among the Southerners he encountered in the West.

'Anyway, considering how well he manipulated the Duke of Tain for years, I assumed he was a cautious man and wouldn't come to the West himself, but... I was wrong.'

Yuder gazed down at the unconscious Aton.

'Given the Duke's description, I assumed he was someone who catered to his every whim, unlikely to be involved in physical confrontations...'

Even in unconsciousness, the fact that he had not released his grip on the sword, and the prowess he displayed in two battles, indicated that this man was more a warrior than a merchant. It was

astonishing to think how he had managed to suppress his nature and cater to the Duke of Tain's whims for so many years, considering the great confidence he seemed to have in his abilities.

"When Sir Aile mentioned earlier that unauthorized entry would be acceptable if the outcome was favorable, I thought it was quite reckless... But it seems it has come to pass as you said."

Yuder broke off his thoughts and turned to Nathan Zuckerman, whose expression was complex yet not entirely negative.

"Didn't I tell you I would manage it?"

"Still, I think it might be better to dissuade you next time."

"Why is that?"

"Seeing the state of your clothes and skin despite my presence, I believe the Duke will be quite concerned."

This unexpected remark held a power that momentarily stunned Yuder, more than anything else could. He glanced down at himself. His skin was somewhat dirtied from rolling around, though not to the extent of bleeding. But as for his clothes and the candies.. Indeed, he had no defense there.

"...That's..."

Before Yuder could find a response, either fortunately or unfortunately, the Southern swordsman regained consciousness.

'...In the end, it's all because of him.'

Chapter 716

"...That's..."

Before Yuder could find a response, either fortunately or unfortunately, the Southern swordsman regained consciousness.

'...In the end, it's all because of this b\*st\*rd.'

Flames flickered in Yuder's eyes. He approached Aton, the writhing Southern swordsman, and flipped him over with a kick to his back, swiftly disarming him. In an instant, he twisted the torn sleeve of the enemy's garment to bind Aton's hands and feet, displaying a skill that left onlookers in awe, albeit with an unpleasant roughness that made Aton groan softly.

"Ugh..."

As soon as the man opened his eyes and saw Yuder's face, he instinctively reached for his sword. However, the sword was already in Yuder's possession, leaving Aton with nothing but twitching fingers.

Only then did Aton realize he was bound, and clarity returned to his eyes. The first emotion to surface on his face was confusion.

"How am I not dead?"

"Because I buried you with an air hole."

Aton muttered incredulously at Yuder's response.

"That's..."

"Possible."

The living proof that it's possible was none other than him.

Aton looked at Yuder, who interrupted him with an answer. His gaze fixed on Yuder's eyes, which had lost their golden glow as he was not using his abilities.

"Are you... human?"

"If your eyes aren't deceiving you, I suppose so."

Yuder was accustomed to opponents who couldn't defeat him, and thus resorting to accusations of cheating or being out of the ordinary. Even a daring Southerner, who had secretly shaken the Empire for years, seemed no different. Yuder gripped Aton's collar coldly and taunted him.

"We don't have time for a cozy debate about whether I'm human or not. The truth is, I won, and you lost. That's all there is to it. Now let's have a proper conversation, 'Aton'."

"Do you know who I am?"

It was a counter-question to gauge whether Yuder was just bluffing or actually knew something about him. Yuder, detecting the ulterior motives in the man's demeanor, feigned ignorance in his reply.

"You thought we wouldn't find out about you after you caused such a commotion? It seems you've been involved in not just the Tain Duke's commotion, but also the Herne Second Prince's incident."

"A commotion..."

Aton murmured as if speaking about someone else's troubles.

"The crimes of the Tain Duke can't be seen as our fault. He chose his path, and we merely followed orders until it seemed we too might be in danger. The death of Herne's Prince is the same. On what grounds do you claim all this as our sin? We are members of a merchant trading company, here for dealings with the Conche Baron's family."

It seemed he was strategizing to feign ignorance now that he was caught. Such words might work in a court of law, but not with Yuder.

"Is that so? Then the Second Prince's horse and servant being here had nothing to do with you?"

Yuder gestured in a direction, and Aton, turning to look, saw a snorting white horse and four Southerners piled atop each other, particularly the one at the bottom. After a moment, he coldly replied.

"Yes. I have no knowledge of that. To my knowledge, that man is a servant of the Conche Baron's family, unrelated to us."

"Why was he here with the horse, then?"

"That's a question for the Conche Baron, not me. If you're curious, go catch them instead of us. Unless it's related to the Tain Duke, I see no reason to answer. Stop wasting time and hand me over to the authorities."

"Interesting."

Yuder, with a face that showed no amusement, replied coldly.

"I never said what happened to the Second Prince of Herne. Yet, you seem well aware of news that hasn't been announced publicly, insisting you know nothing."

At those words, Aton's expression faltered briefly.

Yuder leaned in closer, gripping Aton's collar tighter, their gazes nearly touching.

His voice, low and slow, eerily scraped the air.

"Do you really think we are completely unaware, and that it's mere luck that brought us here, with only a partial knowledge of your deeds?"

"..."

