

Turning

Chapter 16

Externally, Nathan Zuckerman was merely an adjutant who was somewhat adept at swordplay, not a Swordmaster. However, the truth was that he possessed skills tremendous enough to rival even the Awakeners, a fact that had greatly surprised many.

Unlike the superficially dazzling knights he'd met during the day, he could feel a profound aura emanating from Nathan Zuckerman, born of the mana he had consistently refined and accumulated over a long period of time. The quantity was comparable to the exceptional mages that Yuder had once faced.

For a mage, the amount of mana stored in the body was important, but for a swordsman, the quality of mana mattered more than its quantity. Infusing a sword with mana was much more difficult than casting spells, so only the most meticulously purified mana could barely provide the sword with adequate power.

The fact that he had amassed mana equivalent to a mage implied that Nathan Zuckerman was extraordinarily skilled.

'I didn't realize back then, meeting him much later... He was remarkable from the start.'

This realization was made possible by Yuder's heightened sensitivity to others' energies, a sense that had grown incomparably more developed than it had been in the past.

While the abilities he could use hadn't changed much from thirteen years ago, this perception seemed to have been etched into his soul, unfaded even by the passage of time.

Perhaps it was more akin to tricks he had learned from encountering numerous strong individuals over the years rather than an innate power.

" ... "

Yuder did not drink the tea Nathan had offered, instead surveying the room. The room's appearance hadn't changed much from before. The divine sword on the transparent sword stand atop the heater was still there.

'It's still emitting an uncomfortable energy.'

Yuder tried to ignore the divine sword that seemed to be reaching out to him with its energy.

"Oh, you arrived before me. My apologies."

A few minutes later, Kishiar returned. Nathan, who had opened the door for him, silently took his coat from his shoulders and received his gloves to tidy up. A duke who had his adjutant take care of everything, not even having a single servant at his beck and call.

It was strange indeed, but Yuder, knowing from past experiences that Kishiar always behaved this way, said nothing.

"Ah, chamomile tea. It's in season now. Nathan's tea brewing skills are excellent. You can drink it without worry. Surely you don't think he would poison it?"

"No, I don't."

"Hahaha. It's a joke."

As Kishiar sat down in front of Yuder, a fragrant scent wafted into his nostrils. He initially thought it was the scent of an expensive soap used for bathing, but then he detected the lingering scent of a strong perfume. Yuder stiffened his shoulders momentarily before relaxing them and his gaze towards Kishiar.

The ends of Kishiar's golden hair were slightly damp.

"You appear to have taken a bath."

"Huh? Ah. Yes, indeed. You're observant."

Kishiar brushed his hair back with a smile. However, Yuder did not smile back.

'It's the perfume that was popular among the noblewomen. There's no mistake.'

What could be the reason for someone to have a persistent scent of perfume on their body, even after bathing? Who had Kishiar met and what had he been doing? Yuder had a rough idea.

'He always was quite the playboy...'

Even though Kishiar's reputation wasn't exactly stellar, he had always been popular. His godlike physique and stunning looks had always been coveted by many. He was famous for never refusing the temptations that poured his way.

In memories of the past, it seemed as though he had lived quietly after becoming the commander, but that apparently wasn't the case.

Well, it wasn't for Yuder to know. He merely thought that abstaining from such dangerous games, perfect for being met with the wrong end of a blade, would help maintain Kishiar's reputation.

"I'm curious why you've called me."

"Ah, yes. I wanted to talk about what happened today," Kishiar swallowed the tea he had been savoring in his mouth.

"Fortunately, this time it ended because I arrived just in time, but it could have been otherwise. Or I might not have taken sides. Why did you act so recklessly? I thought you were far from being impulsive."

"..."

"Kiolle da Diarca is stubbornly persistent, which could become annoying. He has a very high sense of nobility."

Who was Kiolle da Diarca again? After a few seconds, Yuder finally remembered that it was the name of the knight he had clashed with earlier in the day.

He had decided to remember only what he had done with that fledgling knight and forget the rest, and it had indeed completely disappeared from his memory. It meant that his brain didn't feel the need to remember it.

"I acted thinking that such a situation would not arise. It's fine."

"It wouldn't arise?"

Kishiar asked back with an intrigued expression.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I am much stronger. Even if they gathered everyone from their side, there were many from my side who possessed enough power to overcome them. That's enough to handle whatever happens."

"So, you weren't stalling for time waiting for me to arrive, you just believed that you were much stronger?"

"Yes."

"Interesting."

Kishiar burst out laughing.

"So, how do you plan to deal with Kiolle da Diarca's grudge? He's already pressuring his family to punish you."

"Is it troublesome?"

Instead of answering, Yuder asked back.

"If it's troublesome, you can dismiss me."

"..."

Kishiar's smile deepened. He leaned his face on the hand resting on the armrest of his chair. His red eyes shone through his golden hair.

"You just made it into the Cavalry unit, and you're saying you have no regrets?"

"..."

