

Turning

Chapter 31

One of the main reasons Yuder had initially paid little mind to the news that a special forces unit was being formed was because he knew the military's morale significantly deteriorated.

The soldiers in front of him lacked confidence in their strength and couldn't imagine a future better than their current circumstances.

How could such people have possibly come together to form a special unit? Could it have been that someone with power secretly helped them establish it by offering a sweet reward? Perhaps someone like the emperor who had promised glory to the special forces while driving Yuder towards death.

Yuder opened his mouth, looking into their eyes.

"This power can certainly be an enormous opportunity. Be sure to understand its value properly so you can grasp the opportunity when it comes. And if you need help with this matter, feel free to seek me out at any time."

"You seem to know more about this power than we do... but how are we to know who to look for?"

Emon asked with a hesitant expression. Instead of replying, Yuder picked up a metal fork that was lying on the table.

A moment later, a thin stream of water swirled above the fork, forming a beautiful spiral. Upon witnessing this, Emon and Sunz's eyes widened in astonishment.

"I am Yuder of the Cavalry."

Yuder purposely didn't mention his rank. It was likely to win him more favor from them.

"I've only been in the Cavalry for a few months myself. I'm not much different from you all. However, I believe in the future that this power can bring about. I hope that you too will come to understand its true value."

That was all. There were no ulterior motives. By stating this upfront, he preemptively eliminated any potential for misinterpretation.

Yuder stood up, looking at Sunz and Emon, who had stunned expressions. He had seen all he needed to see. It was time to leave.

"Thank you for showing me around the village, Sunz. I'll be on my way now."

"Ah..."

Yuder turned his back before Sunz could speak. Young soldiers were laughing raucously, completely oblivious to what had transpired at the corner table.

Even after he had left, the two men behind him sat in silence for a long time, unable to utter a word.

The next day, the Cavalry, together with the Knights of Peletta, all left their lodgings at dawn. Kishiar was waiting for them in front of the base they had seen last night, alongside General Gino.

"I'm not sure if you all managed to get a good rest last night."

Despite the fact that he had said he was going to drink with General Gino, Kishiar looked completely unweary.

"As I mentioned yesterday, we will start retrieving the Red Stone from today. For today, we will identify the location of the stone and assess the extent to which we can approach it, and gather information."

Yesterday, General Gino had said that a strange energy was emanating from the Red Stone, making it difficult for ordinary people to even approach it.

However, people who were skilled enough to use Aura, particularly General Gino, could approach it quite closely. The Cavalry could not predict how they would perceive this.

"If during the journey, anyone feels it's too difficult to approach due to the strange phenomena caused by the stone, they should stop walking and report to me before starting their descent. There is no shame in descending. That, too, will be helpful in gathering information."

'Well, with General Gino, the Swordmaster, by our side, we wouldn't need to worry about the nuisances.'

Yuder reinterpreted Kishiar's words from his own perspective. Kishiar's rhetorical skills, able to sugarcoat any message, were still amazing.

If Yuder had been in that position, he would have bluntly told the nuisances to immediately descend and stay out of the way.

'If they get into trouble while descending, or after they have descended, I would have threatened them, saying I won't let them off easily.'

"Now, let's move."

Despite many people's concerns, Kishiar said he would lead the way. He did say that he would keep General Gino right behind him, but the Pelleta Knights, who had the duty to protect him, showed clear signs of anxiety. Yuder, knowing Kishiar's ability, was not very worried.

'Rather... I should find the right moment to say I want to talk, but I wonder when that would be.'

Kishiar moved forward without hesitation, as if he knew the path ahead. His steps were light, like those of a man out for a stroll. If it weren't for the divine sword hanging at his waist, one might truly believe it.

Not long after they began walking, the traces of human footsteps gradually disappeared. The birds that had been chirping from the trees also became invisible, leaving only the dense forest and the occasional sound of the wind.

'So far, I don't feel anything unusual.'