"You're caught, so it can't be helped. Despite the obvious, you play ignorant, hoping to quickly be handed over to the authorities. Then, you plan to shift the blame onto others and escape from our grasp. Once you're free, you think escaping will be easy."

"..."

"Ansuma Mehet. The Wolf's Eye Tribe."

At Yuder's words, Aton's brow furrowed in disbelief.

"You wouldn't claim to be ignorant of this name, would you?"

"...Where did you learn that name?"

The look in Aton's eyes changed dramatically, now tinged with a hint of murderous intent.

'Learn it from where?'

It was uncovered by one of the most notorious troublemakers in the Cavalry, Finn Eldore, and the diligent Gakane Bolunwald, who never missed even the smallest clue.

But naturally, Yuder had no intention of sharing that information. Instead, he faintly lifted one corner of his mouth.

"You can probably guess where I learned it."

"...A traitor, perhaps?"

It was natural to first suspect the source for an impossible-to-obtain information was from a traitor. But that wasn't the case.

Yuder gave him time to misunderstand, then finally spoke.

"Your dealings with the Tain Duke weren't for mere wealth or minor privileges. You desired a prestigious name to hide behind and a network that spanned the entire empire, didn't you? The item traded with the Conche Baron's family wasn't trivial either, but rather a significant gift to the next duke."

"..."

"Try denying this too."

Aton's gaze sank deeper. His eyes swiftly scanned the unconscious Southerners around him.

He was starting to suspect his surroundings.

"There must be a few of the Conche Baron's people hiding in that mansion. After confronting them, I'll gladly send you to the authorities you so wish to see. Of course, then the Cavalry will have to return, given your Awakener status."

Yuder expected a proper reaction from Aton at this point.

However, the silent man's response was laughter.

"Ha... Haha."

'Has he lost his mind?'

"Truly impressive. Yes, now I see. You must be the hero of the Cavalry, Yuder Aile."

"However... You rarely use more than two attributes against us, so I wasn't entirely certain. Had I been sure earlier, instead of just tearing your clothes, I would have killed you on the spot. What a missed opportunity."

Who did he think he was, caught and still speaking of killing? Yuder couldn't fathom his audacity, and the mention of his torn clothes reignited his suppressed anger.

'This b\*st\*rd...'

Just as Yuder's left eye began to glow golden with anger unconnected to the topic of conversation, a large hand suddenly intervened in front of his face.

"Please wait."

"...What are you doing?"



Yuder halted his movements and inquired. His gaze, which would have normally instilled fear in his Cavalry comrades upon meeting their eyes, was met with an expressionless face by Nathan Zuckerman, who replied,

"Close contact with the enemy increases the likelihood of unforeseen situations, so I would advise against it."

"Is this too close a contact?"

"Yes, it is. Especially in a situation where, for unknown reasons, your emotions seem excessively heightened compared to earlier. Since we are moving together, I suggest we eliminate any potential risks."

"..."

"I'm sure the Duke would've said something similar."

Only then did Yuder understand Nathan Zuckerman's sudden intervention.

Apparently, Nathan had noticed Yuder's personal resentment towards Aton, which had grown significantly in his absence, and wanted to advise against engaging the enemy in such an enraged state. However, to explain the cause, Yuder would have to mention receiving candies from Kishiar. Preferring to accept Nathan Zuckerman's concern rather than admit his anger was due to the broken candies, Yuder decided to heed the advice.

'Yes. Pointless contact would only make me want to strike him more. After all, we are the victors, and he has already paid for his deeds.'

As Nathan had said, Yuder also thought that similar words would've been said by Kishiar.

Shortly after, his emotions rapidly subsided.

"...Understood."

Yuder released Aton's collar and stepped back.

"Then, Sir Zuckerman, please drag him to the mansion in my stead."

"Of course."

In the moment Nathan Zuckerman tried to grasp Aton's shoulder, which had been turned over, Aton raised his head. A different expression flickered in his eyes than before.

Chapter 717

In the moment Nathan Zuckerman tried to grasp Aton's shoulder, which had been turned over, Aton raised his head. A different expression flickered in his eyes than before.

"Zuckerman... Zuckerman, huh? That's not a common surname. If I recall correctly, it was the surname of 'Makunata,' a servant that was adopted by Duke Pelleta, the Commander of the Cavalry."

Nathan Zuckerman's hands, which had always remained calm, briefly paused. In their mutual gaze, Aton continued to speak.

"I heard about this Makunata rising from a servant to a knight, but I never heard he was skilled enough to take on the enemy alone after the hero of the Cavalry stepped aside. And amazingly, my own subordinate, no easy catch, couldn't even inflict a scratch on you."

A silence hung between them.

"When I faced three unknown people in Tainu's secret warehouse, one of them pushed me back using only a sword, without infusing it with the power of the Awakener or sword energy, and then disappeared. Later, while escaping from Tainu, I briefly collaborated with another Awakener who warned me that among pursuing Peletta knights, there's one who has reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship. Is that you?"

The identity of this temporary ally was clearly Nahan, who had fled from Nathan.

Nathan remained silent. Yet, Aton's lips twisted as if he had heard an answer.

"What a waste. Makunata, with such tremendous talent, not living as a child of the moon but wasting his life here."

