

Turning 34

Chapter 34

"Do not exhaust yourselves like the one who just left. If you notice any symptoms, no matter how minor, speak up immediately. If anyone appears unable to walk on their own, Hinn Eldore and Finn Eldore will assist them as before."

"Understood."

The gaze of the remaining four members of the Peletta Knights hardened. They too must have been reluctant to be swept away by the mysterious blue wind to an unknown location.

Not long after, two of the Peletta Knights raised their hands, confessing they couldn't bear the pressure any longer, and descended.

As the surrounding scenery gradually turned barren, with lush trees and grasses disappearing and only rocks beginning to surface, another one retreated.

What remained were a single Peletta Knight, five Cavalry members, Commander Kishiar and General Gino. Compared to the Cavalry members, who showed no signs of fatigue, the lone Peletta knight's breath was growing ragged, seemingly struggling.

Yuder identified him as the knight who had led the way here, the one the other knights had called 'deputy-commander.' He seemed to be the highest-ranking of the Peletta Knights who had come this time.

'He seems to be the most capable among them, too.'

It was believable that Swordmaster General Gino and Commander Kishiar were unaffected, but was it really coincidence that all five Cavalry members seemed fine? Yuder had kept a close eye on the energy flowing around him as he ascended. However, so far, he hadn't noticed anything unusual.

"Gakane, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. If anything, I feel a bit more energetic as we get closer to where the stone is... I've been wondering if the stone that awakened us might be the reason."

Gakane, after hearing the question, examined his own arms and legs before responding. Yuder thought his theory might have some merit.

"We're almost there. If we climb up there, we will be able to see the massive crater created by the falling stone at once."

As the trees began to disappear and they finally arrived at a slope primarily composed of rocks, General Gino addressed Kishiar.

"Right, that place, called the Navel of the World or something equally grandiose. I'm quite eager to see what it looks like."

The Navel of the World. Listening to their conversation, Yuder sifted through the information he remembered from the past.

The Yuder of the past had not participated in the Red Stone retrieval operation, but before his death, he had read a brief piece of information about the massive crater created by the falling stone while researching the Red Stone.

One day, the Red Stone fell from the sky, landing in the middle of the Airic Mountains, instantly destroying all surrounding trees and land and creating a massive crater. It was said that the size of the crater was so large that nearly a whole city's worth of forest disappeared. Even after the stone was retrieved, no trees or grass grew there.

Finally, the party stood at the end of the slope. And before their eyes lay a breathtaking sight—an endless, gigantic chasm.

It was as if someone had scooped out a part of the mountain with a colossal spoon. The enormous crater wasn't just a crater—it was more akin to a valley or a rift.

"I have a feeling the air is different from here on out. It gives me the chills."

Gakane crinkled his nose, peering down into the abyss. His statement was not just a figment of his imagination. Yuder also felt a similar sensation, looking at the dizzyingly vast pit.

'Yes, this is the feeling.'

Long ago, when he saw the Red Stone that Kishiar had retrieved from a distance, he felt a strange energy. It was as if the invisible air from all around was pressing down on him, a faint pressure that seemed to ride on the wind.

"What a refreshing sight. Let's proceed downward now."

Kishiar looked around with a unique appreciation. There didn't seem to be any safe paths, but they had to descend. The Red Stone they were seeking lay right in the middle of that immense pit.

"Your Highness, I... I think I should not proceed any further."

The last remaining Peletta Knight spoke to Kishiar, who was about to descend a suitable slope.

"I'm having difficulty breathing."

"Alright, understood. Stay here, a little further away."

"I apologize. I should follow you until the end... I am ashamed."

"You've done an excellent job just by following us this far. Don't worry about it."

Finally, the last remaining knight withdrew as well. Tension appeared on the faces of the Cavalry members.

They carefully stepped down, ensuring they did not slip. As they descended, the pressure became stronger, until it felt as if thousands of needles were prickling their entire bodies by the time they reached the bottom.

