

Turning

Chapter 26

It was a fleeting memory, but Yuder felt an exceedingly strange sensation.

Despite being heavily wrapped in silk, he could clearly sense that something within held a colossal power. Just by sharing the same space with it, the entire atmosphere felt dense as if the air had turned into water. A chilly aura seeped throughout the room.

Yuder wasn't the only one who felt this. All the cavalry members present at the time agreed they had experienced an inexplicable strange energy.

The next day, Kishiar appeared, carrying a box carved from transparent magic stone. Inside, on a cushion of red silk, lay the Red Stone. It seemed as if he had packaged it this way to present it to the emperor.

Just before Kishiar climbed into his carriage, Yuder glimpsed the Red Stone within the box from the window of his quarters. The stone wasn't actually red, and it was smaller than he had expected.

Had he not known it was the Red Stone in advance, he wouldn't have been able to identify it from its appearance alone. It was a surprisingly ordinary looking stone, given the peculiar energy it possessed.

After that, the stone did not return to the Cavalry, but was taken directly to the Pearl Tower. Thus, it was the last time Yuder saw the intact Red Stone in his previous life.

"Did you try to approach it?"

Upon Kishiar's question, General Gino replied tersely, "Yes."

"Ordinary soldiers couldn't dare to approach it. Only those skilled enough to start accumulating aura could get close enough to see it, and I was able to observe it directly in front of me."

"And what was your impression?"

"It was a very strange object. It's hard to accurately judge, but it may not be of this world. The Priests of the Sun God said it felt different from divine energy, and the mages of the Pearl Tower have found it difficult to approach, so no one has examined it directly yet."

"I see."

"Frankly, I'm worried about Your Highness touching it directly. It could be dangerous."

Without changing his expression, General Gino voiced his concerns to Kishiar, who had arrived.

"Some of the soldiers who tried to force their way towards it even vomited blood. It's a mysterious object holding an unknown energy. It possesses a power that could change the entire continent. Wouldn't it be terrible if it harmed your noble body?"

"His Majesty believed I am the most suitable person to retrieve it without harm. Is the general worried about something His Majesty trusts?"

"I am..."

Just as General Gino, who seemed to be losing faith in the emperor, began to speak, Kishiar held out his hand to silence him.

"Trust your eyes, which have watched me since I was young. In this world, I'm the only one who can handle that stone without being affected."

"..."

General Gino looked to be just entering middle age, but in reality, he was old enough to be a grandfather. Therefore, he would have indeed watched Kishiar since his youth.

Upon hearing Kishiar's words, General Gino closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh.

"Would I dare to doubt His Majesty and obstruct you?"

"Haha. And yet, you always find a way to interject."

"It's the worry of an old servant who, despite knowing it's useless, always lets his concern get the better of him."

"Don't fret. I'm not so frail as to be undone by a mere stone."

With that, Kishiar rose from his seat. As all eyes focused on him, he glanced around the room, then broke into a smile and spoke.

"Now, before we set off, let's all sign a confidentiality agreement."

The Cavalry members looked stupefied, but Yuder thought to himself, 'so it has come to this.'

Not only for this mission, but most of the tasks that the Cavalry would handle in the future required absolute secrecy. Thus, Yuder himself had signed such agreements countless times before embarking on missions.

"It's a magic contract used by many knights and mages before undertaking important missions. You write down your pledge, and after the parties sign, the magic within the paper binds their hearts together."

Kishiar explained, holding up a piece of paper that seemed entirely ordinary on the surface.

"The content of this agreement is simple. During this mission, you are forbidden from revealing anything you see, hear, or experience to anyone outside of those who are partaking in the mission with you, without permission. If you break the agreement, the magic imbued in this contract will constrict your heart until you are unable to breathe. I believe none of you here would fail to keep such a secret, but in case of uncertainty, anyone who feels unable is welcome to step back. I promise to send you off without a word."

The phrase 'unable to breathe' essentially meant death. While everyone was frozen, Yuder was the first to step forward toward the contract that Kishiar pulled out. There was no hesitation.

"I'll sign first."

"Go ahead."

Upon closer inspection, it was a contract made directly by the Pearl Tower. In other words, it was the most reputable and powerful contract anywhere in the continent.

No further preparations were needed to sign. After reading the contents, one simply needed to place a finger on the contract. The magic sprouting from the paper enveloped the body, and everything was finished in an instant.

Once Yuder casually finished signing and stepped back, Gakane, who had been wearing a stern expression, swallowed hard, made a determined face, and stepped forward.

"I'll go next."

Seeing that the process was nothing to worry about seemed to put everyone at ease, and they each took their turns. Finally, even General Gino, with his stoic face, signed. After that, Kishiar rolled up the contract and tucked it back into his pocket.

