

## Turning 40

### Chapter 40

How was it? It was only then that Yuder understood that Kishiar's order to bring the box had not been thoughtless.

'Come to think of it.'

He recalled thinking that he had grown somewhat accustomed to the energy emanating from the Red Stone more than he had been the day before. He hadn't even had a conversation with Gakane.

Could it be that he hadn't just become accustomed to it?

"...I thought I had grown more accustomed to the energy it was emitting than yesterday."

"It's not that you've become accustomed to it, but the Red Stone has weakened."

Kishiar's response was succinct.

"The energy it was emitting has diminished a bit today. Don't you notice?"

Yuder suddenly turned his head to look at the box he had placed behind the pillar. He could not see the Red Stone inside, but the energy it was emitting was still perceptible. A strange energy that made the surroundings feel heavy and tingling, like being deep underwater.

If, as Kishiar said, it had diminished slightly from yesterday, there had to be a reason. Was there a plausible cause?

'...Could it be?'

"Is it because of the explosions that occurred yesterday? Because of the energy that escaped from the Red Stone?"

Yuder ventured to speak, his voice filled with uncertainty.

"I think that's likely the case. There's no other explanation."

A satisfied smile crossed Kishiar's face, as if he were speaking with a conversational partner who understood him well.

"Yuder, you're clever enough to understand what that implies, aren't you?"

"...The energy contained within that stone is not infinite."

'Bingo.' Even without Kishiar's response, Yuder understood what he had been trying to say. He tried to suppress his astonishment.

He had never heard such information in the last eleven years. Compared to the Red Stone, the World Sphere was a mere shell, its power nearly depleted. And it was impossible to recover what had already been lost.

But if, as Kishiar and his conjectures suggested, the tremendous power emitted by the Red Stone was not infinite but finite, like water in a jar, then that would mean...

'Could the purification work done in the Pearl Tower in the past have been an attempt to separate the power of that stone?'

Back then, he had thought that the mages, consumed by their research, were simply destroying and shaving away at the stone, causing all its inherent power to scatter.

But what if that had been intentional? What if someone had tried to forcibly separate the power within it, just like Yuder of the past who wanted to possess the power within the stone...?

'...That's too much of a speculation at this point.'

Yuder tried to suppress his complicated thoughts, listening to Kishiar's continuing words.

"The energy contained in that stone is completely different from any mana that has ever existed. It's so remarkable that it can influence humans by its mere presence. We need to be particularly careful to ensure that none of it leaks out during transportation. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"...I'll relay this to the others when we return."

The Awakeners, unable to directly touch the stone, would protect it as they returned to the capital. Although it sounded easy, Yuder remembered a slight 'accident' that had occurred during this task in the past.

The very accident that became the catalyst for Kishiar to draw the divine sword and announce himself as its new master to the world.

Baseless rumors and the Imperial family's downsized official statements. With time, the individuals involved had become nearly impossible to find, and the information Yuder managed to gather about the incident wasn't much. After all, no one who could detail exactly what transpired then remained.

But it was beyond doubt that during that time, Kishiar and his party had engaged in a battle of such magnitude that he had to draw his divine sword against some adversaries.

When did that battle occur? It was highly likely to have happened quite a while after they had departed from this place, which was guarded by countless soldiers.

'It's tricky. The stone would limit or slow our movement, and the Peletta Knights would follow from a distance. If someone attacks us in a situation where the group is separated...'

Yuder furrowed his brows after thinking that far.

"Do you suppose we might be ambushed on our return, Commander?"

Indeed. As soon as Kishiar had retrieved the Red Stone, he planned to return to the capital as quickly as possible. He even declared that he would leave without bidding farewell to General Gino, whom he had known for a long time, and ordered not to disband the Southern Army, which had been safeguarding this place for so long.

'Kishiar ordering to move only after the news of his return to the capital is spread means we need even more stringent security than when we came here.'

However, if the same event that happened in the future were to occur this time, Yuder had to understand Kishiar's intentions beforehand and instill a stronger sense of caution in him.

"Nathan didn't explain it before we came here? Always be wary of the unexpected. After all, everyone in the world knows that the stone is here."

"...Yes."

