

Turning 721

Chapter 721

The events that followed were easily inferred without hearing them. Those who claimed to have come from the central stronghold of the Star of Nagran were likely bewildered and panicked, having their identities and intentions thoroughly exposed before they could even infiltrate the Cavalry.

"The Star of Nagran, even if belonging to the same group, members from different strongholds barely know each other. With internal strife brewing beneath the surface and the Cavalry's recruitment of new members causing upheaval, coordination in such a situation was unlikely."

It was Yuder who had anticipated the likelihood of their downfall due to internal conflicts, based on memories from his previous life. And it was Kishiar who had spread the news of the massive second batch recruitment of members without conditions, and had planned to weaken the Sage's and Nahan's group by leaking the list of the Cavalry's collaborators.

Now, these predictions and plans were coming to fruition, benefiting them as expected.

Yuder looked at the faces of his colleagues and the former Awakener members of the Star of Nagran, who were smiling despite being embarrassed.

He had already guessed from the west that the sage would start acting seriously from his stronghold in the south. The original plan was to weed out the applicants in the south before leaving and clean up the surroundings.

But he hadn't anticipated that things would be resolved in this manner before he even made his move. It felt quite novel to him, especially the method used for selection being a ruse. Even Yuder, had he been here, would not have thought of such a tactic.

The ruse conducted by the southern branch members and the successful applicants of the Star of Nagran was, in fact, quite simple.

First, the successful applicants loitered near the Awakeners from the central stronghold, dropping conversations that hinted they were from the same Star of Nagran. Then, the members acted as if

the situation in the Cavalry was dire, sneakily leaking fake information desirable to any spy, and pretending to share serious inside information with the applicants.

To the central stronghold's Awakeners, it seemed as if these applicants were on the same mission as themselves and had already infiltrated the Cavalry, gathering sufficient information – a perfect misdirection.

In their eagerness, these individuals approached the applicants first, unwittingly revealing their own identities and intentions. The Cavalry members successfully identified all of them without shedding a drop of blood.

‘If it were me, I would have just used my powers on all the applicants to quickly reveal their true colors. Even the Cavalry of my previous life would have done the same.’

However, the fact that the present members chose a different method, a ruse, was probably because they had a similar experience in the west and discovered that it could be surprisingly effective.

Who had given them that experience? It was none other than Kishiar La Orr standing before them.

The fact that the same person can make entirely different choices depending on their experiences and what they learn had been observed several times by Yuder while watching the Cavalry members, but it had never struck him as clearly as it did today.

"Anyway, yes. It was a splendid method to uncover the enemies' identities, but before we could capture them, something unexpected happened. In fact, that's the real cause of what's happening right now."

As Yuder regained his composure, Kishiar smiled and began to speak. His gaze swept over the confused enemies and the suspicious figures caught in between, their whole bodies concealed.

"All the spies we thought we had identified were accounted for, except for a southern Awakener witnessed by the successful applicants. You must have heard by now who that is, right?"

"Are you referring to the person who was the temporary leader of the southern stronghold?"

Was her name Sera? Yuder mulled over the unfamiliar name.

"Yes. Surprisingly, at the time the spies were active, she did not target this branch but aimed elsewhere. Can you guess where?"

Yuder's mind raced.

If the children, including Jack, were not mistaken, then she must have come here with a purpose. It wouldn't have been strange for someone entrusted with a critical mission of overseeing the stronghold in the sage's absence not to come to this branch, especially if she wasn't aiming to infiltrate the Cavalry. If infiltration wasn't the goal, it would have been logical for her to assist or guide the central stronghold's Awakeners who were unfamiliar with the south.

But instead, she targeted somewhere else at the same time?

Then why, for what reason, and where did she aim?

There was only one other plausible answer.

'She was said to have formed close ties with the Southern merchants. And those behind the recent death of the second prince of Herne were precisely them. Considering their objective wasn't just to overturn Herne but also to frame and harm the Cavalry...'

The conclusion that the 'others targeting the Cavalry' Aton had mentioned after being knocked out by Yuder were the Sage and the Star of Nagran.

Reversing this line of thought, the situation appeared in a new light.

What would the Southern merchants have thought if they had early access to the sage's plans in the South through their cooperative relationship with Sera? Naturally, they would have devised a way to inflict the maximum damage on the Cavalry, adding the Sage's plans to their own schemes.

'Once entangled in a cooperative relationship, it can intertwine two or three times more.'

The word 'cooperation' implies mutual support. If the Southern merchants had helped Sera and the Southern stronghold, then it meant that Sera would have also assisted the Southern merchants when they requested help.

The scenario of the Southern merchants proposing to help Sera and the Southern Stronghold again, cunningly interjecting themselves into this plan, easily formed in Yuder's mind. The stronghold was already at great risk due to internal conflicts, so refusing their help would have been more surprising.

It was uncertain how much the Sage knew about the Southern merchants, but ultimately, it seemed clear that Sera had moved with them.

The Southern merchants must have known how the Star of Nagran would move and even how the Second Prince of Herne would die. The next target for them could only be one thing.

'The people who left the Cavalry branch for a while to investigate the death of the Second Prince of Herne they had killed.'

More precisely... the center of the Cavalry, Commander Kishiar La Orr.

He was an Awakener, but his exact abilities remained unclear, and many doubted and questioned even his possession of the Divine Sword. Known to be physically frail, not very bright, foolish, and fond of frivolities, there couldn't be an easier yet impactful target.

Moreover, Kishiar had sent even his deputy Nathan Zuckerman ahead somewhere after concluding the investigation of the Second Prince of Herne's body and had boarded a carriage with only Yuder.

Yuder's reputation had indeed soared after resolving the incident in the west, but it hadn't reached the level of his previous life where his mere existence inspired fear. He was still a novice, not even a year into revealing his name to the world, and he had not directly confronted the Southern merchants during his time in the west. If they considered him merely an inexperienced youth to contend with, it wouldn't have been strange for them to feel confident, especially with the additional strength of Sera and others from the Southern stronghold on their side.

And in fact, even Yuder had secretly disembarked from the carriage midway.

Kishiar had been alone on his return to the branch.

The moment Yuder realized this, a chill similar to a shiver ran through his entire body. His eyes deepened, and a dark, ominous voice flowed from his parched lips.

“Don’t tell me, they even targeted the carriage carrying the Commander?”

Although he phrased it as a possibility, his conviction was almost certain.

And as if confirming Yuder’s thought, Kishiar slowly nodded.

“That’s correct.”

A deep, silent sigh escaped. A mix of incredulity and anger bubbled up from deep within.

Knowing Kishiar’s true abilities, he was aware that Kishiar would not fall victim to a sudden attack. What infuriated him was the fact that he himself had not been there.

Yuder, trying his best to calm his emotions, asked,

“...Does the blood on your clothes also stem from that incident?”

"It would seem so," came the nonchalant reply.

Chapter 722

“...Does the blood on your clothes also stem from that incident?”

"It would seem so," came the nonchalant reply.

Kishiar, upon this remark, glanced briefly at the bloodstains on his garment, acknowledging them anew. Though not a matter of great concern to him, Yuder remembered the intense pounding of his heart when he first saw those stains from afar, the memory still vivid.

As Yuder's gaze grew increasingly cold, Kishiar explained the recent events with a smile. "After dispatching my assistant, on my way back to the branch, the carriage suddenly lost direction and

started shaking uncontrollably. Then arrows came flying out of nowhere. Stepping outside, I was confronted by unfamiliar assailants."

It would sound odd to say that sudden attacks like blind arrows piercing his carriage were common, but for Kishiar, such incidents had become almost routine. Ever since the previous Emperor's passing, attempts on the life of Emperor Keilusa and his entourage were nearly a daily occurrence.

Even while living inconspicuously in Peletta, Kishiar faced clever assassination attempts now and then. Known as a man marked for death, there were always those who desired to hasten his end.

Within the wildly shaking carriage, Kishiar sat quietly, maintaining his balance as if he were in another world, thanks to his subtle mastery of force, an almost unreal sight.

"My Lord Duke Peletta! Are you alright?" shouted the coachman, opening the small door connecting to the carriage's interior, his voice loud with concern and alarm. He suggested leaping out at a clearer spot, given the uncontrolled speed of the horses. Kishiar, unsurprised, nodded in agreement.

"That seems wise," he concurred.

"I'm sorry! I'll try to stop the horses..." the coachman began.

"No need. I'll get down first and deal with the enemies. That will divert their attention, and you can continue driving," Kishiar advised calmly.

"What?" The coachman, dodging arrows, was astonished, not having noticed that the arrows had been missing their target all along, thanks to Kishiar's push-and-pull abilities.

"It's too dangerous to abruptly stop the carriage, for both you and the horses. Why risk lives needlessly here?" Kishiar reasoned, still smiling.

"But...!" the coachman protested, still baffled.