"Now, go and rest. We'll depart early tomorrow morning."

"I'll show you to your quarters."

"That would be good. I'd like to hear more about what's been happening here from the General. Who knows when we'll meet again?"

At Kishiar's words, a smile finally appeared on the stern-faced General's face.

"I've been waiting for your arrival, and I have prepared a fine local wine for you. I'll make sure to bring it."

Kishiar, guided by General Gino, headed to his quarters. The Peletta Knights and Cavalry members, following the General's orders, trailed a young soldier who had just arrived towards a small village near the base.

"Follow me."

'...He seems familiar.'

Yuder watched the back of the young soldier guiding them, lost in thought. Although the soldier wasn't a Cavalry member, he felt as if he had seen him somewhere before. Could he have met him among the people he knew in the past?

If he heard the name, he might remember, but it had been a full 11 years since the time he could recall. He might be misremembering.

'Let's keep observing for now. If I keep watching, I might remember.'

The village, which was only about 10 minutes away, was bustling with life - unbelievable for a place nestled in the mountains. The others seemed taken aback, but Yuder had a hunch about the reason.

'It must have been a regular village, sustaining itself with hunting and gathering.'

The Airic mountain range was as vast as the nickname, the backbone of the continent, suggested. This village was a considerable distance from where Yuder originally lived.

But people's way of life was generally the same anywhere. Mountain villages were typically sparsely populated, and the influence of local lords barely reached them.

However, the situation must have changed when the Red Stone fell nearby two years ago, attracting a host of soldiers.

An army couldn't move for free. A large number of them had stayed in one place for two whole years without engaging in combat or particular activities.

By providing places to eat, drink, and stay for them, this small village must have quickly become a bustling place full of money circulation.

'Of course, the glory would fade once Kishiar retrieves the Red Stone.'

There would be no reason for the army to stay once the Red Stone was retrieved. So, the bustling life of the village didn't seem very joyous to Yuder.

"Why are there so many people here?"

"Most are soldiers on break. Instead of continuously performing challenging surveillance tasks scattered across the vast mountains, they get to relax here, drink, socialize, and have some free time. It's General Gino's consideration."

In response to Kanna's question, the guiding soldier provided an answer that matched Yuder's guess.

"Hey, Sunz. Where are you taking these strangers?"

At that moment, a group of men boisterously drinking at an outdoor table waved and called out to the young soldier.

The young soldier momentarily dropped his solemn military demeanor, towards the men with a youthful smile.

"I'm on a mission. I need to escort these guests, who came to see the General, to their lodging."

"Alright. Join us when you're done. The card game isn't as fun without you, Sunz."

"Save that for later."

The off-duty soldiers, dressed in civilian clothes, roared with laughter, seemingly intoxicated. The young soldier, looking slightly embarrassed, apologized to Yuder and his party.

Chapter 27

"My apologies. We've spent two years here doing nothing but patrol duty, so discipline is a bit lax among us. It's the alcohol talking, I hope you understand."

There were many soldiers in the Cavalry who were used to such a scene, most of them commoners, and they didn't say a word. Yuder was the same. However, it was a bit surprising that the Peletta knights, whom he had thought would uphold their knightly duties and say something, merely nodded without uttering a word.

He had thought they followed Lord Kishiar without bias, but he began to think that perhaps there was something more to them.

'Anyway, the soldier who guided us was named Sunz. Sunz... Sunz...'

Yuder tried to recall from his memory someone with the name or surname Sunz, but he couldn't quite remember. Just as he thought it might have been a

misunderstanding, Sunz stopped in front of a building located in a less populated area.

"This is the lodging we prepared for you. It's small, but most buildings here are. It should be sufficient for a few nights' rest."

"Thank you."

On behalf of everyone, Gakane expressed gratitude.

"Don't mention it. But if I may ask... the noble person who went with the general earlier, is he really Duke Peletta?"

Sunz asked cautiously, his face betraying an eagerness that he'd been trying to suppress.

"Yes, he is."

The guide from the Peletta knights answered simply, prompting Sunz to open his eyes wide in surprise.

"I knew it! My goodness, I never thought I'd see a descendant of the Sun God in my lifetime. You all are... the Peletta Knights following him, right?"

Sunz's excited gaze darted back and forth between the Peletta knights and the Cavalry members, failing to hide his excitement over his flushed cheeks.

Yuder saw the knight guide from the Peletta Knights looking back at him with a troubled expression, as if asking what he should reply.

It seemed like he was having trouble deciding how to explain the yet-unknown existence of the Cavalry to Sunz, but there really wasn't anything complicated about it.

Once this operation was over, the existence of the cavalry would naturally become widely known. High-ranking individuals including General Gino already knew of their presence here, so there was no reason to hesitate. Yuder quietly opened his mouth.