The children of the moon. Yuder recalled Nathan Zuckerman once mentioning that the people of the southern countries referred to themselves in this way. It was the first time he actually heard it.

"So?" Nathan finally retorted.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Why aren't you seeking your kin, who may still be living under the desert sand? Wouldn't Makunata, if alive, have wished to return across the desert?"

So, Aton wanted to ask Nathan Zuckerman why, as a fellow Southerner, he was siding with the Cavalry and Duke Peletta. Realizing that he was a precious swordmaster yet hiding this fact, Aton might have thought of various conspiracy theories, even if he wasn't particularly clever.

'He might be thinking that Nathan Zuckerman is being exploited after being forced to hide his identity... It's a plausible thought. It's worth probing if it's true.'

The nature of 'Makunata' was unclear, but Zuckerman's parents were southern warriors taken as prisoners, suggesting a connection.

Aton's demeanor was so genuine that it might have shaken Nathan Zuckerman if he truly was a powerful being forced to live in hiding like a caged beast. His eyes showed sincere regret and anger for the other's situation.

Aton continued his pleading.

"A river cannot flow from the bottom to the top. Stars shine brightest when together. If you wish to return across the desert, we'll aid you. No child of the moon would refuse a true comrade of the sword. I too am one."

Yuder, silently observing, reflected anew on what he knew of Zuckerman.

In his past life, Yuder had realized Zuckerman's prowess when he accidentally encountered his aura during a fight. Back then, unaware of Kishiar also being a swordmaster, Yuder couldn't fathom why Zuckerman continued to serve as an adjutant, concealing his true identity.

‘Honestly, I had no interest at all.’

Even dealing with Kishiar alone was burdensome enough, let alone concerning himself with the affairs of Nathan Zuckerman, who served under Kishiar. At best, he had only entertained the thought of one day defeating Zuckerman.

But now, he knew both Kishiar's true capabilities and the reasons for keeping them hidden. Considering Nathan Zuckerman's genuine loyalty, it seemed likely he didn't consider revealing himself important in a situation where his lord had to hide his entire existence and power for a greater cause.

Yuder didn't think Nathan Zuckerman would respond to such a proposition, but since he didn't know his entire life story, he couldn't be sure and thus tensed up.

Finally, Nathan Zuckerman slowly spoke.

"An offer not even worth listening to."

"What?"

"It seems like you don't even expect me to accept it. Why waste time talking? Are you waiting for someone to come to your rescue?"

Aton's expression shifted.

Zuckerman, observing his face, continued calmly.

“To answer you... I am not, but my parents were children of the moon. So, I am aware that only those born under the desert sands and who have cried their first in that land can be called children of the moon. As proof, you also don't consider me as one of your kin, hence you keep calling me Makunata. A fragment of a fallen star. Useless like garbage, a worthless trace.”

Aton fell silent. Yuder was somewhat surprised to realize the deeper, more derogatory meaning of 'Makunata'.

"Even if there are others sharing my parents' blood, I have no intention of returning there. I've long decided where I belong."

Yuder looked into Zuckerman's deep blue eyes, uttering those words with conviction. He felt he could almost palpably understand Zuckerman's emotions and predict his next words.

"My name is not Makunata; it's Nathan Zuckerman. Following you, I'd be nothing but a half-breed trash named 'Makunata', but here, I can honorably serve a master who respects me for who I am. The choice is obvious, no need to say it."

Zuckerman's gaze was calm and steady, free of any fear or hesitation, radiating the confidence of someone who had long decided his path. Aton's expression twisted in realization.

"Seems you're thoroughly brainwashed, unfortunately."

"..."

"I made the offer because it's a waste of talent, but if that's your decision, so be it. Understood."

"Sir Zuckerman."

Yuder called out in a low voice, sensing something suspicious in Aton's overly composed demeanor.

"Let's end this..."

"I didn't come here unprepared, as you might think. Yes, I was indeed buying time."

Before Yuder could finish, Aton spoke, admitting to the tactic, prompting Zuckerman to question.

"Even if more of your rescue party comes, they won't be able to save you."

"True. I now fully acknowledge that you are skilled enough to have such confidence."

'What is he planning?'

The surroundings were eerily quiet for a rescue party to be expected. No signs of them were detected.

In such a situation, where he was caught and overpowered, what could he possibly be thinking?

Yuder raised his alertness, ready to act at any moment, and looked at the ring on his hand. At a signal, the other pair of rings worn by Kishiar would respond.

"It's surprising that you know so much about us. Yet, despite knowing that we've been meeting and dealing with Duke Tain for years, you seem not to fully grasp the reason."

"Don't even think about playing tricks. I'll cut off your head immediately."

Nathan Zuckerman warned softly, gripping the hilt of his sword. He was someone who could make good on that threat any time. Aton knew this too, but he wasn't scared at all, instead, he smiled.

"No. You can't do that. It seems about time now."

‘...What time?’

"What do you mean?"

Echoing Yuder's perplexed thoughts, Zuckerman pressed his sword to Aton's neck. Blood seeped out, yet Aton's expression remained unchanged.

“Haven’t you ever wondered why the Second Prince of Herne died now, of all times?”

“...To frame the Cavalry for this crime and shake the succession of Herne?”