"Just a bit further is the Cavalry branch. Break through at the first chance and call for reinforcements. A few might follow, but if you trust my words and don't delay, it's doable."

This suggestion of seeking support was unexpected to the coachman, who had thought Kishiar intended to flee alone. Yet Kishiar offered no further explanation.

The carriage door suddenly swung open with a loud noise, without being touched. Despite the perilously swaying door, Kishiar rose, stepping out as if about to descend comfortably.

"Not now... My Lord!" The coachman, thinking it wasn't the right time to open the door, cried out in alarm. To his astonishment, Kishiar landed lightly on the ground without any apparent impact. Amid the coachman's astounded gaze, the barrage of arrows ceased, and the faces of the mysterious assailants began to emerge.

Thanks to Kishiar's foresight, the carriage, unnoticed by anyone, found its path surprisingly clear ahead. The coachman, realizing that everything had unfolded as Kishiar predicted, clenched his teeth and steered the horses towards the southern branch, speeding away as he caught a last glimpse of the assailants converging on the Duke of Peletta.

Watching the carriage disappear, Kishiar surveyed his surroundings with an inscrutable smile. There were about fifteen assailants in total. They seemed too conspicuous for assassins, dressed not in battle gear but in ordinary civilian clothes, some cloaked in robes that didn't stand out much.

Most notably, they appeared to be Awakeners.

Their eyes shone with excitement and tremor, weapons at the ready. Yet, within those eyes, there was an unmistakable trace of fear and uncertainty, unfamiliar with the situation at hand. Surrounded by them, Kishiar, unfazed and smiling, kindly initiated the conversation.

"So many guests to greet in such a place. Shouldn't you at least tell me where you're from?"

"We are...", someone began to reply.

"Don't answer him. Remember, the Duke of Peletta is an Awakener too! Get back!"

A woman interrupted, likely the group's leader.

"Sera..."

Kishiar pretended not to hear her name, muttered by the hesitant assailants, but he made sure to remember it.

Paying attention elsewhere while keeping his ears open for crucial information was one of his specialties.

They knew who Kishiar was. Their pursuit and attack indicated that this wasn't a spontaneous encounter but a premeditated ambush, possibly connected to the untimely death of the Second Prince of Herne and the fact that Kishiar might be absent from the southern branch.

It seemed impossible unless they were behind the Second Prince of Herne's death.

Sera, the apparent leader, didn't strike Kishiar as exceptionally skilled or powerful, leading him to wonder who truly orchestrated this group. With a seemingly vacant gaze, Kishiar's mind worked rapidly, drawing near-accurate conclusions that others might miss.

Before Kishiar could identify the 'real' leader within the group, the assailants, deciding they couldn't delay further, charged again.

"You three, follow the carriage! The rest, proceed as planned! Block the path so he can't escape!"

Three were chasing the carriage. Kishiar hoped the coachman remembered his instructions and didn't look back.

As Sera gave the order, the attack commenced in a somewhat coordinated manner. Lacking the finesse of professional assassins or the refined strength of Cavalry members, the Awakener assailants made up for their inexperience with their extraordinary abilities.

They showed signs of training, albeit unorthodox.

Kishiar, using his mastery of push and pull forces, moved swiftly, dodging the attacks. He could move faster but deliberately moderated his speed to narrowly evade, provoking his adversaries further.

"D*mn it! How does he dodge like that?"

"My arrows can't reach him!"

"Fools. That must be the Duke's power. Don't get entangled! Keep attacking!"

Even as she spoke, Sera's face contorted in response to the unexpected turn of events.

The Duke of Peletta, arrogantly alone and without even drawing the sword at his waist, was an impressive figure. Despite rumors of his frailty, his tall stature and solid build were initially startling. They thought him no serious threat, assuming his ability to merely evade attacks was the extent of his power. Yet, frustratingly, they couldn't land a single blow on him.

The plan was straightforward: swiftly strike a blow at the Duke of Peletta and the core of the Cavalry, then retreat. Linger in combat within the city, even in its outskirts, was not advantageous for them.

"Sh*t."

Beside Sera, a comrade fiercely launched a sharpened twig like a dagger at the Duke of Peletta. Kishiar, however, evaded this and other simultaneous attacks with eel-like agility, his fluttering clothes getting nicked and torn by the sharp assaults, almost gracelessly.

How could he so effortlessly dodge the attacks of over ten assailants? And as time passed, it seemed increasingly as if Kishiar was getting better at predicting their individual moves, an impossible thought that, in fact, was true. Kishiar was deliberately observing their attacks to gather information, a concept beyond Sera's understanding.

As the notion that they might be overpowered by the Duke of Peletta dawned on Sera, she, gripped by anxiety, unwittingly glanced towards the collaborator who had suggested this assault and revealed the opportunity. One of the Southern merchants, cloaked in a robe and aiding in the attack, felt her gaze and turned his head, signaling not yet time to retreat.

They had said once the Duke of Peletta was taken down, they would create an escape route for the Southern merchants. With the plan not going as expected, Sera wondered if it was time to deploy that method.

However, the merchant, catching Sera's look, firmly shook his head, indicating it wasn't yet time to fall back.

Just as Sera was about to bite her lip and order a change in attack pattern, she locked eyes with Kishiar's piercing red gaze, which had been watching her all along. Feeling as if her thoughts and emotions were laid bare, she flinched, and in that moment, Kishiar spoke up cheerfully.

"Found you. You're the real 'head' leading these people."

The identified Southern merchant stiffened momentarily. Before he could react, Kishiar, who had been evading until then, charged at him with incredible speed, a stark contrast to his previous movements. The merchant struggled, flailing his weapon as Kishiar grasped his throat.

Another Southern merchant shouted something in an unfamiliar language and began rummaging for something in his clothing.

Before it could be recognized, whatever it was, an unseen force exploded from Kishiar, pushing everyone back with immense pressure.

Sera and her comrades, caught off guard, screamed and tumbled backward.

"Ah!"

"What is this...!"

They spat out the dust, trying to steady their dizzied heads.

Through the settling dust, they saw the Duke of Peletta, now wielding a silvery sword.

Chapter 723

Kishiar, who had so far faced his enemies with ease without wielding a weapon, drew his sword in response to an instinctual warning. It was a rare decision for him, as he typically acted based on thorough rational judgment rather than instinct.

However, this decision was spot-on. The moment he grasped the divine sword, an unusual surge of magic power burst forth from the cloaked figures around him.

Kishiar, a mage with superior magic power sensitivity, could clearly sense the flow and danger of this power. It wasn't the common kind of magic one usually encountered. In an age where magic was fading, this was a rare, pure force capable of wondrous feats.

Facing this formless, threatening force was perilous, but fortunately, Kishiar was not only an Awakener and a swordmaster but also a mage and sometimes even a priest.

Feeling the surge of magic power, he pushed away a cloaked man he had been holding with a 'push force', while simultaneously drawing the sword, wrapped in plain cloth, from its sheath with a 'pull force'. The sword, unassuming in appearance, was the divine sword Orr.

The rumor that Duke Peleta had become the new owner of the divine sword Orr was disbelieved for two reasons: the strong bias against the notion of such a divine sword being carried so casually, and a magic artifact attached to the sheath before the journey that diminished recognition. This artifact, often used by nobles to protect treasures from thieves, blurred the perception of its appearance.

The sword itself, stripped of later-added jewels and decorations, was exceedingly sharp and silvery, but otherwise unremarkable.

Yet, a divine sword is a divine sword.

Unbeknownst to many, it was as adept at cutting 'power' as it was at slicing physical forms.

At the moment when magic power swirled violently around, Kishiar swung his arm wielding Orr. If Yuder had seen it, he would have recognized the immense power in the smooth, unexaggerated movement. But he was not there.

Time seemed to slow down as the silvery blade cut through something invisible, a sensation both eerie and fascinating. Kishiar watched the sword's trajectory without blinking.

Only after slicing through the last of the escaping magic power did Kishiar slowly close and open his eyes.

Then, as if the world had been waiting, it resumed its pace, and the once powerful magic, now completely devoid of its strength, dispersed in all directions.

All this happened in the blink of an eye.

No one fully grasped what had transpired, only perceiving an invisible force exploding and collapsing around them.

Those who fell did not realize that if Kishiar had not quickly drawn his sword, they would have been swept away by the dangerous magic, meeting a far worse fate.

Even among swordmasters, Kishiar had accomplished a feat few would dare to attempt, yet he remained composed. He merely observed the result of using the divine sword's power for the first time, a power he had only known in theory until now.

"Oh, it seems a bit of blood has stained my robe."

In the moment he had pushed away the person he had caught to slice through the flow of magic power, their blood had seemingly smeared on his garment. Kishiar turned his gaze towards them, seemingly flustered that things had not gone as intended.

Peeking through the overturned robes, the distinctive red skin of the Southern people was visible. It seemed that those clad in robes, hiding their skin, were all Southerners.