"These five here are knights from the Peletta Knights. And we are members of the Cavalry."

"Yuder."

Gakane's eyes rose in concern and caution, questioning whether it was okay to reveal so easily. But Yuder remained calm.

"By Cavalry, do you mean... the group that the Emperor recently announced he was recruiting, those who've gained power from the Red Stone... It's true then."

"Yes."

"I didn't expect to meet you so soon."

There was no sign of aversion towards the Cavalry in Sunz's expression. He simply seemed genuinely fascinated, then looked at Yuder as if something occurred to him.

"Ah, if you are those people, you should be careful when wandering around the village."

'Village? Why?' Yuder wondered.

A look of confusion crept onto Yuder's face, and Sunz scratched his head, flashing an awkward smile.

"Well... many of the resting soldiers possess abilities like you all. There was even one among those you saw earlier."

"What? Really?"

Both Eldore siblings exclaimed in unison, their eyes sparkling with interest. Sunz simply nodded in agreement, "Yes."

"The abilities aren't that extraordinary, but we've never seen others with abilities outside of our group, so if everyone found out about you, it'd probably cause a commotion. We have quite a few in our Southern Army who are crazy about fighting."

"Even so... why didn't those with abilities apply for the Cavalry test?"

Kanna asked in a puzzled tone.

"I don't think there was a rule that soldiers can't take the test..."

"You're right."

Sunz agreed with Kanna's words.

"But just because there's no rule doesn't mean you can just rush in recklessly. There was no guarantee of success, and we're quite content with our current lifestyle. We thought there would be many others who felt the same way."

'Hold on.'

Yuder sensed something in Sunz's words. When one says 'we', it usually includes the speaker.

"Are you, by any chance, one of those ability users?"

"Ah, yes."

Sunz slowly nodded, seemingly realizing his slip-up late. Yuder, refined through many years, was somewhat skilled in detecting powerful individuals in his vicinity, but this didn't necessarily mean he had the precision of a magic-user or an Awakener with a detection ability.

He hadn't sensed any formidable aura from Sunz, so the idea that Sunz was an ability user hadn't crossed his mind. Before Yuder could ask about his ability, Hinn, with a look of curiosity, beat him to it.

"What ability do you have?"

"Really, it's nothing much. Just a little thing... I can see what's hidden behind. It's a handy ability when playing card games."

'A Vision ability user?'

At that moment, Yuder finally remembered where he had seen the name Sunz before.

'Right. Sunz... Sunz..... So that was it.'

Just as Sunz had said, there certainly were awakened individuals who already had jobs. Among those who, despite having abilities sufficient to join the Cavalry, chose not to, the majority were typically in the military.

Around the time General Gino Bordelli retired long ago, they gathered and formed a new unit within the army. The man who became the leader of that unit was none other than Sunz.

It was a secretive establishment, so there wasn't even a proper inaugural ceremony. He had only heard about it through the military grapevine, but he remembered the name clearly. There was no doubt.

The person who felt the most unpleasant surprise upon hearing of the unit's establishment was Yuder himself, the representative of the Cavalry, which was why he couldn't forget him.

'If my memory serves me right, his full name is Sunz Messial.'

That special unit, composed of awakened individuals within the military, remained low-key, almost non-existent, from its establishment until the moment Yuder died.

Thus, Yuder concluded that they were not a threat to the Cavalry, but were created to separate from the regular soldiers in the military. He put aside his unpleasant feelings and focused on his main tasks.

However, while imprisoned and facing death, Yuder came to realize for the first time that perhaps he had been mistaken.

The soldiers who had captured him, tortured him, and kept a constant vigil were not ordinary. Though the Mana Hole had been destroyed, rendering him unable to use his abilities or recognize other ability users, he knew the men watching him were not ordinary, considering he was once the commander of the Cavalry.

Those who captured him had kept a strict guard until his dying moment, fearing he might escape or regain a shred of his power.

Even during his tortured, disoriented imprisonment, Yuder desperately strained his ears, trying to hear what the others were saying. It was then that he picked up the name of that special unit.

The Emperor no longer trusted the Cavalry. The only force he controlled like his own limbs was this special unit. Due to their role in this 'Great Hunt', they would receive greater rewards, guarantees of honor and position.

When Yuder heard these conversations, whispered joyfully among the soldiers, all hope was lost. An intense premonition that there was no longer a way for him to survive filled him with bitterness.

Of course, the 'Great Hunt' they referred to was Yudrain Aile.

He didn't know who had established that special unit that he had thought so little of, when, or for what purpose. He couldn't identify where his information had been compromised.

But now, if he met the representative of that special unit, things would change.

The special unit had not yet been created, and its representative was stuck in some corner of the Airic Mountains, a soldier as ordinary as they came. Now, in this condition, it would be easy to eliminate him in advance. If Sunz was killed, the future would definitely change!