Yuder was keenly observing the aura surrounding them as he moved.

The steep uphill began, but the Cavalry, who had undergone rigorous training, ascended the mountain without showing any signs of fatigue. Yuder felt as if he was re home, which was quite invigorating.

'After all, having grown up in the same mountain range, it's not an exaggeration to say that I've returned home.'

The clear and majestic energy of the Airic Mountain Range, which he hadn't walked in a long time, seemed to welcome Yuder.

To the Yuder of eleven years ago, it would have been a few months since he last visited, but the current Yuder, who had lived and died without setting foot in his hometown for a very long time, was experiencing this feeling after a long time.

Before joining the cavalry, he would wander these mountains alone, chopping wood and digging up medicinal herbs. He spent his days endlessly repeating the cycle of wandering all day and re home to rest before sunset. He never felt lonely living alone. Probably.

Others asked how he could live alone in a mountain teeming with monsters and wild beasts, but Yuder never found the mountain scary. It must have been his natural disposition.

Even though he was much more naive than he is now, the essence of Yuder back then wasn't much different from the present.

'A creepy human who only knows himself, ignorant of emotions.'

Yuder recalled the words others used to describe him during his youth.

Would those who couldn't even meet his gaze out of fear back then say the same about the current Cavalry and Yuder?

"There's a spring over there. We'll take a short break."

About two hours into their silent trek up the mountain trail, Kishiar gestured towards a spot and declared it was time for a rest. As he had indicated, there was a spring up ahead, seemingly man-made.

A man-made spring with no signs of recent human activity. It was evidence that until two years ago before the Red Stone fell, humans had relatively free access to this area.

The party members each found a rock or tree stump to sit on and rest. Some approached the spring to drink water. Yuder watched Kanna chatting with the Eldore siblings, thinking that Kanna and Hinn had become quite close since they had shared the same accommodations the night before.

Kishiar was discussing something with General Gino, a map that they'd taken out from their belongings in hand. Would there be an opportunity for a personal conversation with him until they retrieved the Red Stone and

returned? If no such opportunity arose, Yuder wondered if he might just have to approach him directly.

"Yuder."

Just then, Gakane sat down next to Yuder. Despite the fast-paced climb up the mountain, Gakane looked perfectly fine, without a single drop of sweat on him.

"Feeling anything yet?"

"No."

"Me neither. Seems like everyone is fine so far."

Could the Red Stone really be up there? Gakane murmured, looking up at the sky. It was a cloudless, clear day.

"Where did you live? Is it far from here?"

"Hmm... It would probably take a few days to get there."

"That's quite far. It would have been nice to drop by if it was closer, after we finish our business."

Yuder studied Gakane's regretful face, trying to understand his intention. Was it just an extension of him inviting Yuder to visit where he lived?

Yuder himself didn't particularly want to visit the place he used to live, so he found Gakane's words hard to understand. If he were to take a vacation, he could visit, but only to tidy up the house.

In the past, when he became a Cavalry Commander, he had tidied up his original house and spent his whole life in the barracks. He had no longing for the house where he used to live.

"There's not much... to see there."

"But it's where you lived. Don't you want to go back and see it, even for a little while?"

What would Gakane think if he said no here? Yuder was lost in thought and only noticed the approaching presence behind them later than usual.

"Go back where?"

"Commander."

As Gakane startled and tried to rise from his seat, Kishiar raised his hand to stop him. He seemed to have finished his conversation with General Gino and was now alone.

"Did you have other business besides the mission?"

"No, no."

Gakane seemed rather intimidated by Kishiar, their commander. Yuder saw him looking for help and calmly opened his mouth.

"My hometown is around here."

"Hmm. Your hometown?"

Interest flickered in Kishiar's red eyes.

"I see. So it's relatively close, then?"

"Not exactly. The Airic Mountains are quite vast."

"So you were discussing visiting it if it were nearby."

Finally, Kishiar seemed to piece together the conversation that had been going on between Gakane and Yuder.