Suspicious Southerners wielding strange magic in such a place, and an Awakener at that. There was only one identity that came to mind.

A smile returned to Kishiar's face, which had vanished while he wielded the sword.

"To think they would come to me before I even started searching. Sending my precious assistant and adjutant was in vain. But this strange flow of magic power... It doesn't seem to be a mage's doing. What trickery is this?"

Seeing Kishiar like this, Sera and her fellow companions were seized by an indescribable fear. Despite everything that had happened, they still could not comprehend the extent of Duke Peletta's abilities or what he had just done with the sword.

Ignorance of one's opponent quickly turned into fear.

Sera decided they couldn't waste any more time here aiding the Southern merchants and hurriedly stood up.

This place was near the southern branch of the Cavalry anyway. Although it was regrettable that their mission was incomplete, escaping safely was the priority.

"Damn it... everyone, get up quickly!"

"Ugh... Ughhh..."

"Hmm. Leaving already?"

Duke Peletta asked, his eyes wide with genuine curiosity, his sword-laden hand hanging loosely. His demeanor appeared chilling to onlookers.

Come to think of it, he had been like this from the start. Ever since he jumped out of the ambushed carriage, he had never shown a moment of panic or lack of composure.

How could a sane human act in such a manner? It made one wonder if the rumors about him being an unpredictable madman might actually be true, despite the falsehoods in many of his tales.

Near Sera, gasping for breath, a Southern merchant spoke in a low voice.

"It seems Duke Peletta being alone here was no coincidence. It looks like something must have happened at the place where we originally planned to evade to."

"What do you mean?"

"Right now, tremendous power is stirring in two places: where our helpers are staying and here. We underestimated the power Duke Peletta possesses. It was our misjudgment."

Sera remembered that one of the Southern merchants had the ability to sensitively detect the flow of power. Thanks to this ability, they had quickly detected the movement of monsters approaching their southern base, providing significant assistance.

Now, it seemed this ability was not limited to sensing monsters but also the power of humans.

"So, does that mean we have no way to escape from here now? You said you could find us a way out!"

"I never said that. There is still a way out. But you'll have to buy us more time..."

As the Southern merchant was about to continue, he suddenly turned his head, sensing something. Then, from a distance, shouts were heard.

"Duke!"

"The Duke is over there!"

"..."

In silence, the urgently approaching figures were not from the Cavalry but were clad in Imperial Army uniforms, unmistakably reinforcements for Kishiar. Why the Cavalry was absent remained a mystery, but it seemed that the coachman had managed to reach them properly. Kishiar, with a smile on his face, waved his hand and spoke.

"Are you planning to continue fighting? I'd prefer if you surrendered at this point."

Sera bit her lip. Reinforcements had indeed arrived. It felt like everything had completely fallen apart.

However, the Southern merchants appeared relatively calm, and it was clear they still had a plan up their sleeve. Sera decided to trust them and not give up just yet. If there was any way to escape, she was willing to help.

"Everyone, snap out of it! We need to attack first to survive!"

Her shout awakened her companions, who one by one stood up and began to confront Duke Peletta and the approaching reinforcements.

But why was this happening? Though they intended only to engage Duke Peletta and then retreat, upon regaining their senses, they found themselves nearly at the southern branch of the Cavalry, caught between the reinforcements and Duke Peletta.

"What is this...!"

Incredibly, at that location were the members from the Star of Nagran's central stronghold, who were supposed to fake support for the Cavalry today, and they were already in a standoff with the Cavalry. The detestable members of the Cavalry cheered upon seeing their leader safely returned.

"Commander!"

"I've heard the rough story from the Imperial Army. You must have had a tough time with the sudden situation."

While the Cavalry rejoiced, the Star of Nagran's forces were filled with silent shock.

The members from the central Stronghold, who had come down to the south to prepare for infiltrating the Cavalry and had received help from Sera, recognized her and the southern stronghold's Awakeners, widening their eyes in disbelief.

Exchanges of bewildered looks communicated their mutual inability to understand why each was in this situation, but the chaotic standoff left no room for conversation.

Chapter 724

What in the world was this situation?

The prey was supposed to be the Cavalry, but it seemed they were the ones being hunted.

Could it be that the Cavalry knew their plan from the very beginning?

The Awakeners of the Star of Nagran vehemently denied such a possibility in their minds, but their hearts told a different story. They struggled to break free from the chaos, but no path of escape from the Cavalry's encirclement was in sight.

Yet, even in such dire straits, the southern merchants remained quietly on the sidelines, offering no significant assistance. Their eyes, cold and detached, watched the Star of Nagran Awakeners fall and suffer, unlike their previous friendly demeanor.

One of them had narrowly escaped the clutches of Duke Peletta, yet instead of harboring vengeance, they seemed preoccupied with something else.

It was unclear what these seemingly observant and waiting merchants desired, but Sera fervently hoped it was the promised opportunity for escape, thus she protected them with all her might, as promised.

Even Duke Peletta, who seemed to have easily gained the upper hand after reuniting with his men and issuing seamless orders, was keenly observing them.

"Commander, we've almost finished arranging our members to protect the buildings around the branch and evacuating the civilians. Shall we now start suppressing them with our powers?"

"We should, but... I hesitate."

"Pardon?"

"Didn't you notice? There are those among them who have cleverly inserted themselves without using much power."

Presumably, these were the southern merchants they had missed in the west.

What exactly was that strange magic attack they attempted earlier? Was it a one-time act? Kishiar was disturbed by their cunningly passive behavior, as he hadn't yet fully understood the cause of the attack.

To Kishiar, they seemed like people waiting for something.

What were they waiting for? The right moment to unleash a second attack on the Cavalry, inflicting damage? An opportunity to escape? Or something else entirely?

It was hard to guarantee that a similar attack, if attempted again, would be thwarted at the right moment. The outcome of that magic power flow, once properly formed, was even beyond Kishiar's speculation.

If a more skilled and experienced mage had been present, perhaps more could have been gleaned from the attempt and failure of the attack. Unfortunately, there was no such person there.

If they were indeed waiting to launch that strange magic attack again, Kishiar decided he couldn't recklessly send in the Cavalry. Those not versed in magic wouldn't be able to perceive and react to the flow of magic power as quickly and accurately as Kishiar, risking severe damage.

Therefore, he temporarily postponed his plan to start suppressing them right after finishing the evacuation and preparations around the branch. Instead, he persistently observed the southern merchants, lost in thought.

What could be a safe response that would minimize damage and quickly reveal their intentions? What were they waiting for, and what did they desire to achieve by doing this?

Kishiar La Orr's mind raced over a metaphorical board, pieces and markers moving across it, drawing dozens of potential tactics and outcomes.

At the end of his contemplation, Kishiar arrived at a conclusion he deemed the best.

"It was difficult to discern their intentions, but one thing was clear. If they were planning to confront the Cavalry, they inevitably had to be concerned about the whereabouts of another person besides me."

Kishiar hinted at this with a knowing wink towards Yuder, clearly believing Yuder would understand who he was referring to.

Of course, he meant Yuder Aile, Kishiar's assistant.

When the enemies ambushed, Kishiar had been alone. The absence of Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder Aile, who should have been by his side, was not a concern when Kishiar was solitary. However, the situation changed once he regrouped with his subordinates.

Outnumbered, and with Yuder Aile, known as one of the Cavalry's strongest forces, yet to appear, the enemy, if rational, would have realized that Duke Peletta being alone was not mere coincidence and would be on high alert for Yuder's return.

Nathan Zuckerman was also a knight of considerable skill, but his true capabilities remained unpublicized.

With this in mind, Kishiar saw clearly what he needed to do.

If the enemy's objective was unknown, the best course was to present them with an opportunity – albeit one that seemed so but was actually a trap.

"It seemed best to feign carelessness. So, that's what I did."

"That's...."

Yuder, who had been listening quietly, suddenly furrowed his brow and began to speak, then stopped himself.

"To think, he didn't wield his weapon even when facing over ten foes, yet drew his divine sword feeling instinctive danger... He deliberately feigned carelessness before the enemy?"

It was an understanding yet perilously risky choice, uncharacteristic of the usual Kishiar. But precisely because of that, the reason behind such a choice felt all the more apparent.

If Kishiar, who usually sought to minimize harm to his allies, went to such lengths to discern the southern merchants' intentions, it meant he judged the situation as extremely dangerous had their attack succeeded.

Known for prioritizing safety, Kishiar was also someone who wouldn't hesitate to shed his own blood if deemed necessary, a realization Yuder had already come to in a previous life.

The image of Kishiar, who had once stood bare against the colossal Pethuamet, throwing himself into destruction, momentarily flashed in Yuder's mind, chilling his hands. But he bit his lip, casting away the memory.

'No. Seeing that he's unharmed now, his feigned carelessness must not have been too perilous. Let's continue listening.'