Yuder tried to muster the strength to kill the man before him. But when he met the unambitious black eyes of the man looking at him, the power he had gathered wavered and dispersed in an instant.

"...Did I say something strange?"

"Yuder. What's wrong? You look stern."

From beside the confused Sunz, Gakane patted his shoulder and spoke in a low voice. Yuder then sighed, feeling the last of his rage vanish.

'...What was I thinking?'

During his life, he had killed many and made many kneel. His subordinates had called him a stubborn devil with nothing but brute strength, but even then, he had a few principles he had set for himself.

Chapter 28

Unless commanded by the emperor, one should not arbitrarily use their power to kill; if possible, spare lives and secure surrenders. Do not punish those who have not yet committed a crime without evidence. As the leader of the Cavalry, prioritize the cavalry and the empire over personal safety. That was roughly it.

Those who possessed power far greater than others could, with a mere flick of a finger, cause great turmoil in others' lives. Therefore, they should not move recklessly without clear guidelines.

Killing and defeating someone arbitrarily might be easy, but living that way would soon lead to major problems in areas that could not be resolved with power alone.

Make judgments more rationally than anyone else, but when power must be used, do so overwhelmingly.

The one who had thoroughly ingrained this fact in Yuder's mind was Kishiar La Orr, who around this time would be enjoying a drink with General Gino.

'...It's easy to kill Sunz now. But will the future really change if I do, leading to the creation of a special force?'

Yuder took a deep breath and thought rationally.

'If the representative changes, that's it. But if I spare Sunz... I can understand the movements of the talented ones in the army through him, and when the future of the special force comes, I can connect more tightly.'

It made more rational sense to spare him and create a connection. After repeating this several times, the conflict finally subsided and his mind calmed. Yuder looked around with a much more relaxed expression.

"It's nothing. Vision ability, a rare ability we don't have in our cavalry. I was just surprised."

"Is that so?"

Sunz tilted his head, smiling as if relieved.

"If there are other talented individuals here besides you, could I perhaps get introduced?"

"It's impossible to introduce everyone. Some are on duty..."

"Knowing about those resting in the village would be enough. You don't have to worry, it's just personal curiosity."

Yuder also smiled to reassure him. Sunz nodded without much suspicion.

"No problem. Anyway, after guiding you to your quarters, my work ends, and you will have free time. If you want to meet other Awakeners in our army, let's go together after you've unpacked in the quarters."

"Understood."

After all, the retrieval of the Red Stone was led by Kishiar, so there was nothing Yuder needed to worry about. It was fortunate that he found an unexpected connection here, which eliminated any chance of boredom.

Ignoring the puzzled looks from the others, Yuder followed Sunz's lead and arrived at their quarters.

"This is where you will stay. Once you've unpacked, feel free to roam around."

There were a total of two buildings for their accommodation. One was for the Peletta Knights and the other was for the Cavalry.

However, because the buildings were so small and only had two bedrooms, they needed to divide the members before unpacking.

"Are there any second-gender Awakener here?"

Hinn stepped forward and looked at the rest of the members.

"Finn and I are both non-manifested-Awakener."

"I am also a non-manifested-Awakener."

After Kanna answered, she turned her gaze towards Yuder. He nodded lightly to indicate he was the same. This naturally left only Gakane. He scratched his head, seeming somewhat perplexed under the scrutiny of four pairs of eyes.

"I am... an alpha Awakener."

"Really? Then it doesn't matter if we divide by only one gender. Kanna and I will take one room. Is that okay?"

Hinn entered the lodging with Kanna's hand in hers, without waiting for an answer. Naturally, the remaining room was left to the three men.

'So, Gakane was an alpha awakener.'

As Yuder entered the room, he mulled over the newly discovered information. He had assumed that Gakane was also a non-manifested awakener, as he had never spoken up when people around him were discussing the second gender. It was surprising that he was not.

'It's fortunate to know this now. After all, I might manifest the same way as before...'

Yuder hadn't forgotten the memories of when he had manifested as an omega. It was one of the most intense experiences in his life, something he could never forget.

The process of manifesting a second gender was bearable, albeit painful. The critical point was that there shouldn't be an Awakener of the opposite second gender present during the manifestation.

Until now, this fact had not been well known, and Awakeners rarely gathered closely, so it didn't matter. But after the formation of the Cavalry, a large group of Awakeners, many things changed.

Up to this point, those who had manifested their second gender were usually those who had awakened their abilities at the same time. But problems often occurred when, after a long time following the awakening of abilities, the second gender manifested late.

Yuder was one of those Awakeners who had unexpectedly experienced this after joining the Cavalry, unaware of the fact. Therefore, he knew all too well the potential problems that could arise.