Yuder responded. Aton nodded slightly, his gaze shifting.

“Yes, you’re well-informed. But there’s something more crucial. The incident tied down the Cavalry, and it led skilled individuals like you, including the Commander, to come out. A natural action to clear your names and investigate. I didn’t expect you to reach here so quickly, though.”

What was he trying to say? Yuder frowned, about to knock the man unconscious when he felt a strange vibration from his raised finger.

“...”

Yuder saw his ring shining and trembling. Turning his head, he saw Nathan Zuckerman observing his own bracelet with a peculiar expression. His bracelet, too, was quivering and glowing like Yuder's.

These paired magic tools could communicate with each other.

Since they hadn’t initiated contact, it must have come from the other side.

‘...Kishiar.’

His heart, previously fearless, suddenly sank with a heavy thud.

Chapter 718

"What have you done? Speak," demanded Nathan Zuckerman, thrusting his sword into Aton's shoulder without hesitation. Blood splattered, soaking the earth a dark crimson. Aton's body instinctively twisted in agony, yet instead of screaming, he returned a chilling gaze to the two men.

"This land harbors all the conditions for endless imbalance. Those targeting you are not only us, and what we did was merely add to the inevitable repercussions of imbalance that would have occurred someday with them. Today was the day it all came together, earning the right to be called the land of the black moon. If you're curious, go see for yourself what has become of it!"

Before he could finish, Aton's head was violently smashed into the ground as if trampled by someone. Unsurprisingly, it was Yuder, his hands wrapped in the force of the wind.

"Augh...!" Aton struggled desperately to lift his head buried in the dirt. No matter how much he pushed with his limbs, the invisible pressure of the wind was overpowering, feeling like being crushed under the foot of a giant. The sensation of the earth mangling his face, filling his nose and mouth, was no less intense than the pain of the sword biting into his shoulder blade. His consciousness began to blur.

"Huh...!" Moments later, Aton finally escaped the crushing pressure on the back of his head. Yuder Aile, wearing a glowing ring, appeared in his blurred vision. Blood streaming from Aton's broken nose and injured eyes.

Contrary to what Aton expected, Yuder's face was expressionless, not showing any sign of the tremendous power he had just exerted. It was all the more unnerving how inhumanly impassive he seemed, as if he had no heart at all. Slowly, Yuder opened his mouth.

"This is too uninteresting for me to indulge. Don't even think about using such rhetoric to deceive anyone again. I would never fall for it."

Thump. Once again, a tremendous pressure crushed Aton's entire body. He felt his limbs shatter and lost consciousness.

Nathan Zuckerman spoke up beside Yuder, who had just subdued Aton.

"I've just twisted my bracelet to send a signal from our side. There's no significant change yet, but you should try as well, Sir Aile."

"Understood."

Yuder removed his ring. During the time he listened to Aton's nonsense, the ring's vibration had ceased, now as quiet as if its previous response had been a dream. He studied the tiny magic circle inside for a moment and then brushed it with his fingertip.

Once, twice, and then a third time.



Gold light briefly flared from the magic circle on the ring, then faded. Nathan Zuckerman, having observed Yuder's actions, began to tend to the unconscious Aton.

"You know, the Duke has the power to surpass us both if he so wishes. So, there's no need to make hasty assumptions just because our two magic tools reacted simultaneously."

"Yes. I share the same thought."

Despite his heart still racing with unease, Yuder knew just how formidable a person Kishiar was.

Kishiar had told Yuder to use the ring as a means of rescue, but that didn't necessarily mean Yuder had to use it for that purpose.

"It seems certain something has happened at the Cavalry branch, but such a situation might also pose a threat to us. So, we chose the quickest way to assess our situation, considering it might be the same here."

The fact that both Yuder's ring and Nathan Zuckerman's bracelet, two magic tools, had reacted simultaneously bolstered their speculation. It was a distinct possibility. Nathan Zuckerman nodded silently in agreement and responded.

"Or, it could be due to the use of magic. Magic tools are designed to respond to the innate magic power inherent in all humans, however slight, making them extremely sensitive to magic forces. I have heard it's quite common for magic tools to malfunction in the presence of large concentrations of magic power."

"I see. I wasn't aware of that..."

"In that case, I will follow after taking care of things here. Sir Aile, please go ahead."

Yuder hesitated for a moment.

"Is that alright?"

"You possess the power to move faster than me, don't you? And if it's related to the Cavalry, it would be better if Sir Aile goes."

Nathan Zuckerman, too, must have been eager to rush to Kishiar's side. Yet his words carried a clear intention of consideration, beyond a cold assessment of the situation.

Perhaps he had stepped back to allow Yuder to go first, even though their lord, Kishiar, might be in danger. The significance of this gesture struck Yuder with an intense and unfamiliar force.

"..."

It was a trust different from what he shared with his comrades. Yet, in matters concerning Kishiar, it felt even more profound and weighty.

Yuder looked intently at Nathan Zuckerman and then bowed his head.

"Understood."

"I'll follow shortly."

Yuder stepped onto the wind and leaped from the ground. In just two or three bounds, he soared over the high walls of the Conche estate, disappearing onto distant rooftops. Nathan Zuckerman watched his retreating figure and then turned around.