Yet, his twitching eyebrows and the cold expression couldn't completely hide Yuder's emotions.

"If it was an act of carelessness, how did you... go about it?"

"Well, isn't it obvious? I loudly complained of exhaustion from using too much power in my frail body, told them to leave the rest to my assistant and adjutant sent on errands, and pretended to go inside for a drink. It's natural to be thirsty after a fight."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

Kishiar smiled faintly. Yuder blinked and looked at the surrounding members. Their sparkling eyes and nodding heads confirmed that Kishiar's words were true.

'Really?'

Yuder hesitated momentarily before asking.

"Did they... believe you?"

"They did."

It was uncertain how convincing Kishiar's acting had been, but apparently, the enemies had truly believed his ruse. With Yuder Aile, the most powerful hero of the West, confirmed to be away and Kishiar, the Cavalry Commander with unknown abilities, having retreated inside the branch, the enemies finally revealed their true colors.

"Not long after I feigned carelessness and went inside, I began to sense the signs of that magic attack again. However, it was heading in a slightly different direction than I had anticipated."

Kishiar, prepared to emerge at any moment using his Awakener abilities, leaped out with his divine sword the instant he sensed the signs.

But what caught his eye was neither his members trying to fend off the attack nor the appearance of the enemies. They were all staring upwards, faces etched with shock, having discovered something.

Kishiar too halted in his tracks, realizing that the massive flow of power he had sensed as the sign of an attack was now condensing above their heads.

Lifting his gaze, he saw a dark crack tearing through the sky like paper, its ominous and eerie presence looming over them.

"...That crack was it?" asked Yuder.

Kishiar nodded in confirmation.

"Yes."

The sudden appearance of the bizarre crack left everyone bewildered. A crack that tore through space signified the imminent emergence of monsters.

'Suddenly, here, in this place?!

'What is this? How can a crack occur in a city?'

Cracks that spawned monsters did not follow any predictable patterns in terms of timing or location. However, there were certainly areas where they appeared more frequently and others where they were rarer. As a result, people chose to live away from places where cracks commonly appeared. Cities, especially, were areas where cracks appeared less frequently, and the empire's capital was famous for not having experienced a single crack in a thousand years, thanks to the magic blessed by the Archmage Luma.

But now, a crack had suddenly appeared right above the Cavalry branch in the middle of such a city.

While the members of the Cavalry and the Star of Nagran were in a flurry, anticipating the appearance of monsters, Kishiar was the first to regain his composure.

'No. No, this isn't right. This crack is different from the ordinary ones that spawn monsters.'

Ordinary cracks would immediately spew out monsters and then disappear, but this one merely hovered in place, showing no signs of releasing anything even after several minutes.

Kishiar had seen such a peculiar crack before.

It was in the Great Sarain Forest in the West.

A strange crack that simply existed and then vanished within the forest that only grew denser no matter how much it was cut down. And the sight of Yuder Aile, who alone did not panic but stared at it gravely.

Yuder's exhausted voice speaking of a 'disaster' echoed in Kishiar's mind.

Chapter 725

A strange crack that simply existed and then vanished within the forest that only grew denser no matter how much it was cut down. And the sight of Yuder Aile, who alone did not panic but stared at it gravely.

Yuder's exhausted voice speaking of a 'disaster' echoed in Kishiar's mind.

"You must have seen the strange cracks that appeared in the west, when the monsters began acting oddly. Do you remember?"

"I have seen similar things before..."

Yuder asserted that this was merely the beginning. He described it as a quiet sparkle, a signal flare before countless disasters and hardships, like the calm before a storm.

Kishiar vividly remembered the expression on Yuder's face as he told this tale.

Always known for his impassiveness, Yuder, upon closer inspection, actually had a surprisingly wide range of emotions. Although he appeared cold, within him burned a flame far more intense than others.

But his expression at that moment...

It was utterly devoid of anything.

All that made him human seemed to have been stripped away, leaving behind only dusty and hollow eyes, faintly reflecting ancient dust and a chilling coldness. The Yuder that Kishiar thought he knew, or believed he knew, had vanished, replaced by someone worn down by a terrible solitude, echoing a hollow voice.

Only those who had faced death could understand the weight of that emptiness. Kishiar felt it not with his mind, but with something deeper.

Even at his brightest, burning fiercely and brilliantly, the deepest part of him harbored a concealed void, akin to the blackened ash left where everything had burned away.

Even when revealing his goal to 'once again avert the disaster facing the world', Yuder's eyes held a resignation, as if he naturally expected Kishiar not to believe him.

His expression, accustomed to self-doubt, spoke the truth without any trace of grievance or desire to persuade, more harrowing in a way than his physically battered and prostrate form.

Somewhere deep within Kishiar, a long groan of pain echoed...

"...Commander?"

In the midst of discussing something crucial, Yuder stopped and cautiously addressed Kishiar, who was silently staring at him, concern evident in his now dark and laughter-less eyes.

‘What happened back then? Was there something serious?’

As if trying to discern some hidden trace of an untold story, Kishiar's intense yet worried gaze met Yuder's, eliciting a soft sigh.

"Sorry. It just struck me how miraculous it was for the assistant to arrive here so timely."

"Excuse me? What do you mean by that..."

The unexpected and somewhat awkward remark caused a frown to form on Yuder's brow, while the man chuckled softly, continuing the conversation.

"As soon as the crack appeared, everyone panicked, thinking monsters were about to emerge. They tried to flee, but fortunately, we remembered the similar cracks we'd seen in the west and managed to avoid being swept up in the chaos."

Kishiar, recalling the cracks he had seen in the Great Sarain Forest and Yuder's words, immediately commanded the bewildered crowd, "Monsters won't appear; keep your focus on the enemy." Without his directive, they would have missed the southern merchants, disguised in robes, attempting to slip away.

Upon hearing Kishiar's affirmation, it wasn't just the Cavalry or the Imperial Army that regained their composure, but also the members of the Star of Nagran.

"Are you telling me you were about to leave us behind just now?! Is that what you meant by clearing the way? What in the world is that strange crack?"

"No, that's not it. It's hard to explain here, but please trust us..."

"What's going on, Sera? Are you here under his command? As far as I know, that shouldn't be the case. Why have you come this far? Weren't you from the South supposed to return today? And who are those suspicious people?"

Sera, shocked by the Southern merchants' attempt to escape, raised her voice, forgetting the standoff. The merchants, not intending any harm, tried to calm her, but now a member of the Central stronghold Awakeners, suspicious of Sera, intervened.

The seed of distrust, once sown, spread like wildfire.

It was then that a chill began to circulate among the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran. The Central stronghold gathered with their own, the Southern stronghold with theirs, and the merchants huddled together, exchanging glances and words.

From a distance, Kishiar, with the keen sense of a swordmaster, easily grasped the conversations without moving a finger.

The Central stronghold Awakeners, losing trust in the Southern stronghold for not following the Sage's orders and engaging in dubious activities with the strangers.

The Southern stronghold Awakeners, suspecting but unable to fully confront the Southern merchants they had moved with, unsure how to extract themselves from this situation.

And the silent Southern merchants.

With each group's motives and benefits differing, mutual distrust prevented the battle from progressing, leading to a stalemate.

A situation simmering with tension, yet on the verge of exploding.

Yuder appeared from the sky at that very moment.

"That's how it happened."

Having learned the whole story, Yuder sighed deeply.

Though many events had unfolded where he had been, the situation with Kishiar was even more intense. In the short time Yuder was away, returning alone by carriage to the Cavalry branch,

Kishiar had faced an ambush and even used his divine sword to fend off an unknown attack, tensing his muscles to the point of stiffness.

However, it was fortunate that he had managed to turn the situation to their advantage without injury.

"It's to be expected, but..."

Kishiar, immensely powerful but with little experience using his abilities, still had to be cautious about his health and the issue of containment. Knowing he was a brilliant strategist and swordmaster who could slice through walls with a twig, a battle against multiple opponents was still perilously risky. Moreover, he had used more strength than usual since coming South, adding to his fatigue.

Although his condition had improved with Yuder's assistance, exerting himself again today would have undoubtedly drained him significantly, even if he appeared fine on the surface.

Yet, looking at Kishiar's brazen smile, one wouldn't guess he had just faced over a dozen opponents alone. His usual self, a true Kishiar La Orr, was indeed a relief to see.

"Regardless of there being no major incident, those who attacked will pay their dues."

Yuder's icy gaze swept over the Awakeners of the Southern stronghold and the robed Southern merchants.

He clenched and unclenched his fist, gauging the strength that remained within him. Although not in a completely relaxed state due to the excessive energy expended while dealing with Aton, he was confident enough to take down those lurking adversaries.

The crack still floated in the sky, existing without any noticeable change. In his memory, such cracks in the Great Sarain Forest had been followed by a surge of monsters, but this had never been the case in the South.