'...I need to inform Kishiar about this along with the other Awakeners in the military.'

So far, he had not seen any members who had suffered due to related issues after joining. However, he didn't know what the future would hold, so it was necessary to prepare a contingency plan.

If Kishiar asked where he had learned this information, he would have to dodge the question. But even at the risk of arousing suspicion, it was crucial to inform him beforehand.

As Yuder pondered this and entered the room to put down his bag, Finn left the room to find the bathroom.

After discarding his uniform coat and lying down on the bed, Gakane exhaled a long sigh and opened his mouth.

"Yuder. Why do you suddenly want to visit the other Awakeners in the military?"

"Just because. I got curious."

"But you didn't pay much attention to our peers in the Cavalry."

Being criticized out of nowhere, Yuder let out a hollow laugh as he looked down at Gakane.

"Well, I already know you guys well. But they are different."

"What's different?"

"Think about it. There are several Awakeners in the military who have unknown abilities, just like us."

At Yuder's words, Gakane nodded with a naive expression like a boy.

"So what? There must be people with abilities who did not deliberately apply to the Cavalry."

"That might not have mattered if this place wasn't a military."

Among the mages of the Pearl Tower, and even within the court mages and the Imperial Knights, there undoubtedly existed Awakeners. They simply had not revealed themselves yet.

However, their numbers were inherently limited, unlike the army. The Southern Army alone, led by General Gino, boasted an impressive number.

Even if only a fraction of them were Awakeners, when gathered together, their numbers would not pale in comparison to the Cavalry.

"But if the Cavalry begins to fully exert their power, how long can they continue to live as they do now, ordinarily?"

"Do you mean to suggest that the higher-ups in the army might try to create a second Cavalry?"

Although he did not elaborate, Gakane's eyes momentarily flickered, as if he had an inkling from this hint alone.

"What would you do?"

"If it were me... No, I suppose I might entertain such a thought."

For a moment, Gakane struggled between disbelief and a chilling realization before finally rising from his seat, looking at Yuder with an admiring gaze.

"So, you're trying to gather as much information as possible. That's impressive. I never even considered it."

Gakane Bolunwald, too, would have thought of this naturally if he had weathered all the storms at the top of the enormous organization known as the Cavalry for nearly ten years.

'Besides, even if he were in the same situation, he might not have thought of murder like I just did.'

Gakane had talent. Considering his relentless personality, good looks, and lineage, he could have been a much better leader than him if he had become the captain.

If he were still alive, Kishiar might not have chosen him as his successor. While he couldn't say what Gakane himself would have thought, Yuder held his abilities in high esteem.

He never thought he'd agree with the words of others in his old memories who regretted the premature death of such a promising talent. He gave a bitter smile inwardly and bowed his head.

"I'm not trying to do anything that grand."

"Were you two friends before you joined the Cavalry?"

Finn Eldore, who had opened the door and returned, interrupted and asked. Gakane had apparently had a good deal of conversation with the Eldore siblings on the way there, but Yuder had hardly ever had a personal conversation with them.

"We stayed at the same place before the test. Yuder helped me out."

"Is that how you got to know Kanna too?"

"Well, that's..."

"I'll go out now."

Yuder took off his uniform coat like Gakane. He then returned to his usual civilian attire. As he opened the door to leave, Gakane looked at him worriedly.

"Even though Sunz is with you, be careful, Yuder. We need to leave early tomorrow, so try to come back as soon as possible."

"Wow. At your age, you sound like a parent who already has a child?"

"That's not what I..."

As he listened to the conversation between Finn and Gakane, Yuder chuckled and closed the door.

Chapter 29

"I apologize for being late. Let's go."

Upon speaking to Sunz, who had been waiting outside the lodging, he nodded and began to walk ahead with a relaxed stride.

"By the way, what should I call you?"

"Just call me Yuder."

"Alright, Yuder. You can simply call me Sunz."

Sunz chuckled, stating that he disliked being called by his rank as it was too stiff.

"I've been trapped here for two years, it feels good to have a new friend after so long."

"Have you been here since the Red Stone fell?"

Yuder decided to ask the question that had been on his mind, and Sunz responded candidly.

"That's right. Originally, I was in the Southern Army in the Gulcan region under Airic. But after that incident, all the troops nearby were summoned. Since then, our numbers have been gradually increasing, until General Gino arrived a few months ago."

"It must have been boring."

"It was and it wasn't. These days, whenever it gets boring, someone awakens. Watching the newly awakened individual's abilities, and fulfilling our duties, time surprisingly flies."

Sunz smiled, expressing that this was preferable to facing threats to his life while serving on the front lines. However, Yuder caught something unusual in his words.

"Do you mean that Awakeners have been continuously emerging among the soldiers?"