As long as Yuder's future didn't flow the same as his past, he didn't care. Being expelled from here didn't mean there was no way forward.

In fact, if he left, it might increase the chances of Kishiar remaining as the cavalry commander. Considering that, it wasn't a bad outcome.

"I thought I'd scare you a bit, but it's been a while since I've met someone who doesn't get scared. Have you always been this fearless?"

"...It seems so."

As Yuder recalled, he had received a similar compliment from Kishiar before.

...Yuder, you're too fearless, and that's a problem. But that's what I...

'No.'

Yuder closed his eyes, letting a useless memory from the past wash away. No. That future would not come. There was no need to recall it since he would make sure it didn't come to pass.

"Why did you suddenly become so serious? It's as if I asked something I shouldn't have."

"No, it's nothing. Even if they hold a grudge against me, it doesn't matter. I'll make sure to avoid any damage to the Cavalry."

"Ha-ha, Nathan, did you hear what he said? He'll sort it out by himself."

Kishiar burst into laughter again.

"A commoner orphan claims he can beat a great duke family whose lineage spans a thousand years. That's really entertaining."

"..."

Nathan's ice-blue gaze met Yuder's face, then quickly averted.

"I'm curious why you think your power is so extraordinary. From what I've seen, you're impressive but I'm not sure it's enough to warrant such confidence. Do you think you can defeat me too?"

Against Kishiar La Orr? It was a dangerous conversation, one that could invoke a charge of treason if overheard. But Yuder focused solely on the meaning of the conversation.

Could Yuder, as he was now, defeat Kishiar if they fought?

The abilities of Kishiar that Yuder had seen in the past were mostly physical. Even just one of his skills seemed extraordinary, appearing to be paired with a high level of magical defense. It wouldn't be easy to fight him directly.

'Besides, he was not even at full power... He is the only opponent I have never seen at full strength.'

Nevertheless, Yuder was probably the only one who knew about Kishiar's abilities to this extent. It was possible because he had accompanied him during his time as deputy commander.

Kishiar was a leader who primarily analyzed situations and placed capable people at the right places during incidents, rarely stepping forward himself.

It was the exact opposite of Yuder, who would always step in before his subordinates whenever something happened.

'I've seen him use one or two abilities at once, but never all at once... I've only heard about him using the divine sword, never seen it.'

The fact that Kishiar was the owner of the divine sword became known during the mission to retrieve the Red Stone, but Yuder hadn't accompanied him then and didn't know the details. Those who had been there were ordered to keep their mouths shut about what had happened.

What Yuder heard later was that Kishiar had drawn the divine sword for the first time to urgently deal with an enemy's surprise attack, and the situation was resolved instantly.

As far as Yuder knew, that was the first and last time Kishiar had used the divine sword.

What if Kishiar were to use all his abilities at once, while also wielding the divine sword?

'I don't know how the power of the divine sword is manifested... but it probably makes it easier to use his existing abilities.'

Kishiar didn't directly show his abilities even during training, preferring to participate in a teaching role. Imagining unknown abilities had its limits.

"I'm not sure. I don't fully understand your abilities, Commander."

Chapter 17

Yuder decided to answer honestly rather than skirting around the subject.

“Saying you don’t know isn’t an answer. Haven’t you made bold judgments without fully understanding the abilities of Kiolle and the Imperial Knights? For instance, what about Nathan behind me right now?”

“Well...”

Yuder inadvertently turned his eyes towards Nathan, who was standing behind Kishiar. At the moment, he was unaware that Nathan was a Swordmaster.

However, since he was reputed to have a keen eye for assessing the abilities of others, he needed some time to consider how to respond appropriately.

“I get the feeling that your deputy, Nathan, is so powerful that he could probably defeat all the Imperial Knights we’ve seen today if they were brought here.”

“Ho, did you hear that, Nathan? He’s rating you quite highly.”

Kishiar grinned. Nathan’s gaze also landed on Yuder’s face.

“And what if you were to compare him with yourself?”

“If I were to compare him with me...”

Yuder paused, taking a small breath.

“...I’m not sure if I could win right now, but I believe that could change with time.”

‘I didn’t realize how hard it would be to give a modest answer to something so obvious.’

Nathan was undoubtedly one of the top Swordmasters in this world, but Yuder was once a Cavalry commander who had a reputation for being unparalleled.

Although he hadn't fully developed his abilities at the moment, if he could achieve the same level of growth as before, he was confident he could defeat several Swordmasters.

In the past, it took him nearly ten years to reach that level, but since he was retracing a path he had already traveled, he believed he could grow much faster this time.

"Hahaha. You say my deputy is stronger than the so-called experts of the Imperial Knights, and now you're confident that he will eventually become weaker than you. Truly an impressive level of confidence."

Kishiar laughed heartily. Yuder slightly bowed his head, wondering if Kishiar had always been so cheerful.

"So, you're saying you can't assess my ability?"

"...Yes."

That was all Yuder could say.

"Hm, I see."