‘In my previous life in the South, such silent cracks appeared in various places more than ten times before a major earthquake occurred. There were no instances of monsters appearing then. If this is the beginning of something similar, the likelihood is high that it will repeat. But in the Great Sarain Forest, the appearance of these cracks led to an increase in monsters, so certainty is elusive.’

The earthquake in his previous life's South had occurred several years later. It had been difficult to gather information, as it was only after everything had passed that people reported witnessing such cracks.

But could it be that even back then, these cracks had formed in this manner?

Could cracks be created by human power?

The words of Aton floated in his mind, continuously breeding questions.

‘The one thing that's clear is that to find answers, we must capture those Southern merchants.’

Already half-intent on punishing them for the attack on Kishiar, the added need to extract information seemed to invigorate him with newfound strength.

Chapter 726

Yuder turned his head to gaze upon Kishiar.

"Given the uncertainty of the problems this crack may cause, wouldn't it be best to deal with them as quickly as possible? I shall go and see to it."

"Will you go in person?"

Kishiar asked, tilting his head. Yuder, not quite grasping the intent behind his question, remained silent for a moment before responding.

"Yes. Naturally, I must go myself."

"We're not so hard-pressed that I need to send someone who's just returned from battle and is in disarray out again. Why not rest for a while, observe the situation, and leave the suppression to your comrades?"

"..."

Yuder's eyebrow twitched slightly.

'...Is this his way of punishing me for failing to heed his warning to avoid injury?'

The situation was not disadvantageous for them, as Kishiar had pointed out. However, as long as those who had caused the crack remained standing, Yuder had no intention of standing by idly.

Though not in perfect condition, he didn't necessarily need rest. To sit and merely watch was unthinkable, especially given the situation reminiscent of a disaster from a previous life.

"I cannot predict what those Southern merchants might do next. They dared to target you, Commander, and seem to be linked to that crack above. Those two reasons alone make it imperative for me not to back down. If there are no other reasons, I implore you to reconsider."

Yuder emphasized the phrase "other reasons." It was a subtle protest against receiving such a punishment, especially having heard about the terrible events in the previous game and now facing this strange crack.

Yet, the response he received was unexpected.

"Is that why you're worried?"

"Excuse me?"

It was a voice so low and quiet, only Yuder could hear.

Kishiar's unsmiling eyes quietly watched Yuder's face, as if trying to see through something hidden.

Caught off guard, Yuder opened his mouth but then hesitated. After a moment, Kishiar let out a small sigh, his face relaxing into a reluctant smile. Soon, it shifted back to his usual, carefree, and shameless expression.

"It was a joke. Of course, having my capable and beautiful assistant take charge is the best and highest course of action. I suggested a rest out of concern, but if that is your wish... Are you sure you're okay?"

One of the successful candidates looked incredulous, wondering if this was indeed something Duke Peletta had just said to his assistant. The others around, including other successful candidates and imperial soldiers, shared the same expression.

However, the Cavalry members took it all in stride, accustomed to Kishiar's manner of speaking.

Yuder, momentarily caught up in the smile he had just seen, barely registered Kishiar's added nonsensical description.

'What was that?'

He took a deep breath, trying to calm his irregular heartbeat, and nodded firmly.

"I'm fine... Please entrust it to me."

It was natural for him to worry, as Yuder would have felt the same had Kishiar tried to intervene. It wasn't strange that he momentarily showed his concern.

Yuder bowed his head before Kishiar, placing a hand over his chest in the Cavalry's salute. Kishiar, returning to his usual brazen and relaxed demeanor, looked towards the distant enemies and spoke.

"Those called upon now shall follow Yuder Aile to the forefront."

"Yes!"

The waiting Cavalry members responded vigorously. The names Kishiar recited belonged to members possessing power with natural attributes, totaling five.

"Everyone is well aware of Yuder's abilities, I presume."

"Yes. We are aware!"

"From now on, you will be responsible for dealing with the key figures in this incident, aligning thoroughly with Yuder's movements. As it's a practice we often do in the Cavalry, I trust you will perform well in real combat."

Realizing what was expected of them, the members grinned and nodded affirmatively.

"Yes!"

"The rest, as mentioned earlier, will form a formation and start suppressing. Do not miss signals from colleagues already dispatched in the surrounding buildings. Always be vigilant and move accordingly. Remember, precise control and speed of abilities are paramount to minimize collateral damage."

"Understood!"

As Kishiar raised his hand, the Cavalry members moved in unison. Only the imperial army and successful candidates remained by Kishiar's side. However, no one was worried about the Commander left behind. The members' faces brimmed with confidence, a testament to their belief in their skills and the Commander.

Yuder, without looking back at his following comrades, ran, stepping on the wind. Using the wind's power allowed for high jumps, but with lesser power, he could sprint at tremendous speeds without touching the ground.

Direction control was challenging, and efficiency dropped with prolonged use, but in situations like now, where quick handling was crucial, this method was most appropriate.

"Ah...!"

A Star of Nagran member, thinking he had prepared quickly for the Cavalry's movement, was startled to find Yuder had reached him in the blink of an eye. He hurriedly swung his sword, but Yuder was no longer there. With a weightless grace, Yuder leaped high and struck the sword-wielding person's head with his scabbard.

"Ugh!"

'The target isn't who I aimed for, but at least one is down.'

Yuder, without looking back at the one who had fallen unconscious, focused only on what lay ahead. The fallen would be collected by the following members of the Cavalry.

Jumping high again while sprinting on the wind, Yuder quickly discerned the positions of both enemies and allies.

Kishiar had strategically positioned members around the southern branch and in surrounding buildings. They replaced civilians for building protection and, from elevated or concealed positions, supported their allies with their abilities.

Members creating barriers in every corner to prevent escape, casting blinding lights to signal enemy directions, and spreading strengthening winds, all contributed to the allies facing the enemy directly, enabling them to exert their powers far more comfortably than usual.

The Cavalry's form, a fluid encirclement of the enemy, was a product of grueling collective training. Seeing this perfect synergy in action filled Yuder, who had taught them, with immense satisfaction.

In the midst of the tangled fray, Yuder precisely counted and located the robed figures. He longed to knock down the fools from the southern stronghold, but since they were wearing casual clothes, it was very difficult to distinguish them from those from the central stronghold.

'There are four of them, all scattered. Did they think it's enough if even one escapes?'

What was the use? Such tricks were meaningless before Yuder.

While it was common to pursue and confront each adversary individually in such situations, Yuder Aile could, if he could see them all, choose to strike them down simultaneously.

Yuder, harnessing the wind beneath his feet, explosively propelled himself upward. Just before descending, he briefly slowed, reaching his hand toward the distant ground below. His golden eye shimmered brighter as the earth beneath the four southern merchants suddenly caved in.

"...!"

They reacted quickly, as if expecting such a sudden turn, but Yuder was not alone. The Cavalry members following him each used their abilities to subdue the enemies, one by one.

The water manipulator flooded the ground, making it swampy to prevent escape, while the fire manipulator surrounded the area Yuder had affected with a ring of fire. Though none could manipulate earth, the air manipulator adjusted the airflow in the hole, making breathing impossible, achieving their goal with ease.

Meanwhile, Yuder, leisurely landing, easily shattered the blind attacks coming his way with a sword in its sheath, a gift from Kishiar, moving forward. The sturdy sheath, a weapon in itself, didn't necessitate drawing the sword.

Barehanded, with only his robust sword sheath, Yuder felt no need to exert more power. His combat sense, particularly adept in one-against-many battles, shone as always.

His relentless manner invigorated his allies and stunned his enemies.

"Madness... How can he be...!"

"Is he even human?"

Chapter 727

"Madness... How can he be...!"

"Is he even human?"

'If not human, then what?'

Yuder, deemed by others as a monstrous non-human, maintained an indifferent expression and pressed forward silently despite the trembling words of disdain. Such remarks had become so commonplace to him that they now felt like a validation of his efficacy.

'But indeed, those who have undergone proper training are far more challenging than the soft, worthless fighters of the underground illegal fighting rings.'

The challenge was greater when facing fellow Awakeners, as opposed to non-Awakeners. The greatest difficulty lay in predicting the abilities and fighting style of an Awakener until faced in person.

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, particularly those with unique abilities, were notoriously unpredictable and lacked any discernible pattern in their fighting styles, making them even more formidable.

However, the difficulty in combating diverse abilities mainly troubled those inexperienced with Awakener.

Yuder could quickly deduce the nature of an opponent's abilities at the slightest hint of their use.

'This one must be of the natural attribute. If it's fire, just quench it with water.'

Before the Awakener could even unleash fire, he was drenched and sent flying with a scream by a surge of water.

'Why does this one continually rely on his ability to instantaneously enhance his physique without efficiently distributing it? Even a served meal wouldn't be this easy.'

The physically-enhanced Awakener, who tried to attack Yuder from the side, was effortlessly struck in a weakened vital spot by his casually swung scabbard and fell backwards.