"Yes. Isn't it the same in other regions?"

Well, if you looked at it regionally, that was true. But the frequency as mentioned by Sunz was not common.

'...Could it be because we're closer to where the red stone fell?'

Yuder thought it was a highly plausible hypothesis. After the Red Stone fell, Awakeners began to emerge across the continent, but the highest number was from the Orr Empire.

And, even within the Empire, the central region had a higher ratio. Considering the Airic mountains, where the Red Stone fell, stretched across the central region, it was a significant ratio.

If one assumed that there was some kind of power emanating from the stone, the soldiers who had stayed here for two years had more exposure to that power than anyone else.

The fact that an Awakener appeared every time they almost forgot about it could be some evidence of the power the stone possessed.

'Did the previous Kishiar not know this fact?'

Yuder silently sorted out his thoughts as he followed Sunz toward the village center where off-duty soldiers were gathered.

Despite being a small village, it had a well-established tavern, restaurant, and market. At first glance, there were several soldiers who seemed out of place among the villagers.

"Hey! Sunz. Are you done?"

"Yeah. But where did Emon, who was here earlier, go?"

Those still playing cards at the outdoor table waved at Sunz. Upon scanning their faces and not finding the person he was looking for, Sunz asked. Someone immediately pointed at a nearby building and answered loudly.

"That guy said card games were boring and went to the tavern over there."

"I see. Let's go check it out."

Yuder followed Sunz towards the tavern. Despite it not being late, the place was bustling. Sunz explained that the soldiers often gathered here regardless of the time, as they had nothing else to do and enjoyed sharing stories.

"It's a tavern in name, but during the day, we serve ordinary food and drinks too."

"Understood."

As he said, most of the patrons, seated in a spot well-lit by the sun, were drinking mundane beverages with bored expressions on their faces.

Several individuals inside greeted Sunz upon recognizing him. He acknowledged their greetings with a brief explanation.

"That friend awoke his powers a year ago. His strength is comparable to that of a bear. And there's another one over there. That guy can jump as high as a city wall, if I recall correctly...?"

Most of the people he introduced possessed powers that enhanced their physical bodies. Yuder examined their faces carefully, wondering if any of them had detained him in the past, but he didn't recognize any of them.

"Ah, and there's Emon over there. He's the one I've paired up with the most for duties. He's a bit rough around the edges, but a decent fellow. Emon!"

"Ah, Sunz. You finally arrived."

A man who was engaged in a dice game at a table with others inside the tavern looked up. He was one of the men who had recognized Sunz earlier on their way to the quarters.

"But who's the person behind you? I've never seen him before... A new recruit?"

"No, he's one of the people I showed around earlier."

Emon, apparently having not recognized Yuder due to his change of attire, looked surprised.

"Ah, I see. I'm sorry for not recognizing you. Why are you here...?"

"I wanted to look around, so I asked for permission. I'll be leaving soon."

His answer suggested that it was fine to ignore him as he didn't want to cause any discomfort. Emon watched Yuder with a strange expression for a moment before nodding and re his attention to the dice game.

"Emon's ability is..."

Just as Sunz was about to explain Emon's power, a noisy commotion arose from behind. It was the tavern owner, appearing with a tray piled high with grilled sausages.

He placed the tray on the table where the dice game was taking place and flashed a friendly smile.

"Here are the snacks you ordered. Enjoy them while you play. I've also thrown in some dried jerky on the house."

"Awesome!", "I love the sausages made by the owner here."

The dice players cheered in unison and reached for the tray. As the mountain of sausages rapidly dwindled, the dice game took a brief pause.

Yuder saw Emon, who had stepped back a few paces, take out a small cloth pouch from his pocket and fill an old portable pipe with dried herb leaves. He didn't seem interested in eating the sausages.

A moment later, a small flame, like a spark from flint, ignited inside the pipe. A fragrant yet sharp smell spread as the smoke wafted out.

"That's Emon's power. He can create fire. It's quite unique among those who awakened their powers here."

"I see."

As Yuder nodded, Emon turned his head, seemingly having overheard the conversation.

"What? You're not here just to look around, but to scrutinize the Awakeners?"

"He's just like us. He was curious, so I was explaining things to him."

Before Yuder could respond, Sunz answered first. Fortunately, Emon didn't seem overly curious about Yuder's identity.

"Ah, I see? Then you must have noticed that we don't have any exceptionally powerful individuals here. After all, the best I can do is light my pipe with a tiny flame."

With a snicker, Emon lifted his index finger, and a small flame flickered and popped on its tip. Yuder stared at it before speaking.

"That flame, can you not sustain it?"

"I can't. If I could, it might be more useful, but I'm content with having the freedom to light my pipe at any time without a flame. It's something I didn't have before."