Fortunately, Kishiar didn't press him further. Yuder felt as if Kishiar's red eyes were targeting him, like he was an intriguing prey.

"What about the Cavalry as you see it? Can you not speak about that either?"

Just when Yuder thought he would be told to leave, Kishiar asked another question. Yuder was momentarily taken aback.

He could answer questions about individuals, but a response about the entire Cavalry might sound like a critique of Commander Kishiar's actions.

He couldn't understand why Kishiar was asking him, a mere member, something that should be asked of other important figures.

"Well... I think there might be someone else who could give a better answer."

"Of course, I'm asking others as well. But I'm asking you because you seem to have a good eye. There's no hidden agenda, so feel free to answer. Whether it's something you felt during training, anything. Don't worry about being expelled for expressing your concerns."

“ ... ”

Yuder sneakily cast a glance towards Kishiar's deputy, Nathan Zuckerman, hoping he might put an end to this dangerous conversation. However, Nathan remained silent, staring ahead as if he heard nothing at all.

'I don't remember anything like this happening in the past. I don't understand why he's acting like this all of a sudden. I just need to answer vaguely and get out of here.'

"The Cavalry... is a good place. We all haven't fully realized our power yet, but I believe that with time, as per your guidance, we will greatly improve and establish a system that will contribute to the safety of the empire."

"Really? Is that what you think?"

"Yes."

Yuder knew that future was bound to come. Even after Kishiar's death, the cavalry would develop as he had said, taking its place and becoming an organization more powerful than any other group before.

In a few years, the only ones able to protect the empire, and the world, would not be the knights or the mages, but the Cavalry and the Awakeners. Therefore, he had no doubts when he responded that way.

"Interesting. Everyone else says the opposite."

"Pardon?"

Surprised by his unexpected reply, Yuder blinked. Kishiar, who had finished his tea, slightly turned the teacup to the side. Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing by, filled the teacup with more red liquid from the teapot.

"They all say that I will fail. They ask how can I do anything with illiterate people and no system in place. It's something no other country has tried, there's no precedent. I have to create rules and a system from scratch."

A deep conviction passed through Kishiar's eyes, as red as the tea.

"There are already plenty of powerful mages and knights in this country, so why am I insistently bringing dangerous individuals into the capital? All I have is my own strength and the support of the Emperor."

After speaking up to that point, Kishiar suddenly smiled.

"And yet, the promising member I managed to recruit says he can leave without any regrets, but he is also the only one who assures me that the cavalry I created is good and will succeed. Isn't it funny?"

"..."

His words were too honest. Yuder had never expected to hear such words from him, even considering his past memories.

For a moment, Yuder doubted whether the words he heard had really come from Kishiar's mouth. However, the duke in front of him was still sipping his tea with a languid smile.

"I've found you quite interesting from the start."

Yuder lowered his gaze to avoid his red eyes, but ended up staring at the cooled red liquid in his own tea cup. He couldn't escape that red color, wherever he looked.

"If someone else had said that, I would've thought it was just a flashy answer. But your eyes, they see things that others cannot, so I somehow want to believe what you're saying."

Saying that, Kishiar stared intently at Yuder.

"So, I hope you won't say things about leaving without regrets next time. That's all I have to say."

Yuder rose, offered his greetings, and left Kishiar's quarters.

An odd sensation overcame him. Who would have thought he would have such a conversation with that Kishiar La Orr? His previous impression of him had been of an enigma, a being whose true nature was unfathomable till the end.

'What are you thinking, Kishiar La Orr?'

Had he always been this ambitious? Or had he sensed something from me?

The man Yuder thought he knew, or believed he knew, seemed strangely different, making him wonder if he had remembered incorrectly.

'He seemed more worldly...and annoying...giving off the impression that his thoughts were inscrutable.'

But one thing was clear: from Yuder's perspective, this Kishiar was not a bad person.

'If things go well like this, there won't be any need to inherit the commander position as before.'

This was certainly a good thing. But the strange sensation he felt seeing Kishiar's unfamiliar aspect did not fade, but deeply lodged in Yuder's mind, lasting until he fell asleep.

"Nathan."

"Yes."

After Yuder left, Kishiar, staring at the chilled teacup on the opposite side, opened his mouth. Kishiar's cup was empty, but the one on the other side remained untouched, just as it had been from the start.

"What do you think of that guy?"

It was an unusual question. Nathan pondered for a moment before answering.

"If I hadn't heard of his background beforehand, I would never have guessed he was a commoner."

He was unmistakably a commoner, an orphan, barely twenty, yet he did not falter in front of Nathan, let alone in front of the noble duke who was as esteemed as the heavens.

Was that all? He seemed to gauge his opponent with an impassive gaze, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

His gaze suggested someone accustomed to evaluating others, and at the same time, someone who had long taken for granted standing in a superior position.

When their eyes met earlier, for a fleeting moment, he reminded him of his fencing master from his childhood.

One might think he lacked manners befitting a commoner, but there was something different about him. The fact that he did not drink the tea and simply left was one thing.