Another Awakener, crouching behind and morphing into a winged beast, charged at Yuder. But as soon as Yuder twisted his scabbard between the creature's wings, the attacker collapsed, unconscious.

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

'He wields sound control. Impressive, but... try screaming while swallowing a dust storm.'

The one causing turmoil with his piercing screams, making his comrades struggle, was promptly overwhelmed by Yuder's wind-conjured dust, coughing miserably before collapsing from a scabbard blow.

The abilities of the Awakener, though seemingly unique at a glance, ultimately stemmed from the same human origin and shared similar vulnerabilities.

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagan, intent on targeting the renowned Yuder Aile, were astounded by his rapid, mechanical-like precision, which left them incapacitated.

Kishiar La Orr, who induced a ghost-like fear by never allowing an attack with his mysterious power, was different from Yuder Aile, whose power, although clearly visible, was unavoidably terrifying.

Who called them the indulgent and incompetent Duke Peletta and his toy-like Cavalry?

His mere existence posed a threat like a weapon, causing the enemies' morale to wane steadily.

This was no mere fight of a twenty-year-old youth. Those who had underestimated him as an equal Awakener experienced a daunting disparity in skill and an inexplicable maturity, stirring both awe and fear.

Among them, the Awakener from the southern stronghold who had ambushed Kishiar felt an intensified fear. They knew someone with such overwhelming power would not mercifully spare those who dared attack their master. Had they known earlier that a monster like Yuder was with Duke Peletta, they would not have left their stronghold so easily.

Among them, there were those who had believed that Nahan's repeated defeats against the Cavalry were due to collusion. Only now did they realize that it was a miracle Nahan had managed to return each time from facing a monster like Yuder Aile.

'That guy Awakened around the same time as us, but what accounts for this difference?'

The Cavalry had been formed barely a year ago. Even if he had Awakened earlier, he had only gained his powers about two years ago. How could he fight like this?

As fellow Awakeners, they were even more acutely aware of Yuder Aile's absurd strength. Those who possessed similar attributes of power felt it even more intensely.

Those who had been smug about their strong abilities, and those who had underestimated the young Yuder, were all equally shocked, as if their world had been turned upside down.

"This can't be..."

The sage who had sent them here had not warned them about the strength of the Cavalry.

Having already experienced a group of Awakeners in the Star of Nagran, they thought a second encounter would be no different.

But this was nothing like that. They were like in the belly of a gaping lion.

The demoralized men hesitated and retreated. But instead of an escape, they found the smiling members of the Cavalry guarding the encirclement. Yuder had been so overwhelmingly dominant that it overshadowed the fact that the others were also experienced and adept in handling their powers.

"Hey, looking at Yuder, we seem pretty easy, huh?"

"You dare to infiltrate our branch? I'll show you exactly where you tried to enter. What? You won't look? No refusal accepted. Your chance to leave is over!"

As the attackers targeting Yuder began to scatter in fear, he leisurely moved towards the location of the southern merchants he had trapped with his earth abilities. Initially, he had planned to head straight to them upon landing, but he was delayed by the unexpectedly large number of the Star of Nagran's Awakener who, fearlessly, had targeted him first.

If it weren't for the comrades assigned by Kishiar, even after capturing them, he would have been concerned about their escape, preventing him from fighting so freely. Initially, he had thought Kishiar's concern excessive, but his decision had proven to be significantly helpful.

This demonstrated Kishiar's exceptional ability to read the flow of the battlefield.

'He must have predicted how I would fight and who I would target first. Maybe even more accurately than I could...'

It's not pleasant to know that others can predict one's actions. Being predictable means being vulnerable to defeat at any time.

But if the other party was Kishiar, it was different. Far from being displeased, Yuder felt a sense of gratification and slightly lifted his head.

He felt as if he caught Kishiar's gaze from a distance. It was probably true.

Even though Kishiar's face was hardly visible from such a distance, Yuder could clearly feel those red eyes not missing a single move of his. A warm heat overflowed in his heart.

However, separate from that, the crack that hung over their heads still remained, maintaining its ominous appearance.

'I'm not sure if it's just my imagination... but it seems to have grown larger than before.'

"Yuder!"

As Yuder frowned and tried to observe the crack more closely, one of the members holding the southern merchant called out. Yuder resumed his steps and headed towards them.

Yergin Schiller, the Awakener with wind and air attributes, was sweating but did not lessen her grip on the subdued southern merchant. As Yuder approached, she spoke.

"I was wondering when you'd come, what with everyone clinging to you. Whew, finally some relief."

"The one you caught?"

"I took their weapons and belongings and buried them in a pit. I'll dig them out now."

As Yergin used her powers, the face of a semi-conscious person emerged from the pit. Yuder grabbed the person by the scruff and pulled them up. A woman's face with red skin was revealed as

her robe flipped over her head, her short hair framing her vaguely focused eyes, shimmering with an indiscernible emotion.

It was a chilling gaze, but Yuder wouldn't have come this far if he were afraid of such things. Yergin, standing beside him, was not frightened either, whistling while inspecting the confiscated weapons. Yuder, still holding the woman by the scruff, looked straight into her eyes and asked.

"That crack. It's your doing, isn't it?"

"..."

"How could humans have caused such a crack?"

"..."

No matter what he asked, no answer came back. There was no response, as if her tongue had been cut out.

'Well, I didn't expect a cordial response anyway.'

But the actual leader of these people, Aton, wasn't so reticent, having spewed quite a bit of nonsense. Perhaps mentioning what he had said would provoke a reaction. Yuder recalled a particularly noteworthy phrase from Aton's ramblings.

"Is this the result of your nonsense about 'repercussions of imbalance' turning this into the land of the black moon?"

"..."

Indeed. For the first time, the woman blinked and showed a reaction. A hint of emotion flickered in her distinctly southern, dark eyes.

Chapter 728

Indeed. For the first time, the woman blinked and showed a reaction. A hint of emotion flickered in her distinctly southern, dark eyes.

"Who told you that?" she asked, her accent harsher than that of Aton.

Yuder, realizing he had successfully engaged her in their imperial tongue, smirked slightly. "Your leader, who suffered a beating at my hands before you did," he replied.

"...Sir Aton?" she questioned in disbelief.

"Exactly."

"That's impossible."

"Why? You also lost to me without laying a hand on me."

This left the Southern merchant speechless.

Yuder, gripping the merchant's collar tighter, leaned in, his eyes as dark as the night sky. The woman's eyes trembled as if uncomfortable under his gaze.

"What does it mean to create a land of the black moon by the repercussions of imbalance? What do your Wolf's Eyes want, and what outcome does this crack bring?" Yuder demanded.

The woman remained silent, lips tightly sealed. Yuder considered interrogating another merchant when Yergin, his companion, suddenly made a curious noise, having discovered something.

"Yuder, sorry to interrupt, but can you look at this? I found something odd among the belongings we took from her."

Yuder released the merchant, turning to see what Yergin had found - an old cloth pouch with a small, palm-sized box inside. Opening it, Yuder found another pouch filled with white powder, which gave off a musty, rotten smell. Yuder immediately recognized it as the counterfeit drug they had swapped in the West.

'Why carry around spoiled drugs?' he wondered, pocketing the pouch. As he was about to close the box, Yuder's eyes flickered in recognition, '...The shape of the inside of the box looks somewhat familiar.'

"The powder's identity is unclear, but it reeked terribly once the box was opened. Could this be their weapon?" Yergin speculated.

Yuder, pondering whether to disappoint his comrade with the truth that it was merely rotten illegal drugs, ultimately shook his head.

'Hold on,' he thought, intrigued by the comment that the box emitted no smell when closed. He opened and closed it repeatedly.

'This is no ordinary box,' Yuder realized, his expression changing. He began shaking the small box next to his ear, prompting Yergin to ask quizzically, "What are you doing? Is this some new training method?"

"No," Yuder replied, still shaking the box. Though he wondered what she thought of him, discovering the secret of this box was largely thanks to her. Yuder opened the box again and briefly expressed his thanks.

"Thanks to you, I found it."

"What did you find?"

"The hidden compartment in the box."

"The hidden... what?"

Yuder, instead of explaining, fiddled with the inside of the open box with his fingers. It seemed plain to the eye, but when touched, a catch was revealed.

It was the key to a new space, secretly hidden beneath the box's bottom.

Yuder had seen such a secret double-bottomed box before when he was pretending to be Kishiar's lover in Tainu. He had received a lapis lazuli cigarette case of the exact same structure as a gift while surveilling suspicious individuals under the guise of buying rare goods from the crowded streets.

Despite initially refusing such a box, thinking it unnecessary, Yuder had stored a flower folded from candy paper, given by Kishiar, in its secret compartment, hidden in the depths of his wardrobe. It seemed the only appropriate place to keep it safe and out of sight.