—

Without taking a breath, Yuder leaped twice into the air, bounding towards the temple spire. Chimneys that blocked his path were leaped over effortlessly, and he ignored the screams of someone hanging laundry on a rooftop. Even when his foot nearly slipped on the broken edge of a roof, he kept his eyes fixed forward.

Having arrived at the Conche estate by carriage, he wasn't exactly sure how far or in which direction the Cavalry branch was located, but he didn't need to ponder. The moment he started running wildly, stepping on the wind as if mad, a thin thread appeared before him, just like that time.

That thing that always appeared whenever Yuder Aile wished to find Kishiar La Orr.

The thread, wrapping around Yuder's body and extending into the distance, seemed fragile enough to break with a breath. Yet, it was more distinct than when he first saw it, and instead of a single strand, there were now several.

The existence of this thread meant Kishiar was still alive.

At the end of it, Kishiar would surely be there.

'No matter what has happened, as long as he is there... I can handle it.'

That was enough. He thought so, but while his mind tried to remain calm and rational, his heart continued to race with unease. His nerves felt unbearably sharp, as if wringing his brain.

Thus, Yuder decided to contemplate Aton's words while running.

'This land harbors all the conditions for endless imbalance. Those targeting you are not only us, and what we did was merely add to the inevitable repercussions of imbalance that would have occurred someday with them.'

Then there was the mention of the 'Land of the Black Moon'.

The southern people were known to still hold the belief in the Black Moon, chased away by the Sun God. But this was the first time he had directly heard that name from them.

'Imbalance... What does it mean for the land to have been imbalanced from the beginning? Does adding an aftereffect imply making the already unbalanced land even more so? And then, what happens?'

Finally, the distinctive, worn rooftop of the Cavalry's Southern Branch came into view, not too far away. Yuder, following the swaying threads as if they were leading him, ran faster. Suddenly, he halted, noticing something.

"There it is..."

The sounds akin to explosions near the Cavalry's branch didn't bother him.

Neither the sight of people gathering nor those fleeing was of concern. After all, he had no great fear when it came to dealing with humans.

But,

What was that jet-black line hanging in the sky?

It looked like a cracked vessel, its endlessly split mouth agape.

Yuder had seen something like this before.

"...A crack in the sky."

It was akin to the crack he had witnessed in the Great Sarain Forest in the West, now floating in front of the Cavalry's branch.

In his previous life, a crack was often seen just before a great calamity struck. And the first time it was noticed by people, in Yuder's memory, was...

‘The Great Southern Earthquake.’

Suddenly, Aton's words about the aftermath of an imbalance flashed through Yuder's mind.

A chill ran down his spine, feeling as if his blood had turned cold.

Yuder, who had paused momentarily, started running again. With more speed and greater force, responding to his desire to exert more power, the energy surged like a small whirlwind.

With the whirlwind lifting him from below, Yuder finally reached near the top of the Cavalry's branch. Up close, the rift seemed even more vast and ominous.

And then, the figure standing below it.

The very person he had been searching for was there.

A man with golden hair, holding a long sword, seemed to notice Yuder's approach and lifted his head, meeting his gaze precisely. The threads that had led Yuder ended right above his red irises.

Chapter 719

‘Kishiar.’

‘As long as he is alive, as long as his life clings on, the rest could somehow be handled.’

Yuder had repeated this to himself countless times as he hurried. Whether it was due to his wishes or not, Kishiar was indeed alive, standing on his own feet, seemingly unharmed.

But to say he was in the same state as before would be incorrect.

Kishiar's previously uncreased clothes were now stained with dirt and smudges. In some places, faint traces of red blood were visible. It seemed less like his own blood and more like splatters from somewhere else. The mere fact that he was wielding a sword stained with blood made Yuder feel a heavy, dark sensation in his chest. His head grew cold, and his heart beat rapidly, yet disquietingly.

In that brief moment, Yuder, who had scanned Kishiar from head to toe, noticed that Kishiar was also gazing intently at him from afar. Kishiar's red eyes clearly noticed Yuder's dirty cheeks and the torn clothes from battle, yet unlike Yuder, he didn't show his emotions openly.

"Yuder!"

"Where?"

"Over there, on the roof! Yuder is here!"

At that moment, people around, who had turned to see what Kishiar was looking at, spotted Yuder and began pointing and shouting. Only then did Yuder realize that he was not alone with Kishiar; there were numerous people around them.

It was in front of the Southern branch of the Cavalry, so it was natural for many people to be there, but Yuder had seen nothing but Kishiar. This realization brought a sense of absurdity and, with it, a return of rational thought.

"Sigh..."

Yuder exhaled deeply and began to scrutinize below more sharply and thoroughly.

Among the many around Kishiar, some wore the uniforms of the Cavalry, others were in imperial military attire. So far, it was understandable, but there was an unusually high number of people in civilian clothes, armed with weapons.

Those in civilian attire within the branch were mostly Cavalry applicants or those who had yet to be formally admitted.

'But there aren't that many of them, are there?'

Most of those in civilian clothes, not mingling with the Cavalry or the imperial army, stood opposite Kishiar, as if in a standoff, weapons in hand.

Strangely, even among these opposing groups, there was a vague division into two factions.