Normally, one would not stand up so dismissively if someone they deemed superior offered them tea.

Even if he has awakened his abilities, it has been only two years. Nathan Zuckerman grew up crawling with a sword, rolling around in all sorts of harsh places.

He had never seen someone show such an attitude towards someone who had trained for much longer and possessed much more.

Normally, most people would shrink in fear and avoid eye contact when meeting him or the duke.

How could a young man of merely twenty exude such a feeling? That man was... In any case, he was not just daring, but odd.

"He might be a spy, so it would be best to investigate."

"Actually, I've already done some investigation. There really wasn't much."

Kishiar chuckled.

"He actively participates in training and his performance is excellent. If he had gone to the Sul Division, I might have immediately offered him the position of deputy commander."

"If I investigate again, I might find something."

"Well..."

The expression of the master, who would usually instruct to proceed meticulously, seemed somewhat nuanced. A strange smile, like he was holding back a laugh, appeared and disappeared from his face.

"Perhaps we need more people like him here."

Chapter 18

"Perhaps this place needs more of such individuals."

"It's better to cut off those who enter with ill intentions early."

"If they had ill intentions, they wouldn't dare to step up against the Imperial Knights, risking their lives. Especially against the Diarca Duchy."

"..."

At those words, Nathan fell silent. A hint of amusement flickered in Kishiar's red eyes.

"It was an interesting spectacle indeed. Almost a shame I couldn't share it with you."

Knowing how much Kishiar detested the nobles, and the four major ducal houses, Nathan sighed at the sight of his master's rare, genuine smile.

"You seem to have enjoyed it immensely."

"Enjoyed it... Yes, I suppose so."

It was fun and unusual indeed. His attention was drawn to him from the start. With such murmuring, Kishiar stood up from his seat.

"By the way, Nathan, were there any messages while I was out?"

"Yes, a message had arrived from the Sun Palace."

Nathan retrieved a short letter from the leg of the courier bird that flew in just before their guest arrived and handed it to his master.

The Sun Palace, a place where only the Emperor of the Orr Empire could reside, had its insignia, the sun emblem, stamped clearly on the wax seal of the rolled-up letter.

Kishiar took the letter, broke the seal, and quickly read through it.

"Hmm. As soon as the induction ceremony is over, they want me to bring the Red Stone."

"Isn't the induction ceremony the day after tomorrow?"

"Yes, it's a tight schedule."

Kishiar threw the paper into the central furnace. The paper, thrown into the flames of the magic stone burning in a rainbow of colors, was burnt to ashes in an instant without leaving any trace.

"Retrieving it isn't the problem. It's just that the system here isn't fully established yet. I'm a bit worried about what might happen if I leave for too long."

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard. The Peletta Knights are on standby, so if you tell me the number of people you need, I'll get them ready."

Kishiar turned his head towards Nathan. He frowned and smiled as if he had too many worries.

"You worry too much, Nathan. Lately, I've been thinking that even my late mother would have worried less about me."

"Since your awakening, everyone has been more concerned about you. They fear you might overexert yourself."

"I know my body best."

Kishiar cut off his adjutant's words quietly.

"So far, there hasn't been any problem."

"I apologize if I overstepped."

"No, it's alright. And about the knights... Yes, prepare about five."

"Five is too few. Then I should go with you too....."

"You need to act on my behalf here. Who else will receive the message from the Sun Palace?"

"But..."

Transporting an unknown object called the Red Stone with only five subordinates was too risky, even if Kishiar himself was involved.

"I have to return quickly, so I can't move heavily. And it's not just five knights, I plan to select a few from here to participate in the mission."

"From here... do you mean?"

Despite knowing that this group had been painstakingly established by his master, concern inevitably crept into Nathan's voice. Kishiar responded with an expression as if he understood his worries.

"Didn't you just see? Given a bit more time, there are those who believe he could win against you. After observing for a while, I've noticed that there are many with quite interesting abilities. They are people who have gained power through that stone, so they might be of some help. In many ways, it is also the best opportunity to make the name 'Cavalry' known to the world."

The decision had already been made by the master. Once Kishiar made a decision, he was not one to change his mind.

Nathan looked at him for a moment before bowing his head.

"I understand. So, do you plan on taking him with us?"

"I am considering it."

Kishiar smiled faintly as he spoke about Yuder.

"I want to see just how much power he possesses that he's so confident. His attitude of not caring whether he's a noble or an imperial family is quite intriguing. Don't you think it would be rather amusing to prod him a bit?"

"I hope your interest does not escalate excessively."

Worry was etched on Nathan's icy expression. Kishiar rarely took a deep interest in anything, but when he did, he pursued it relentlessly until he had resolved it.

Until now, this trait of his master hadn't caused any major problems. However, he thought there might be trouble for the first time if this interest were to deepen towards the commoner they had just met.

Too little was still known about those who had awakened their power two years ago. As long as the extent of this man's power remained uncertain, it was crucial to prevent any potential dangers to his master.