"Still, it's a useful ability. When we pair up for patrol duties and climb the mountain, at least we won't have to shiver all night because we can't light a fire."

"Yeah. Thanks to you, I can avoid places where there might be monsters or wild beasts at night. It's just that simple."

Emon shrugged nonchalantly at Sunz's praise, a slow smile gracing his face. Sunz let out a laugh.

Meanwhile, Yuder's gaze on them cooled.

'They have no idea of the potential their abilities hold.'

This world was still completely ignorant of the potential and characteristics of the Awakeners' abilities. Even the Awakeners themselves were in the dark.

Once an ability was awakened, it didn't just stop there. It was given endless opportunities to grow alongside its owner. Even an ability that seemed insignificant could be developed into a formidable power, depending on how much effort the owner put into it.

'Besides, most of them have abilities that are quite useful, even if they don't develop them further.'

Most of the soldiers introduced by Sunz had physical enhancement abilities.

Although they hardly needed to use them in this place, where their main adversaries were the occasional lost wild beasts or monsters, such abilities would truly shine on a battlefield. There was a high chance of explosive growth as well.

'The same goes for Sunz's vision ability. For now, it only allows him to see through obstacles and perceive things day or night, but that alone can provide a major advantage in combat. Its potential for development is enormous.'

Emon's flame was similar. Although it was small and lasted only for an instant, it had the advantage of being conjurable immediately, regardless of location, whenever its owner wished.

There were members in the cavalry who could manipulate fire, but most of them either took quite a bit of time to summon fire or had a mediocre duration.

In this respect, Emon's flame was an extremely useful ability, perfect for launching surprise attacks while engaging in close combat with enemies.

Chapter 30

'In a few years, information about the development of abilities will be known to the world. They, too, will come to realize the potential of the power they possess. Being in the military would have been an even better environment for further development.'

Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to drop a few hints early and win their favor.

Yuder was a person who had managed to advance a power related to attributes, which was notoriously difficult to develop, to several levels and reached the top.

There was a saying that no one understood the mechanism of the abilities possessed by the Awakeners better than Yuder Aile, the Commander of the Cavalry.

The potential for future development, which even the Awakeners themselves had not yet realized, appeared as clear to Yuder's eyes as reading the branches of a handprint.

He quickly came to a decision and opened his mouth.

"In my opinion, it's a very impressive ability, but you seem to underestimate your power."

"Underestimate? Didn't you just see it? It's a flame that can't even singe a single hair of a monster. What's so impressive about it?"

Emon laughed as if he'd heard a funny joke, waving the pipe emitting smoke in his hand. Yuder, without a hint of a smile, opened his mouth again.

"You might feel that way if you're trying to singe a monster's hair. But what if you sparked your flame in a monster's eye or mouth during a fight?"

"..."

Emon's pipe, which he had been lightly shaking, stopped. The casual smile on Sunz's face also disappeared in an instant.

"Your flame is like a spark from a flint, short and bursting powerfully. It's not like a big fire that you have to worry about maintaining - you can keep trying as needed."

Yuder looked straight at them as he continued.

"If you get used to summoning the flame more quickly, more frequently, like striking a flint repeatedly, you could potentially ignite dozens, if not hundreds of places simultaneously. Do you still feel your power is insignificant?"

"...I've...never thought about it that way."

Emon stammered, his face aghast.

"Try it if you haven't. That much will undoubtedly be possible soon. And Sunz."

"Oh, yes!"

Sunz, who had been watching the lesson Yuder was giving Emon, instinctively responded with military precision.

It was as if he was in the presence of a superior, but none of the three found anything odd about it.

"The ability to locate enemies in the darkness is an impressive reconnaissance skill. Regularly practice feeling beyond what you see with your eyes closed. As your senses become sharper, your ability will gradually develop. You might be able to extend the range of your vision or even selectively see only what you want to."

"Close my eyes... and practice?"

"If you don't understand what I mean, try closing your eyes now."

Yuder's words carried the persuasive power forged from long years of serving as a commander. For some reason, Sunz felt as though he was obeying an order and unwittingly closed his eyes.

"Do you see anything?"

"No, not now. Nothing at all...."

"When you use your ability, do you have to concentrate hard?"

"Yes. How did you...."

It was obvious. Even an ordinary person without any Vision ability would need to concentrate to look closely at something. Much more so for someone whose ability was precisely that. Yuder had seen many like them before.

"You should start practicing the ability to focus instantly when necessary. Anyway, I'm going to hold up a few fingers in front of your face. Try to concentrate and guess how many there are."

"... Eh? Just like that, out of the blue?"

"I'm doing it now. How many do you feel?"

"Wait, give me a moment."