"The reason no one coveted the stone, even though everyone knew it was here, was because no one had found or attempted a way to touch the stone. But things have changed now."

Fortunately, Kishiar had a proper sense of caution.

"We must return to the capital as quickly as possible. I'm counting on your remarkable abilities should anything happen."

"...Understood."

Good. He had eagerly taken up the duty of protecting the Red Stone that Kishiar had outright entrusted to him. It was what he originally wanted, so he was quite pleased.

'Even if attackers show up as they did before, as Kishiar said, this time I'm here.'

So, he would minimize Kishiar's need to step in. Absolutely.

Yuder planned to gather the remaining Cavalry members as soon as they returned and prepare how to act in case of an emergency.

He had to get going since there was no time to lose.

"I enjoyed the tea. I'll head back first."

Yuder drained the remaining tea in one gulp and rose from his seat. Kishiar then opened his mouth with a dissatisfied look.

"You shouldn't gulp down tea all at once....."

Crash!

Just then, something flew past his head with the sound of shattering glass, crashing into the magic stone heater. A dense smoke spread, and a chilling, intense murderous aura targeted Yuder.

'An intruder!'

Yuder immediately cast a wide water barrier around himself and Kishiar.

With a 'puff' sound, something was felt rebounding off a barrier. Then something else flew towards it but was likewise repelled.

"What the hell is this!"

A bewildered deep voice echoed.

'They must be new to something like this. They're not professional killers, it seems.'

Many had laughingly considered his water-made wall to be weak. However, what Yuder had created was different. He could instantly freeze the water to be as solid as steel and then melt it again. That was the main reason why he often used water for defense.

'It seems like several people have entered, but it's too dark to see ahead. For now, let's deal with this darkness...'

If he were to reveal all his abilities, he could just summon dozens of flames to push back the darkness, but he couldn't do that. Yuder paused to think for a moment, then removed the barrier in front of him.

'If there's any guy with a sword, I should take it and use it.'

The magic stone heater had shattered, and smoke had exploded, making the interior as dark as pitch-black. However, to the focused Yuder, the positions of those inside felt distinctly clear.

"Commander, please stay still for now."

Worried that Kishiar might try to grab the divine sword, Yuder advised him and then lightly waved his hand. If there was a steel sword in the place, it would respond to his power, escaping from its owner's hand and flying towards him.

"Uh! What, what is this!"

Soon, one of the enemies not far away let out a bewildered sound. The sword that flew through the darkness landed in Yuder's hand. Yuder immediately gripped it and infused it with his power.

With the sound of a soft roar, flames climbing the blade quickly illuminated the smoke-filled darkness, revealing the surrounding scenery.

The interior was a mess due to the shattered magic stone stove, and several masked men appeared, not knowing what to do. Kishiar was also seen inside the barrier, his face as usual.

'Good. The box containing the red stone...'

He glanced at the box that was still lying there, unnoticed by anyone. It was a relief.

"Who the hell are you guys?"

Yuder opened his mouth with a more relaxed attitude.

'The Red Stone makes it inaccessible to ordinary people. Considering they got in... they must all be Awakeners. I wonder who sent them.'

"Where's the Red Stone?"

A man standing at the front of the masked people growled in a low voice.

"Hand it over quietly. If you don't want to die."

"Are all of you Awakeners? Who sent you?"

"We're the ones asking the questions, not you."

Due to the energy emitted by the Red Stone, the air enveloping the entire mansion was very heavy. If they knew that the energy became stronger as it approached the stone, they could track its location without asking, but the enemies were unaware of this.

'They know that the stone is here, but they don't know its characteristics... It's safe to say that there wasn't a traitor among those involved in the recovery operation.'

Even though Yuder had lit the darkness with a flame-wrapped sword, its range wasn't very wide. It was fortunate that he had pushed the box containing the red stone behind an inconspicuous pillar.

'I need to uncover the mastermind, so I shouldn't kill them. And Kishiar might go for the divine sword, so I should prevent that in advance.'

The tingling energy emitted by the Red Stone wasn't good for either Yuder or Kishiar, but it was the same for the enemies. Besides, no matter how much Yuder had returned to his state from 11 years ago, he was not so weak as to lose to these enemies.

Having made his decision, Yuder looked back at Kishiar and spoke.