"Haha. Are you worried that I might get hurt?"

"...I am aware that such a situation is unlikely, but there is always a possibility."

"Do not worry, Nathan. If there were things that could harm me so easily, there would be no reason for all this trouble."

Kishiar patted Nathan's shoulder lightly.

"Life is tedious, always needing to forcibly express what is stored within, no matter what. Compared to that, this is natural and interesting."

"Well, now you should go rest too." After Kishiar said this, Nathan bowed his head in acknowledgment, retreated from the living quarters, and entered another room prepared for him.

Even after his loyal adjutant disappeared, Kishiar remained standing still in front of the central fireplace, not retiring to his bed.

Unlike the red flames of wood-burning fire, the fire fueled by a magic stone emitted a mystic multi-colored glow, not giving off any smoke or ash, and burned for more than ten days with just a handful of stones.

Moreover, it didn't require ventilation, making it possible to create such a beautiful fireplace.

When it was first invented, those familiar with wood-burning fires and mages had treated it as magic. However, it had now become a common sight everywhere.

That's why Kishiar had specifically instructed to install this fireplace in the center of his dwelling.

Would the outcome of his creation here be perceived as this fire? The answer remained unknown.

Two days later, a ceremony of conferring last names took place in the open space in front of the accommodations where the Cavalry members stayed, with more than half of the entire Cavalry members in attendance.

It was a special event that had been held only a few times in the empire's history of over a millennium. The faces of the Cavalry members who were to receive a last name directly from the emperor were filled with awe.

'Reality may be humble, but still.'

As one of them, Yuder stood in his black uniform. Ideally, the emperor himself should have attended an event such as a conferment ceremony, to bestow the names or last names in person.

However, the number of people to be conferred was too large, and the emperor had already been absent from political discussions for several years, citing health reasons.

Therefore, the ceremony took place not in the imperial palace, but in a small open space in front of the Cavalry building, and Kishiar La Orr, the commander of the Cavalry, stood on the stage with a decree bearing the emperor's seal, not unlike his usual posture when making announcements to the Cavalry members.

Yet, even that was enough to inspire awe in the Cavalry members. Receiving a title meant rising above being a commoner. They were liberated from many strenuous duties of commoners, received many benefits, and could pass on their last names to their families.

In other words, they could establish a lineage. Although they were not on par with the nobility who owned territories and titles, in other words, they could become nobility if they acquired those as well.

When a commoner became a knight, one of the few professions that they could aspire to rise in status, and received the title of 'Sir', they couldn't pass on that title to their family, so this was an incomparably greater benefit.

Receiving a last name meant exactly that.

"Moreover, it's a last name given by His Majesty the Emperor himself. It's unbelievable."

As names were called one by one and individuals stepped forward, Kanna, who was next to Yuder, patted her cheeks with an awe-struck face.

"I'm not sure if we really deserve all this, we haven't done anything yet."

Of course, they deserved it. They would become accustomed to receiving more rewards every time they completed a significant mission later on.

In Yuder's case, who had been a commander, he had received territories and titles directly from the emperor. He even received several mansions in the capital.

He had received so many precious treasures, servants, and all sorts of honorable titles that eventually, none of them seemed to have any meaning. Looking back now, it seemed like a laughable memory.

"Yuder. Aren't you happy? Smile a bit more."

"...I am happy too."

Kanna lowered her voice and whispered, perhaps because Yuder's expression seemed dull as he recalled the past. He replied, but she seemed unconvinced.

"Does that look like a happy person's face? I don't think so....."

"Next, Kanna."

"Yes!"

Fortunately, at that moment, Kanna's name was called. Yuder watched Kanna go up on the stage.

"I confer the honorable last name, 'Wand', to Cavalry member Kanna."

"T-thank you. I accept the last name."

Kanna Wand. Kanna, who had received a new title, turned around with tears welled up in her eyes and bowed. That was the only scene that didn't exist in the past.

"Next, Yuder."

Chapter 19

"Next, Yuder."

"Yuder!"

Finally, Yuder's name was called. As Yuder stepped out of line, a conspicuous redhead in the crowd outside the open space, Gakane, waved at him with a beaming smile.

Those Cavalry members who already held a last name didn't need to attend the ceremony, but most, like Gakane, watched from the outside of the field, sending their unabashed applause and cheers.

Imperial Knights, passing by with sneers at their private ceremony, were occasionally seen, but nobody paid them any mind.

Yuder glanced once at Gakane before continuing on to ascend the platform. On the platform stood Kishiar, wearing an imperial ceremonial cape over his usual white uniform.

Underneath his golden hair, akin to the sun, his shining red eyes were as beautiful as a Sun God depicted in a temple.

But the gaze he cast on Yuder sparkled with a distinctly human curiosity.

"You seem to be without nervousness, as I expected."

"Should I be nervous?"

In response to Kishiar's quiet voice, Yuder tilted his head slightly and replied, eliciting an even deeper smile from him.

"No, I would have been disappointed if you were."