'What's going on?'

The atmosphere was chaotic, as if a battle had taken place. Yuder, realizing that further observation would be futile, leaped down, stepping on the wind. As the wind tousled his hair and clothes, he landed softly, quietly observing the writhing dark crack in the air.

"Ah!"

Those who seemed to see Yuder leap from such a height for the first time uttered sounds of either astonishment or alarm.

Yuder, seemingly oblivious to the glances of those concerned about his legs, strode forward with long steps. His demeanor was so cold that those who tried to approach and call out to him dared not interfere. Naturally, his destination was where Kishiar stood.

"..."

Despite the multitude of thoughts and surging emotions he had felt while running, when he finally faced Kishiar, he found himself speechless. It felt strangely like a long-awaited reunion, even though they had only been apart for a few hours.

Instead of words like 'glad you are safe' or 'I was worried when the magic tool suddenly activated,' the only thing that slipped out between his lips was a single word.

"...Commander."

Upon hearing the faint call, like a sigh, Kishiar slowly lowered his eyes and smiled. In that moment, as their gazes met, Yuder realized there was no need for further words.

Kishiar already knew everything Yuder intended to say.

"Did you return because of the abnormal condition of the magic tool?"

"...Yes."

"I see. You must have been quite startled. Unexpected events here caused some of my magic tools to react on their own. As you can see, there hasn't been any serious issue so far."

Indeed, the activation of the magic tool was not a distress signal. The fact that Nathan Zuckerman's speculation was correct brought Yuder a sense of relief. The sharp, knife-like atmosphere that had enveloped him finally began to calm down.

Yuder's gaze fell on the sword Kishiar was holding. It was the divine sword Orr, wrapped in cloth around the handle, which he had not drawn since leaving the capital. Was the situation here so dire that he had to unsheathe his divine sword?

"It seems a battle took place. Could you tell me what happened?"

"Before that, I'd like to know why the one who promised not to get hurt left in such a disheveled state."

Kishiar gestured with his eyes towards Yuder's torn clothes.

"Could you tell me how it came to be like this?"

Though smiling softly, his eyes indicated that he wouldn't move on to another topic without first getting an answer to this matter.

"...That is."

How could Yuder explain in a way that wouldn't discomfort Kishiar that he ended up in this state after a fight with southern merchants he had encountered? Moreover, the memory of the candies given by Kishiar, now shattered to pieces, almost reignited his anger toward the men he had beaten to the point of fainting.

'Don't think about it. Dwelling on it now won't help the situation.'

Yuder pushed the memory of the candies deep inside and began to speak.

"I found the missing servant and horse of Duke Herne's second son, and the Southern merchants we were pursuing. They were indeed all in cahoots."

Deciding that swift suppression was better than just observing and returning, Yuder had engaged in combat. Amidst the unsettling words spouted by Aton, who seemed to be their leader, and the sudden abnormality of the magic tools, he had hurried back. Kishiar nodded, listening to Yuder's objective, concise explanation.



"So it was as expected. Then Nathan is handling the aftermath?"

"Yes. Sir Zuckerman said he would follow shortly."

"Good. I trust Nathan. This confirms the connection between what happened here and their involvement."

After responding, Kishiar paused to look at Yuder before continuing.

"Securing evidence and witnesses instead of just observing them was a wise decision. It was somewhat reckless, of course, but we can discuss that in detail after this matter is resolved."

Kishiar must have immediately understood why Yuder made such a decision. Still, as Yuder hadn't perfectly adhered to the command to avoid injury, he bowed his head without a word.

"Yes."

"Nevertheless, I am even more pleased that, just as I was worrying about you both due to the strange happenings here, as if you read my mind, I get to see your face again."

Kishiar let out a small sigh and smiled.

The tension in the air, frozen from the worry that the conversation between Kishiar and Yuder might escalate, melted away instantly with his gentle smile.

"Phew. What a relief. I was wondering where Yuder had gone, but it turns out the Commander had sent him."

"Anyway, with the arrival of the best of our Cavalry, it's the end for them now!"

Yuder turned his gaze upon hearing the bellicose voices around him, to assess the plainly dressed people standing in opposition.

'Are they all Awakeners, as I thought?'

They seemed utterly bewildered by Yuder's sudden descent from the sky. Although it was difficult to discern at a glance, Yuder had noticed from above that there were two distinct groups among them, each with a slightly different atmosphere.

The first group appeared eager to turn and flee at any moment, their eyes betraying anxiety amidst low curses and conversations resembling signals.

The second group, however, was generally very quiet. They stood in vigilance and silence, their hands tightly gripping weapons or fists, ready to spring into action. Among them were a few individuals thoroughly cloaked from head to toe.

'Are they the ones Aton mentioned... the ones targeting us? Whether it's just some of them or all, I'm still unsure.'

As he made these observations, Kishiar spoke at just the right moment.

"Those people are the first and second batch of today's test applicants who entered our branch early this morning. Or, 'were' would be more accurate to say."

Before the news of Duke Herne's second son's death brought knights storming into the southern branch of the Cavalry, there were already applicants present. While the knights had searched the premises, they didn't excessively scrutinize or question these applicants. Their priority was to find any trace of Duke Herne's son, his servant, and their horse, which might be hidden somewhere in the branch. They also considered it highly unlikely that the culprits were commoners or foreigners, who wouldn't even know who Duke Herne's son was.