Had he not had the experience of opening and closing the box a few times before, he might not have discovered its secret compartment. Fortunately, despite differences in form and material, the opening mechanism was similar.

Yuder twisted the part he felt with his fingertips forcefully. The bottom opened, revealing the hidden space and its contents. Yergin applauded in admiration.

“Wow! That's amazing. As expected of Baron Aile.”

Though Yuder had no significant rapport with Yergin in the previous life, he could clearly sense that she was a highly competent member of the excessively bloated Cavalry. He sent her a frown, suggesting she keep it down, and carefully picked up the hidden object.

"No, don't you dare!"

The southern merchant, having seen what Yuder was doing from inside the pit, thrashed about, growling. Of course, no one here was really going to stop because of such words.

"How did you know that was hidden there?"

"If a box is sealed well enough to contain a rotting smell, it's likely more expensive than it appears. It's odd to store only rotten powder in such a box. Plus, when I shook it, I heard something rattling."

"Hey, I hadn't thought of that. I'll learn from this."

Yuder, letting her words go in one ear and out the other, examined the object he had picked up closely in midair.

'A jewel? No, a magic stone?'

It was an opaque black stone. It looked like a raw gemstone, but faintly emitted a weak magic energy, suggesting it might be a magic stone.

Small in size, but definitely worthy of further investigation.

'I should send this to Kishiar.'

Just as Yuder was about to put it back in the box, a loud shout came from the pit.

"You fools above the desert will never understand what this is!"

"..."

"The more you meddle, the more the balance will be disturbed beyond repair. You've lost."

That was as much as Yuder could understand. The woman, muttering in a mix of southern language, took a deep breath and then shouted in pure southern tongue.

"Inia! Kta Inia!"

After the shout, there was a gruesome sound from inside the woman's mouth.

"Oh? What...!"

Startled, Yergin dove into the pit, but soon reemerged, her face a mixture of shock and disbelief.

"My God. She's killed herself! What kind of people are these, to take their lives so easily..."

"Yuder...!"

"Yuder!"

Then, calls for Yuder began simultaneously from all around. They were from the Cavalry members, each guarding a southern merchant.

"Come quickly! This guy's about to kill himself...!"

"Why, why is this happening? Suddenly acting crazy...!"

Yuder regretted not having gagged them earlier, gathering his strength in haste. He tried to enhance and use the powers of earth and wind, but could not prevent the deaths of the remaining southern merchants.

In an instant, four corpses lay before Yuder. He, pale-faced, searched the bodies for possessions and weapons in place of the other stunned members. Each had the same item as the first woman who died – a secretive box, and a similar stone was found beneath the hidden compartment of these boxes.

There were no other items to identify them, and all their weapons were ordinary.

'What were these people planning to do with these?'

While Yuder was lost in thought, the remaining members nearly subdued all of Star of Nagran's members. They all thought the situation would resolve without any harm to allies or damage to surrounding buildings.

Unaware of the merchants' deaths, they were concluding the battle amidst their mixed emotions.

"...Yuder!"

Hearing a faint call, Yuder reflexively raised his head while pondering over the corpses.

'Kishiar?'

Almost immediately after, something fell from the sky, crushing the four corpses completely. It landed so close that it would have hit him had he not lifted his head in time.

The impact shook the ground, startling everyone into screaming. Yuder, rolling backward, instinctively wrapped himself in the power of wind to offset the shock and quickly got up to look ahead.

"What, look at that!"

"A monster...! It's a monster!"

A ghastly form, slowly rising above the crushed corpses, loomed ominously. Its thin, fragile-looking legs and disproportionately swollen body, topped with oddly sturdy wings, made for a grotesque sight.

It was a monster, as large as a carriage.

As it raised its head and its hollow eye sockets began to move, identical forms started falling from the sky in succession.

Thud, thud. Thud...

In this unimaginable, nightmarish scene, even the seasoned Cavalry members were flustered, staring blankly at the sky.

"Uh... uh..."

"..."

Yuder, watching the monsters rain down like a downpour, quickly drew his sword. Though he didn't understand the situation, his instinct as a seasoned monster fighter who had faced death countless times kicked in.

At the same time, a familiar scent rapidly enveloped him.

Kishiar, having somehow run there in no time, stared at the monsters with unsmiling eyes, sword in hand, and asked,

"...Did anything like this happen in the previous game?"

Chapter 729

"...Did anything like this happen in the previous game?"

Amidst the roaring and screams from monsters falling and buildings crumbling, that voice alone pierced distinctly into Yuder's ears.

Caught off guard by the unexpected events, Yuder felt a slight warmth return to his blood, which had gone cold, the moment he became aware of Kishiar's presence. He took a small but deep breath and shook his head.

"No."

"Indeed, that would make sense. If you had known, you would have warned us earlier."

That was true. If Yuder had been certain such an event would occur, he would have rushed out alone, as he did during the Pethuamet crisis in the West, to prevent it. However, Yuder did recall a disaster strikingly similar to the current situation.

A wind began to disturb the air around Yuder. He muttered quickly and softly, words meant only for Kishiar's ears.

"While I have never seen monsters emerge this way, the crack I witnessed reminded me starkly of the signs of an event I remember."

"What event?"

"The Southern Earthquake, recorded as the Empire's first catastrophe in the previous game."

Originally, the Southern Earthquake was not expected to happen for several more years.

A single quake, dozens of days of aftershocks, and the massive tsunami that engulfed three regions in its aftermath.

The disaster damaged most buildings in the southern cities, killed and injured countless people, and resulted in the loss of innumerable cultural artifacts and ruins.

Usually, before such a disaster occurs, it is possible to predict to some extent signs that something unusual will happen through changes in the surrounding natural environment. However, the Southern Earthquake was unexpected, which worsened its impact.

In hindsight, Yuder thought he should have noticed something unusual from the start. However, an earthquake is a natural disaster, and it is usually not thought that there might be some special or strange cause for a natural disaster to occur suddenly.

At the time, Yuder was busy suppressing the old nobility and concentrating power for Emperor Katchian, dealing with uncooperative and hostile nobles, and aiding in disaster recovery.

Moreover, the Southern branch of the Cavalry was located slightly away from the most affected areas, delaying their response. This led to criticisms of the Cavalry's ineffectiveness, a move instigated by the old nobles in their power struggle with Emperor Katchian. Although the Emperor shielded Yuder, it still took considerable time for Yuder, an expert in natural elements, to take charge in the south.

Politically motivated delays exacerbated the aftermath of the earthquake, yet no one mentioned this fact.

'Anyway, the important thing is that although such cracks were observed back then, monsters never appeared. The timing and process are different now. But to say they are completely unrelated...'

With the newfound suspicion that the Southern merchants might be behind these strange occurrences, Yuder couldn't dismiss a possible connection.

Yuder succinctly relayed this information to Kishiar.

"At that time, several cracks like this were seen, followed by an earthquake throughout the South. There had been no appearance of monsters, and the timing now is much quicker, but if this crack and the Southern merchants are connected, it seems difficult to dismiss the relation entirely.

"So you think it might have been caused by the same people as before."

"Yes."

In his previous life, he had never properly interacted with the people of the Southern countries, so he had no way of knowing how far their influence extended. As Emperor Katchian's loyal sword, he had spent too long focusing solely on the information given to him, deliberately ignoring anything beyond that.

He had thought it enough just to strengthen the Cavalry and do the tasks assigned to him, but now those times seemed regrettable.

However, Yuder did not consider these unexpected events a failure.

The appearance of the strange crack had accelerated, but it confirmed that this was not a natural occurrence and solidified the possibility of the Southern merchants' involvement. Monsters might be falling like rain from the sky, but for now, the area affected was only around the Southern branch of the Cavalry. Thankfully, the citizens had long been evacuated, so no one was harmed, a blessing in disguise.

More importantly, Yuder was no longer alone in sustaining the Cavalry.

Now, under Kishiar, he could fully focus on resolving these monster incidents and the impending disaster-related investigation.

Because Kishiar was here.

Holding onto that thought, Yuder pulled out the black stones he had found amongst the belongings of the dead Southern merchants.

"These are items carried by the deceased Southern merchants. I find it difficult to identify them, so a detailed investigation will be necessary after this is over."

Kishiar's gaze briefly shifted to the barely visible remains of the Southern merchants, crushed under the monsters.

"Understood. You did well to collect them amidst this chaos."

"It's not something to be praised for. I couldn't prevent their suicide."

"Not everyone can handle every situation perfectly as planned. I too had assumed they weren't the type to give up their lives so easily like assassins, so if we're to blame, it's my fault too."

"That's not true. You were far away, Commander. Please, consider this my responsibility."

Yuder's firm response brought a smile to Kishiar's face, incongruous with the situation. As Yuder hesitated, Kishiar spoke.