"Yes."

"I see... Yuder. I remember you didn't have a family, do you miss your hometown?"

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"Do you miss your hometown, Yuder?"

Kishiar, as usual, wore a gentle smile.

Yuder didn't attach much significance to the question. However, Gakane, who was sitting next to him, was incessantly shifting his expressions. He seemed to believe that the commander was scolding Yuder indirectly.

'Kishiar is not the type to do that. He's indeed a bit eccentric, but....'

Ah, another unnecessary thought. Yuder shook his head and briefly replied, "No."

"As you said, I have no family, and no lingering regrets, so I do not miss it. I only feel that I should go back someday to tidy up, as I left without doing so, not knowing I would be accepted into the Cavalry."

"That's a valid point. I hadn't considered it. After we successfully complete this mission, I'll have to give everyone a few days of leave."

At Kishiar's smooth response, Gakane's eyes widened in surprise.

Not only was Yuder's audacity to converse so casually with the commander, who held a high noble title, shocking, but so was Kishiar's easygoing nature. He did not reprimand Yuder for his insolence and even casually mentioned future plans.

"Um... Commander, is that okay?"

"What do you mean?"

Gakane cautiously composed himself and posed the question.

"Deciding on something like a sudden leave for everyone..."

"Of course, it's okay. I have the discretion to make such decisions. I won't change my mind, so Gakane, you too should start planning ahead."

Kishiar gave a slight wink. Gakane had always thought of Kishiar as a person of great dignity, his conduct fitting his imperial lineage. However, seeing Kishiar's casual demeanor, all thoughts disappeared from Gakane's mind due to shock.

"I'll... I'll go get some water."

Yuder watched Gakane rise shakily and disappear, guessing the kind of shock he must be feeling.

Those who judged Kishiar by his outward appearance were bound to be shocked by the discrepancy with his true character. Yuder had once been the same.

On the surface, Kishiar might appear as a dignified commander with a handsome face, reflecting his divine lineage, but that was not all there was to Kishiar La Orr.

He was an imperial family member, who never married and maintained an insignificant noble title until his death. He was a womanizer, indiscriminately sowing seeds of scandal with countless individuals.

Now, the newly formed Cavalry needed to establish discipline, so he maintained a calm demeanor externally. However, once you peeled back one layer of his mask, he casually winked at his subordinates. That was another side of Kishiar.

The Cavalry members would probably have to get used to this aspect of his.

'Come to think of it... Now that Gakane is gone, this is the only time I can speak privately with Kishiar?'

Despite the lapse in conversation, Kishiar remained seated next to Yuder. After hesitating for a moment, Yuder opened his mouth.

"May I ask you something?"

"Only if it wasn't about disappointment in my unfitting behavior as a leader."

Kishiar responded as if he had been waiting. Yuder sighed lightly and shook his head. Could a mere member dare to do so?

"Of course not."

"Really? You, Yuder, seemed like someone who could."

What did he mean by someone who could? But Yuder knew well that digging into that here would only waste time.

Pointlessly making unnecessary comments to break down the opponent's walls and guess their intentions was one of the things Kishiar used to do well in the past.

"Fine. If not, then what are you trying to say?"

"Do you know that among the southern army soldiers who have stayed here for two years guarding the Red Stone, there are unusually many Awakeners?"

As there wasn't much time, he went straight to the point.

"From what I heard from the soldier who guided us yesterday, the ratio was significantly higher than expected. If you add them all up, there are dozens of Awakeners in these mountains."

If Kishiar had asked why he suddenly mentioned this, it would have been quite a conundrum as to where to begin the explanation. However, fortunately, he seemed to understand right away what Yuder intended to say.

His playful red eyes immediately became serious.

"...I have never received such a report."

"I heard they were mostly ordinary soldiers."

"And they didn't even apply to the Cavalry."

Why didn't they apply to the Cavalry, why didn't anyone think to report it as an unusual occurrence when there were so many Awakeners, how much had Kishiar realized?