After Kishiar and Yuder left with the knights to see the body of Duke Herne's son, all operations at the Cavalry branch were temporarily suspended. The members supervising the applications and tests apologized to the applicants and ceased their work until the Commander's return.

Everyone, forced into an abrupt break, had nothing to do but gather in small groups and discuss the ominous incident.

Under normal circumstances, the Cavalry would stick with their own, applicants with other applicants, and imperial soldiers with other imperial soldiers, chatting among familiar faces. However, in the face of a horrifying and shocking murder, such distinctions became meaningless.

The majority of those inside the branch were outside due to the investigation, contributing to this mingling.

Without exception, they all mixed together, sharing their worries and speculations. They wondered if anyone had seen anything suspicious, or if there had been any odd occurrences since the day before. Among them were those who had just yesterday been discussing the legend of Yuder Aile.

Among them, a young boy named Jack, who had narrowly escaped a duel with Yuder Aile, suddenly seemed to remember something and cautiously spoke up.

“Well, now that I think about it... I saw someone the other day while walking... someone who shouldn't be here. That's the only suspicious thing I can think of...”

“Someone who shouldn't be here?”

“But I might be mistaken. It's just too unbelievable...”

“Who is it, Jack?”

Jack hesitated, wondering if he should speak, then responded softly.

“It's, uh, Sera... my sister.”

“What? Sera?”

“Impossible!”

Those who had escaped with Jack from the Star of Nagran's southern stronghold unanimously rebutted his statement. Then, a young Awakener who had gone with Jack to submit an application to the underground fighting arena that day timidly raised his hand with a subdued voice.

"I saw it too. At first, I thought I was mistaken and didn't say anything... but if Jack saw it too, it must be true."

"...Really? In this world?"

"Could it be that she followed us here..."

"But, actually, I was more concerned about someone else rather than Sera..."

"Someone else? Who else did you see?"

The young Awakener hesitated, then, gathering his courage, he finally spoke.

"Before I met all of you... I was briefly in the Central region."

Although he spoke vaguely, those affiliated with the Star of Nagran immediately understood what he meant. It implied that before coming to the southern and western strongholds, the boy had briefly stayed in the central stronghold.

"That time... I think I saw those people from there... this morning, when I stepped out briefly. Among the applicants..."

"What? Really?"

"No, what are you all talking about? South? Central? Sera? What does all this mean? Are you saying you saw some suspicious people we don't know about?"

Those unaware of their origins were puzzled, trying to understand, while the former the Star of Nagran Awakeners were momentarily caught in their own astonishment.

Had it been before, they would have never revealed their origins to the Cavalry. However, the situation had changed; the children who had nearly died in the secret fighting arena had safely returned, and the Cavalry had not blamed them, instead offering them a way to live. This instilled a newfound sense of trust in their hearts.

Crucially, those who remembered the conversation from the day before exchanged glances and nodded firmly.

"That is..."

## Chapter 720

Speaking the truth was always a challenging task, especially when many were involved, and any misstep could endlessly spread the blame. This made silence seem like the better option.

Nevertheless, the Awakeners of the Star of Nagan, showing courage, broke their silence.

"We've been together since we came to support this cause, a fact well-known to many. Earlier, out of fear, we couldn't disclose where we came from, but in truth, we are... escapees from a group where only the Awakeners lived."

"A group of only Awakeners? Does such a thing exist?"

While the Cavalry members intertwined with the Star of Nagan in the west fell silent, sensing something familiar, the imperial special forces, unaware of this, looked puzzled. When one of them asked with a perplexed expression, Dagon, the young man named as their leader and who had brought them here, nodded.

"Yes. It's a place formed in secret by those who, after awakening, fled persecution in their hometowns. There are a few stronghold villages with their own rules. At first, we thought it a safe haven, but over time, it didn't feel entirely secure."

And so, those with shared convictions secretly gathered and journeyed here, spurred by news that the Cavalry was recruiting new members.

After explaining how they arrived, Dagon continued with a somber expression.

"Not all at our former home wanted a quiet life away from the outside world. Some believed we should use our powers to gain nobility's recognition and ensure complete safety. Others, and it's hard to say, thought that having become powerful, we should... stand above the non-Awakener, or rather, the nobility."

His risky statement shifted the mood drastically. Dagon, understanding their reaction, nodded. The beads of sweat on his forehead indicated the difficulty with which he spoke these words.

"The reason we were startled by the people the children saw is that they would never leave that group, especially being spotted near a Cavalry branch... It's unbelievable. They must have a sinister agenda. Especially Sera... She was a temporary leader of a stronghold. Why would she come here?"

The decisive reason for the southern stronghold escapees, including Dagon, to leave was Sera's overly close dealings with southern merchants during the sage's absence.

Sera, naturally anxious, grew worried when communication from the sage's side in the capital ceased, fearing she'd have no way to defend the southern stronghold in an emergency.