"Their deaths are regrettable, but it's not the worst scenario. Aton, whom we captured before your arrival, is still alive. You're pushing the responsibility onto yourself to prevent the others who helped and me from being implicated in this monster incident, aren't you?"

"..."

"It's not right to bear it alone."

"That's not it..."

Ah, Kishiar La Orr.

Yuder felt his intentions had been read correctly, though he still tried to argue. Yet, his objections were quickly halted by Kishiar's words.

"Hmm... Did I ever say that taking responsibility is one of my favorite things in the world?"

"..."

Kishiar gently brushed his hair with a tender touch.

"You know, the weight of responsibility is very heavy. But it's something that is only assigned to those who are deemed capable of bearing it. And, unfortunately, that's an area where I haven't been greatly relied upon until now."

It sounded like sophistry, yet still.

"With this opportunity, I can test how much I can endure and protect. And the thought that my assistant will witness it makes my heart race. It's not bad at all."

His heart pounded in response to the jesting words that seemed to suggest it was unfair for him to monopolize such a great opportunity.

Could it really be a good opportunity? But looking at that face, it truly seemed so. Strangely enough.

Amidst the deafening pounding in his ears, Kishiar smoothly twirled the hilt of the sword he grasped and straightened it.

"Let's leave the rest of the discussion for after we finish this, and for now, shall we go together?"

Before the words were even fully uttered, Kishiar raised his sword high and swung it down.

Once again, Yuder witnessed the perfect trajectory of the sword he had seen before. The tip of the sword drew a silvery line through the air.

Instantly, a monster that had approached them, mouth agape, was enveloped in a blue light and split into two.

"----!"

Yuder saw the neatly cleaved monster above his head smoothly slide apart in both directions and collapse. Bone and flesh, like the smooth surface of a glass, split with clean cuts, an utterly surreal sight.

Thump... Thump.

No terrifying scream, incomprehensible to human ears, was heard. The organs that could have produced such a sound had already been split in two. Yuder turned to look at the giant corpse of the monster, felled by a single sword strike. It twitched as if not yet completely dead, but astonishingly, not a single drop of its spilt fluids reached Yuder.

It was a sword technique bordering on miraculous.

The power of a swordmaster.

Chapter 730

"Cavalry! It is indeed a daunting task to battle monsters, but I need you to focus intently and listen to me. I have assessed the situation and am ready to issue orders."

Kishiar, having just released his sword radiating a blue aura, called out to everyone. His voice, though not raised excessively, had the power to command attention instantly. This time, too, it effortlessly roused the spirits of the Cavalry members, who were ensnared in confusion and dismay.

"Everyone knows that when monsters appear, cracks accompany them. I don't suppose anyone is surprised by this obvious fact. Or is there anyone here who is?"

"No, Commander!"

Shouts came from various directions, even as some struggled to fend off monsters, their roars and thudding footsteps resounding in the background.

Yet, Kishiar's face bore a relaxed smile, devoid of urgency, reassuring those watching him.

"Good. As it stands, there are fifteen monsters here—no, fourteen, I reckon? And soon to be thirteen, judging from over there."

"Ah... ha ha...."

Even the tense recruits and Imperial soldiers managed a strained laugh at Kishiar's witty joke.

"Fortunately, the crack has vanished, so no more monsters will appear. And they're confined within the area we're surrounding. They're too big to escape unnoticed, so we don't need to count them anymore."

The implication was clear to all: if they could deal with the monsters here, they could resolve the situation without endangering civilians.

This hopeful message visibly shifted the mood. The faces of the Cavalry members, previously dismayed, now filled with calm determination and resolve, as Kishiar raised his hand.

"So, our only task now is to maintain our current encirclement and deal with these monsters. Are we capable of that?"

"Yes, Commander!"

The number of Cavalry members present was significantly fewer compared to those at the capital's headquarters, as they were merely the members dispatched to the southern branch. Even though their leader, Kurga, had not yet returned, their faces were resolute.

'It's strange that Kurga hasn't returned yet. He should have been back before us, to inform the other members and investigate the death of the second prince of Herne... There is a high possibility that Kurga had encountered trouble on his way back.'

It wasn't surprising, given that the same culprits had targeted Duke Peletta's carriage. But Kishiar must have anticipated this and taken measures upon realizing Kurga's absence.

'I don't know about the Knights of the Herne Duchy, but Kurga is not weak enough to be easily defeated. I have to believe that nothing serious has happened.'

As Kishiar surveyed his troops, he once again raised his sword.

"Alright then, let's begin the annihilation. Cavalry, switch to lure-and-attack formation! Yuder and I will take the center."

Lure-and-attack formation.

The eyes of the Cavalry members, who had been holding off monsters, sparkled with determination.

Their training in the Cavalry had not been limited to practical combat. Kishiar had taught them literacy, as well as theoretical knowledge usually reserved for knights and soldiers, including the types of monsters and how to counter them.

The types and countermeasures of monsters were based on the valuable lessons recorded through the hard-earned experiences of the Peletta Knights, followers of Kishiar. Initially, those who had just joined the Cavalry wondered why they had to learn such things, suffering through the training. However, after experiencing its utility in the West, they ceased their complaints.

The lessons introduced various advantageous combat forms against monsters, including the lure-and-attack formation ordered by Kishiar. "This method is especially effective against large, slow-moving monsters. A small group of our strongest will engage each monster individually, while the rest will scatter to lure away and stall the remaining monsters," it was explained.

But this wasn't just about indiscriminately stalling or luring. The crux of this tactic was the coordinated movements of the remaining troops, ensuring the elite few could focus solely on their monstrous adversaries.

Although this method had its drawbacks, its efficacy was unmatched if executed correctly. Should the timings not align, or if the monsters were not lured effectively, or if the elite group failed to swiftly dispatch their foes, the situation could quickly turn perilous for all.

It required perfect trust and execution, with each member fulfilling their role without deviation. And Kishiar, along with Yuder, boldly declared they would undertake the role of the elite few, focusing solely on combating the monsters. This was a decisive choice, despite knowing Yuder's vulnerability to monsters.

"Are you sure about this?" Yuder asked with concern.

"What do you mean?" Kishiar inquired.

"I thought you would have me stay back," Yuder admitted, half-expecting Kishiar might tackle the monsters alone. But Kishiar just smiled, as if to dismiss the notion.

"Would you have obeyed such an order?" he challenged.

"No," Yuder replied, to which Kishiar smiled knowingly.

"I just need you to buy me time to wield my sword while I assess the monsters. That's enough," Kishiar said earnestly, his face a blend of seriousness and slyness.

Yuder, albeit slightly depleted in strength and knowing his efforts might not significantly harm the monsters, understood his role was not about brute force. His experience in drawing the enemy's attention and creating openings was what mattered. And in this regard, no one was more experienced than Yuder Aile.

Kishiar trusted Yuder implicitly to create the opportunities he needed. This was the first time Kishiar felt confident in someone else's ability to handle the attack on his behalf.

'This is good,' he thought. With Nathan Zuckerman also due to return, they would have additional support. Yuder nodded firmly, resolved.

"Understood. Leave it to me."

Kishiar's eyes twinkled with amusement as he unwrapped the cloth bound around the hilt of his divine sword, revealing its true form beneath the unassuming exterior.

"Set up the formation! Lure one monster each to Commander and Yuder!"

Unaware of Yuder's weakness, the other members of the Cavalry had already started moving without hesitation. The first to bring a monster for combat was Yergin Schiller, who had earlier dealt with a southern merchant alongside Yuder.

Despite some wounds on her body, Yergin exhibited skilled movements, using the power of the wind to draw the monster towards them. Her eyes lit up at the sight of Kishiar's sword.

"That sword...! Could it be a divine sword?! Wow... Ah! Oops."

"Be careful."

Yuder, noticing her momentary distraction due to excitement, lightly used the power of the earth. With a minimal effort, he created a small depression in the ground, causing the massive monster to stagger and its attack to falter.

Yergin, having nimbly dodged the creature with her wind manipulation, expressed her gratitude to Yuder.

"Thanks, Yuder! I'm not sure if our Commander is a swordmaster or has abilities like Jimmy, but being part of this historic moment, capturing monsters with a divine sword, feels amazing! Now, please take care of the first one!"

As she darted back after her playful remark, Kishiar, responding with a smile, raised his sword.

"I shall."

The divine sword Orr, filled with an aura of anticipation, was suddenly enveloped in a blue light, unleashing sharp attacks in accordance with its master's intent.

It took three strikes for the first monster to fall, losing limbs and other body parts in the process, completely pierced by Kishiar's attack.

"Wow!"

As the monster collapsed with a thud, cheers erupted from afar. The joy of their strategy's success and the rapid spread of hope that they could indeed prevail filled the air.

Then, the second and third monsters, lured by the Cavalry members, began to approach. Yuder, alternating between his sword and a bit of his power, did his utmost to prevent the monsters' desperate attacks from reaching Kishiar.