'It seems that all the Cavalry members are in a similar state... Is it because we are Awakeners?'

Yuder scanned the faces of the slowly moving members. Although they felt the pressure, none of them seemed to be having trouble breathing.

"General, which way should we go now?"

"Head straight towards the center of the pit. The stone is very small, so you can only see it when you get close."

Kishiar questioned, and General Gino answered. Even he seemed to feel a significant pressure now, as his brows were furrowed.

Only Kishiar and Yuder did not show any changes in their expressions.

'The World Sphere didn't emit such strong energy.'

As Yuder approached the location of the Red Stone, he recalled the World Sphere he had seen countless times.

The World Sphere, long kept embedded in the Sanctuary Forest, did give off a slightly strange sensation when approached, but it did not emit such rough and intense energy.

'It's clear that the energy of the Red Stone was reduced and disappeared due to the refining process in the Pearl Tower. What the hell were they trying to do?'

The mages of the Pearl Tower, who had refined the Red Stone into the World Sphere, Yuder did not know what their purpose was, but he thought it probably wasn't a good one.

'They did more than one or two pieces of trashy research there.'

Originally, the Pearl Tower was a place created by the Archmage Pierre Mice, who wanted to lead mages who did not want to be influenced by any political purpose and solely desired to practice magic.

Like a clam that coats a foreign substance with hundreds, thousands of layers of nacre to create a single pearl, they were obsessed with magic and lived only for magic, layering countless magics to achieve the essence. They named it the Pearl Tower, symbolizing their aspiration to pile up countless magic to form the essence.

At first, they were indeed ostracized, but as time passed, the situation changed. The Pearl Tower produced numerous archmages and released several outstanding research findings.

Until recently, when people thought of mages, the image of court mages working exclusively for the state was strong. But the mages of the Pearl Tower didn't work for anyone. They researched and trained freely.

Those bound by the state, moving for the elite, couldn't compare with those who trained freely. After a few centuries, all the countries could no longer ignore the Pearl Tower, and it grew into an organization representing all mages.

The problem was that over time, their original good intentions gradually twisted into something strange.

The goal of existing solely for magic was gone. The current Pearl Tower clung to the power structures of various nations, using their power for them and consistently conducting inhumane research.

The creation of the Misty Wind Horse was one of the less inhumane experiments they conducted. At least it was a product of research using captured monsters and beasts.

The mages of the Pearl Tower struggled to the bitter end to not lose the power they obtained through the Awakeners' Red Stone. Yuder strongly suspected that their efforts to refine the Red Stone into a World Sphere were part of that struggle.

'Good riddance. Even if I didn't do it.'

Yuder chuckled as he recalled the destruction of the Pearl Tower, one of the charges that led to his execution.

"The stone is in sight."

At that moment, General Gino spoke heavily. Yuder's gaze, lost in the past, followed his. Half-buried in the ground where General Gino was looking was a stone the size of a fist.

The stone looked completely ordinary. If it wasn't the only stone in this desolate place, no one would have thought it was the Red Stone.

It was a slightly gloomy color, rough but generally round in shape.

Even though they were still quite far away, the stone was very clearly visible because there was nothing around it. The party all stopped, each absorbed in their own emotions. Some showed reverence, some fear, and some simple curiosity.

Yuder also felt a very strange feeling the moment he saw the stone. But what he felt was far from the reverence or fear of the others.

'Because of that.'

Because of that, his fate had changed.

Yuder, once an ordinary peasant boy, had become an Awakener, possessing the greatest power in the world, and was eventually executed for the crime of trying to touch that stone. His life and death had essentially been determined by that stone.

'And now it's a stone that needs to be carefully observed and protected.'

Previously, he had not been able to closely examine the stone before it was chipped away. But this time was different. Yuder resolved to use this opportunity he'd been given more wisely than anyone else.

"How's everyone feeling?"