"That's settled, then."

After all, he was going through this for the second time. Had he trembled a bit the first time? He couldn't quite remember.

Without looking at the paper Kishiar held, Yuder already knew what was written on it. Toward Yuder's impassive face, Kishiar raised his voice and began to speak.

"I decree that the honorable last name 'Aile' will be bestowed upon Cavalry member Yuder."

"Thank you. I accept the honor."

The given last name, as expected, had not changed. It was 'Aile', derived from the place where he had lived. Nevertheless, the name Yuder Aile, a member, not Yudrain Aile, the commander, seemed not too bad. He decided to think of it that way.

Without looking back at Kishiar, Yuder descended the platform. Not far away, Gakane was shouting cheers of congratulations with a wide smile.

"Yuder! There's going to be a celebration party. We should go too."

After the ceremony ended, Gakane, who had run after Yuder heading towards the dormitory, shouted cheerfully, patting his shoulder.

"...Where?"

"We've decided to go to the pub outside the grounds of the Imperial Knights. Juan has already contacted them to make sure it's entirely vacant. It's a three-story building, so we won't run short of space. Everyone's already gone."

He asked just in case, but the answer was as expected. Yuder listened with one ear to Gakane's excited chatter, recalling old memories.

'I remember down the invitation before and training alone.'

Yuder, who had just joined the Cavalry, didn't understand his peers who were anxious to form relationships. What mattered to him then was proving to himself how far he could develop his power.

Having nothing else of interest besides growing stronger, he rejected someone's invitation then and spent all day training at the training grounds.

Even now, he doesn't enjoy social gatherings or drinking parties. But since becoming the commander and having been dragged around by the emperor's orders until he was sick of it, he understood there were occasions he had to attend, whether he liked it or not.

Compared to all sorts of foul meetings he had attended then, this was nothing.

'Back then, and now, my goals were different.'

At present, Yuder's goal was not to increase his own power, but rather to prevent as many talents as possible from leaving the Cavalry, preparing for future disasters.

'I can always improve my abilities. But once I lose a person, it's over. I've learned that.'

"So you should go too, Yuder. It'll be fun."

"Alright. Let's go."

Yuder quietly responded to the final words of Gakane, who had been chattering for a while. Upon hearing this, Gakane let out a sigh of relief and gave Yuder a tight hug.

"I'm glad you decided to go! I was a bit worried you might refuse."

"..."

It had been a long time since Yuder had been embraced by someone. Startled by the unfamiliar feeling, Yuder blinked, causing Gakane to quickly release his previously firm grip.

"Ah, I'm sorry. Did that make you uncomfortable?"

"No. ...It's fine."

"Good. Then let's get going. Everyone will be waiting."

With a grin, Gakane took Yuder's arm and led him away.

For the first time since joining the Cavalry, Yuder left the Imperial Knights' grounds. The familiar streets of the capital were as bustling as ever, filled with enough people to give one a headache.

Gakane navigated the crowd with surprising ease. Watching him move forward smoothly as if he had eyes on the side of his head, Yuder could not help but admire him.

"Here it is. The Black Whale! They say it's also an inn, and it's really big, isn't it?"

Finally, their destination appeared. As they approached the neat wooden building Gakane pointed out, the sound of uproarious laughter became increasingly audible. It seemed many people had already arrived.

"I'm here! And Yuder too!"

As Gakane, still holding Yuder's arm, pushed open the door with his chest, cheers erupted.

"Gakane finally brought Yuder!"

"Since the bet's results are out, those who lost, throw your coins!"

"Eh, I bet that he wouldn't come till the end."

Someone grumbled and tossed a coin made of copper. Coins poured down from the second and even third floors, yet the hat-bearer managed to catch every single one.

This wasn't simply a testament to his good reflexes; he had subtly used his ability to create wind. Laughter filled the tavern.

"Gakane. Yuder! Over here!"

Kanna, sitting not too far away, waved her hand. Yuder took a seat next to her, accompanied by Gakane. Familiar faces were seen all around.

There were Ever, whom he had met during a training session at the Imperial Knights' training ground not long ago, and Kurga, who had a bear-like face and had once been his roommate, among a few others sitting around the round table. On the table, there were already quite a lot of dishes and several bottles of alcohol.

"I bet on Yuder showing up. I'm looking forward to the payout; it's going to be quite salty."

As Kanna beamed, a chorus of disappointed sighs and shouts of joy erupted around them.

"Don't be like that. What will you all do if he says he's not coming next time? You've made your bets so openly," Gakane spoke.

"No. Yuder didn't even care about those fool nobles of the Imperial Knights, so it didn't seem like he would care about something like this, right? Isn't that so?" Ever replied.

With a worried expression, Gakane pushed a cup of rice wine towards Yuder. In response to Gakane's words, Yuder briefly answered, "Yes," in a dismissive manner, his gaze fixed on Ever, who was nodding in agreement.

"I'm fine either way."