Yuder quietly waited for his response.

"If it's true, then we need an investigation. Originally, the military is not something I can interfere with, but if what you say is true, this is not a normal situation. The words you just said, they are based on the truth, right?"

"Of course."

Kishiar's reaction was more favorable than Yuder had expected. With a calm face, Yuder nodded. It was something that would come out sooner or later if they investigated anyway.

Kishiar, who seemed lost in thought for a moment, stroking his chin, turned his gaze with a soft chuckle as if he had finished sorting things out.

"Well, I didn't expect that the serious thing you wanted to talk about with such a grave face was this."

"..."

"I heard you're not particularly interested in your comrades, but it seems you're quite interested in the Awakeners?"

"I..."

What should he answer here to smoothly move on and establish a not-so-bad relationship with Kishiar in the future? Underneath his emotionless face, Yuder was having a fierce internal debate.

"It's not that I'm interested... I just thought it could be dangerous. Since you, the leader, are the one commanding us, I thought it would be best to tell you about matters related to the Awakeners."

"Dangerous... Unmanaged Awakeners gathered in one organization, it could be."

It was a fundamental answer, so it probably didn't feel strange. Kishiar murmured lowly and slowly nodded.

"Interesting. It's curious that so many Awakeners appeared in this one place. I wonder if it's because of the Red Stone."

He turned his gaze towards Yuder as if contemplating something.

"What do you think?"

Yuder maintained a moment of silence. What should he respond? Would it be better to feign ignorance and take a step back in this situation? However, it was him who had brought up a matter that a normal, commoner-originated awakened individual wouldn't even care about to Kishiar.

'He seems to want to know how far I've thought.'

In that case, he could just show him. After all, Kishiar would have already speculated about what Yuder could answer.

Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

"When the Red Stone fell, its emitted power caused awakenings across the entire continent. If such a powerful force can do that, isn't it not coincidental that many awakened individuals would come from among those who stayed closer to it for a longer period?"

"Right. I also think the same."

Kishiar smiled like a teacher who had finally heard the answer he was seeking.

"However, those who haven't reported to me about the unique awakening ratio among the soldiers here even after two years since the stone fell probably didn't think that way. You've quickly noticed this anomaly and even reported it to me, which is a matter they might have considered insignificant. I admire your ability. Is that observational and judgmental ability part of your awakened ability?"

"...No, you're flattering me."

"It's not flattery. It's sincere."

With a single sentence, Kishiar had rated all the soldiers here, including General Gino, as inferior to Yuder. As Yuder hesitated about how to respond, Kishiar's red eyes sparkled like a clever beast, without a hint of his usual languor.

"Hmm. Indeed."

"Yes?"

"I proposed before that we should get to know each other better. Would you seriously consider it? I promise you won't be disappointed."

His voice was sweet, more like throwing a charm towards someone he liked rather than talking to a subordinate. Any ordinary person would have blushed at such words, but Yuder, on the contrary, became calmer.

"I'm already your subordinate, Captain. You've been more than generous with me. I'm not sure what you mean by getting closer here, but..."

"Oh? So, you're going to dodge it this time?"

Kishiar grinned, pulling up the corners of his mouth.

"Well, fine. I'm the type who feels more accomplished when I break down a higher wall."

A high wall. It was not an expression that someone of imperial lineage would use to a commoner.

"Just as I said, you're already my subordinate, so let's take a long-term view."

That was a declaration that he wouldn't give up on his intention. As Yuder's eyes twitched, Kishiar stood up from his seat. It seemed he was about to set off again.

"Yuder Aile. If you notice any strange circumstances in the future, feel free to report them to me anytime. If I'm not around and you meet my deputy or other people, feel free to talk to them as you would to me. I'll let them know."

"...Understood."

For a single conversation, it was a remarkable achievement. It was also a gesture that proved Kishiar had a significant interest in Yuder's mind and abilities.

'He's certainly no ordinary man.'