Yuder didn't give Sunz a moment to think, he immediately held up three fingers in front of his face. Sunz began to fuss, pressing his lips tightly together and furrowing his brow. A very faint ripple of energy emanated from around him.

"Try to guess before I count down from 5 is over. 5, 4, 3....."

"Wait a moment. I'm still....."

"2, 1. How many?"

"2... No, 3?"

Sunz mumbled in a resigned tone. However, he was correct. Yuder chuckled, seeing Emon's wide-eyed expression from the corner of his eye.

"Open your eyes."

".....What?"

Sunz opened his eyes to see three fingers right in front of him, and his face turned pale.

"You guessed correctly."

"But it was so sudden... Maybe it was just luck."

"No, you were correct."

Yuder asserted with conviction.

"Doubting yourself only makes it harder to fully utilize such abilities. Have confidence."

"But still....."

"Both of you might think what I'm saying sounds odd. But I've been observing people with these abilities for a while now, and I'm still doing so. Believe what I say."

Upon hearing Yuder's words, both men looked at each other with peculiar expressions. They seemed unsure about how to interpret this strange conversation that had abruptly taken place.

'Of course, they would be surprised and confused. But I need to change their perception of their abilities too.'

Yuder looked at both of them and began to speak.

"Your abilities are far from useless. I can bet anything that important people will soon find your abilities necessary."

"Important people? Who are they? No one has sought us out in two years."

Emon muttered as he tapped the ash from his pipe.

"We're just ordinary soldiers. There must be countless people with abilities like ours throughout the Orr Empire, right? Like that... what was it? The Cavalry that the Emperor just recruited."

"You're well informed. Why do you think the Cavalry was recruited? Because they were needed."

They may have been overlooked for two years, but in other words, it was only two years.

The past two years, a time when there was no Cavalry, was a period when people were on edge and struggled to adapt to the emergence of individuals with new abilities.

And now that the adaptation was over, a new world was about to unfold. A world that, for now, only Yuder knew about.

"The world doesn't yet understand the value of these powers. But that will soon change. When the moment comes that many people realize their worth, it will inevitably change."

"Do you really believe that?"

Sunz tilted his head and asked. He still seemed skeptical.

'Responding with an immediate affirmation might make me seem like a demagogue.'

So Yuder just smiled quietly.

"...If you are unaware of the power you possess, you won't be able to properly use it when it's needed the most. Know your strength well until someone who needs it appears, and don't belittle its worth. If you trivialize your own power, others will regard it as even more insignificant."

At Yuder's words, both Sunz and Emon fell into deep thought simultaneously. As soldiers, they were taught that it was a virtue to obediently follow orders from above, and to unconditionally obey their generals and emperor. This concept might have been difficult for them to understand immediately.

However, they needed to grasp this in order to shake off the deeply ingrained military spirit, and change the situation when the special forces are eventually formed.

"...Well, you might be right. If I belittle my strength, others would find it even more laughable. I didn't think about that part because it was always that way with the guys here from the start."

Emon, looking at his extinguished pipe, lifted one corner of his lips.

"If we improve the way we use our power through training as you suggest, our situation, which hasn't shown signs of promotion for years, might get better."

In the Orr Empire, the military was perceived as nothing more than a group under the knights, who possessed enormous power, merely filling up the numbers.

After humans were able to use mana and aura, wars were always about those who could wield such powers.

There was a time in the ancient past when tactics and individual soldiers' skills mattered, but no one thought of that anymore. It had been long since winning was about whether a swordmaster or a great mage was on our side.

In the end, the main tasks of the Orr Empire's Imperial Army could not be exaggerated as merely defending the borders, maintaining public order, and dealing with troublesome monsters.

Even though the high-ranking officers who commanded the military were of noble birth, they did not regard their positions as ones of real power.

Only the generals who commanded the southern and northern armies, in turn, held their positions as swordmasters, using them as stepping stones to enhance their honor and grasp higher power.

Like General Gino Bordelli, the rare case of maintaining the general's position for a long time was only possible when one had outstanding skills and a clean and incorruptible disposition without any ambition for promotion.

Despite this, the reason why commoners kept joining the military was simple. They could earn a stable income without suffering from a lord's exploitation, and it was one of the few opportunities for commoners to travel around leaving their hometowns.

Those who applied for the military were usually children pushed out from poor commoner families to reduce the number of mouths to feed.

Being able to join the military was a slightly better situation. Those who couldn't often ended up in mercenary bands or did menial jobs at the lower echelons of the market until they died.

Occasionally, even though they were commoners, if they showed an extraordinary talent for martial arts during training, they could rise to a fairly high rank. However, such events were so rare throughout the thousand-year history of the Empire that they could be counted on one hand.

Yuder guessed that the cause of the lethargic attitude and self-deprecating behavior of the soldiers who had been idling in the mountains for two years was probably due to this.