"See, Gakane, you're too cautious with Yuder. But thanks to that, we made some money, so I guess we should be thankful for today?"

"Kanna...."

Gakane sighed resignedly, lowering his head.

"Well then, it seems everyone is here except the young comrades who cannot come and the comrades with a situation. Let's officially start the celebration! A toast for our comrades who have been granted a last name!"

"Cheers!"

The Cavalry members all lifted their glasses in unison.

"To the glory of His Majesty the Emperor and our noble commander, cheers!"

"Cheers!"

And with that, the raucous party officially began. As they roamed freely around the tables, eating and drinking to their hearts' content, bright laughter and happiness echoed throughout.

A former wandering band member was somehow playing lively music with an old string instrument and flute that had been left in the corner of the shop, further lifting the spirits.

One by one, the comrades who had been sitting at Yuder's table left for other tables or ventured out to dance. Yuder watched Gakane being dragged off by someone and dancing quite well, despite his obvious awkwardness, while he leaned against a wall, sipping his drink.

He wondered if they had partied like this even when he hadn't been around. Just watching brought a not-so-bad feeling, prompting him to chuckle bitterly at why he hadn't come before.

'It seems much better than those nauseating noble parties.'

Although hardly anyone directly approached Yuder, any comrades who made eye contact displayed their intent to toast from afar with a light smile.

There was not a hint of negative emotion toward Yuder in their eyes. It was thanks to the fact they knew the full story of the incident that had occurred at the Imperial Knight's training ground two days prior.

The Cavalry members were each somewhat confused, caught between the newfound, overwhelming power they'd gained and their original perception of the world. Everyone believed they could defeat anyone, but in front of the weaker noble knights, they often lost their nerve.

Among the Awakeners, there were those of high status, but those individuals either did not apply to the Cavalry or, even if they did join, they inevitably had a distance from the common-born members.

In the midst of this, the incident Yuder had caused was more than enough to provide each of them with a tremendous stimulus and a refreshing vicarious satisfaction.

A Cavalry member of common birth had stood up to a knight from a duke's house with nothing but his strength, and Commander Kishiar had demonstrated that regardless of background, he would protect any Cavalry member.

Regardless of one's origin, from now on, the association with the Cavalry would take precedence. It was a message that had been conveyed.

Chapter 20

Up until then, Yuder had been nothing more than one of the Cavalry members, a gloomy and inscrutable figure, albeit a powerful one.

However, after that incident, he began to be recognized as someone reliable, someone who could step forward on their behalf in times of crisis.

In a group of 300 people, all too busy adapting to worry about ranks, a figure emerged whom they thought would be suitable to tacitly take the role of a leader.

With Commander Kishiar ardently siding with the non-noble Cavalry members, their training mindset had become significantly more comfortable, and their sense of camaraderie grew exponentially as they found some spare time.

Before, they had only been friendly with their roommates or colleagues they got along with well. But two days ago, they began to freely interact with one another, even if they didn't know each other's faces or names well, as long as they belonged to the Cavalry. That was proof.

Gender or previous social status no longer mattered. Underneath their identical black uniforms, they were all equals.

Yuder wasn't aware that the Cavalry members had begun to think this way, but he did notice a change in the way they looked at him.

It was the first time he had seen a sense of equal camaraderie in the faces of the Cavalry members looking at him, not a competitive spirit towards a strong man, nor a helpless dread.

It was a peculiar feeling he hadn't known until he returned.

"Whew. Every time I try to come back, they keep asking me to dance one more time. I'm sorry, Yuder."

After dancing with various partners three times, Gakane finally returned, wiping the sweat off his forehead, and flopped down in front of Yuder, gulping down his drink.

"How is it? The party isn't that bad, right?"

"Yeah."

"I thought so."

Gakane, who was grinning, started to chatter, using the stories he'd heard while dancing as the topic.

"I heard that all the expenses for tonight's party are being covered by the Commander. He said that the members needed more time to bond. He's really a remarkable person."

Kishiar? Yuder didn't know that.

'If I think about it... Renting out an entire place would have cost a considerable amount of money.'

It might have been a significant amount for the members, but it probably didn't even tickle Kishiar's pocket. Yuder remembered that during his Commander days, he had been asked several times to prepare meals and drinks with his own money to boost the morale of the members. But he only provided the money and was absent from the event, simply because he didn't want to attend.

Would the members back then have interpreted Yuder's intentions positively, like Kishiar? He was slightly curious, although it was something he could never know now.

"Yuder! Do you know how to dance?"

Just then, Ever, slightly flushed, appeared and asked.

"He can't dance! He can't dance!"

Gakane desperately tried to block in front of Yuder, but it was futile against Ever's fingers. With just a light push from her, Gakane was quickly sent flying out beyond the table.

"Ouch!"

"I wasn't asking you, Gakane! I asked Yuder. You're so noisy."

"I know how to dance."

As Gakane was being rescued amid the laughter of the other members in the distance, Yuder spoke.

"But I don't feel like dancing right now. I prefer just sitting like this."