Although it was a tense time, with Nahan, who seemed like a disruptive element within the group, leaving with his followers, the atmosphere was incredibly tense between those sympathetic to his ideas and the sage's followers. Sera, who blindly believed and revered anything the sage said, couldn't properly mediate the internal conflict, and the situation worsened by the day.

Then the southern merchants arrived in the village. Initially, they seemed to be looking for Nahan, but even after learning he had left, they strangely remained at the stronghold.

Although the intentions were unclear, it was customary in the Star of Nagran to accept any Awakener, so their actions were tolerated. Frankly, as the atmosphere worsened day by day, it was difficult to pay much attention to them.

As the internal strife continued, injuries inevitably began to occur. Those Awakeners who desired only to live peacefully felt greatly threatened by this development. It was around this time that people began leaving the village quietly.

Up until then, Dagon had not considered leaving the village. But then...

"A monster suddenly appeared, putting the village in peril. It was a problem that could have been easily resolved if we had united our strengths, as usual... But Sera, distrusting each other, started seeking external help," he explained.

Sera, a follower of the sage, judged it too dangerous to unite with those following Nahan amidst the monster threat. She feared they might not fight properly, betray them, or stab them in the back.

Therefore, she chose to ally with the southern merchants instead of Nahan's followers and successfully repelled the monster.

This incident shocked both the sage's and Nahan's factions. The sage's followers realized they could protect the village without Nahan's people, while Nahan's faction was enraged at being excluded.

The southern merchants rapidly became closer with Sera, even inviting their colleagues to the village. People expressed discontent over this sudden development without explanation, but those who did were branded as Nahan's followers and faced cold stares. Some were even confined to their homes for breaking the stronghold's rules.

While the original southern stronghold residents might have been oblivious, those from the western stronghold, including Dagon, found the situation incomprehensible. They didn't want to take sides and also found the southern merchants suspicious.

At this time, a letter from a former comrade, Robel, about the Cavalry's recruitment, came as a much-needed oasis. Robel, unlike the vague external rumors, provided practical information as someone involved with the Cavalry.

Eventually, they left the village, leading them to their current situation.

Dagon didn't mention names like Nahan or the sage directly in his story, but otherwise, he spoke quite candidly.

"I believe you can now roughly guess why we were startled and suspicious. Sera always spoke ill of the Cavalry, accusing them of persecuting us. If she's not here to capture us, her purpose is hard to fathom. It's unlikely to be anything favorable to the Cavalry."

"That makes sense. Is it the same with the central stronghold?" asked one of the Cavalry members seriously.

Dagon shook his head slightly. "I'm not sure. There might be some from there who, like us, secretly escaped to join the Cavalry. But if so, why travel all this way? It would be much quicker to head to the capital. I certainly wouldn't have done that."

Indeed, for those living in the central location, heading to the capital would have been much faster. There seemed to be no reason for anyone eager to escape and join the Cavalry to come south instead.

After pointing this out, Dagon hesitated for a moment before concluding his thoughts.

"Perhaps our young ones misjudged the people they saw. But in a situation where the entire Cavalry could be suspected and endangered, I felt I couldn't stay silent, knowing that such incidents were happening one after another. It might be helpful to find them and ascertain their purpose," Dagon said.

Though his experience with polite speech was limited, making his manner of speaking quite awkward, the sincerity in his words was unmistakable. The other members of his party, nodding earnestly beside him, also conveyed this sincerity.

The Cavalry members looked at each other seriously. With the Cavalry Commander, Yuder, and Kurga, who had led in their absence, all missing, it was now up to them to make a decision.

Should they believe this story? Or should they doubt their identity and intentions?

Should they wait for the Commander to return? Or should they verify it right away?

"It must have been a tough decision. But in the end, everyone decided not to overlook the story and went to see the applicants," Kishiar, who had relayed the events so far to Yuder, said with a faint smile.

"Isn't it admirable? In a situation where the Cavalry was deemed in danger, they didn't just wait but actively sought what they could do, showing how much they've grown."

"Commander..."

The faces of the surrounding members flushed with embarrassment at Kishiar's praise, resembling dogs that expected to be scolded but were instead commended.

‘Well... Certainly, such initiative would have been unimaginable before.’

It's not wise to just wait for the higher-ups to return. The Cavalry, comprised of a few elite soldiers, had a completely different set of expected behaviors compared to regular soldiers, whose existence and best course of action typically involved following the commands of their superiors.



Yuder glanced at his colleagues and then spoke with a softened demeanor.

"So, what happened then?"

"It turned out that there were more Awakeners from the Star of Nagran's central stronghold among the applicants than initially thought. They pretended to be from different regions and used aliases to apply. At first, they denied it, but when the members and successful applicants acted in unison, they were deceived and revealed their purpose."

They managed to do all that? Yuder looked at the members again. The previously Awakeners of the Star of Nagran, who had been peeking out, suddenly became extremely bashful when their eyes met Yuder's.

"...To set such a perfect trap, you guys have done something remarkable."

"Right?"

Kishiar's smile deepened.

"Their purpose was to infiltrate the Cavalry under someone's orders. Who exactly gave the orders is still unclear, but we'll find out soon enough."

Who else would give orders to infiltrate the Cavalry from the Star of Nagran?

Yuder, thinking of the sage, responded.

"...I see."