"Really? That's a pity. I really enjoy dancing."

Ever flashed a smile.

"When I first arrived here, I thought I'd never again have the chance to dance and converse so freely with someone. But, I'm pleased to realize I was wrong. This is all thanks to you, Yuder."

"..."

"If you hadn't stepped forward back then, we wouldn't have believed we could enjoy ourselves like this now."

Yuder set down the glass he was holding.

"That's not true."

It was true that he had stepped forward in front of the knights, but his motives were not as pure as Ever made them out to be. Rather, his actions had been reckless enough to incur resentment from the knights of noble descent, as he had stirred up unnecessary conflict.

"I didn't have some grand goal in mind when I stepped forward, and even if I hadn't, someone else would have eventually. If my actions helped in some way, that's good, but don't credit it all to me."

The reason Yuder had stepped forward was simple. He felt that at that moment, in that place, the only one who wouldn't hesitate to take the lead was himself, having already experienced that era once and having grown accustomed to leading as a Cavalry commander for nearly a decade. It was no more and no less than that.

Now, he had no desire to strive for a higher position and was content to live as just one of the members. Still, his time leading them remained within him like an obligation, like a debt.

He hadn't appreciated each of them individually before. He thought he could handle everything by himself and was always on guard, erecting walls.

But when it came time to die, he finally realized it. Perhaps those who could help Yuder were not the powerful Emperor, the nobles, or even himself, but other beings possessing the 'same power'.

"No matter what happened, it would have ended up like that."

Yes, even without Yuder, the Cavalry members would eventually realize that they were much stronger than the Imperial Knights or the Pearl Tower mages. They deserved just compensation and treatment for the work they did for the country.

Yuder's actions were merely an effort to reduce the trials they would have to endure before that future came.

In order to correct a misaligned button, he had to straighten out this Cavalry first.

Those who had been the core of the Cavalry and could have been its future were lost too early on due to ignorance and petty discrimination.

Furthermore, Commander Kishiar, who could have been a much greater asset than Yuder, died as soon as he established the framework. Even just correcting that could have been a huge help in preventing future disasters.

"...You speak as if you're prophesying?"

Ever, who had been blinking, soon chuckled.

"It's not a prophecy. It's a fact."

"I hope so. I'm still not accustomed to receiving disdainful looks for daring to set foot in this noble place as a country bumpkin commoner. Someday, I hope I can stand up like Yuder and reprimand others for looking down on those weaker than themselves."

"That will happen."

Yuder assured her with confidence. In the future, and the past, where he had lived, Ever was one of the initial members who worked hard in the Cavalry until the end.

Her stern demeanor, her unblinking eyes, and her propensity to pursue those who blindly trusted their lineage yet lacked ability, was famously known within the Cavalry.

Now, she was smiling and dancing with a much softer expression, but it didn't make her seem any weaker than her future self.

What she lacked was only experience. Given time to gain that, she could transform into her future self at any moment.

"Good. Let's drink to that future."

Yuder silently clinked glasses with Ever.

"Yuder. Have you fully manifested your secondary gender yet?"

"No, not yet."

"They call me an alpha, but I still don't really understand what makes me different."

In a few more years, openly asking about someone's secondary gender would become impolite, but it wasn't the case yet.

The world barely knew about the existence of alphas and omegas. It was all still novel and liberating.

Would this atmosphere last forever? Yuder swallowed his thoughts with a nod.

"I see..."

"What exactly is the power of the Red Stone? It gives us immense power, changes our born gender, and even alters our entire being, yet we can't see it. I don't even know what it is. Is it really a power bestowed by the Sun God, as the priests say?"

"What are you talking about?"

Just then, Gakane, who had been pulled away by other comrades, finally returned and sat down next to them. Ever rolled her eyes and opened her mouth.

"We were discussing whether the power of the Red Stone is truly a divine power from the Sun God. Weren't you curious? Or was it just me?"

"Well, I am curious, but being in the Cavalry, won't we eventually find out?"

Gakane answered, his eyes widening slightly.

"There are rumors that the Cavalry was formed to retrieve and protect the Red Stones, after all."

"Is that so....."

Ever sighed. Gakane's words were among the strong rumors that had been circulating since the first public notice for Cavalry recruitment was issued in the country. Yuder also remembered hearing such rumors from his distant past.

'In retrospect, the rumor was half true and half false.'

The Red Stone that Kishiar had retrieved was refined in the Pearl Tower over the course of a year. It was then dubbed the 'World Sphere' and was to be enshrined in the deepest part of the sacred forest located north of the capital.

Although it was said to be enshrined, it was more akin to being sealed. One of the main duties of the Cavalry was to ensure that no unnecessary people could approach it.

Only two people could access that place without anyone's permission. One was the Emperor, and the other was Yuder, the commander of the Cavalry.

Thinking about it made Yuder feel a tingling sensation, as if his undamaged mana hole was being pricked.

'Come to think of it, isn't it about time to retrieve that Red Stone?'