

Turning 69

Chapter 69

"Halt, you scoundrels!"

Just at that moment, a few people stepped out to block the path as if they'd read Yuder's thoughts, shouting out in defiance.

"How dare you tread on the path we linger! You should be ready to pay the toll."

"Ah, right. It's them. The ones I encountered when I came for the Cavalry test."

Jimmy, who had been chattering with Gakane, looked at their faces and whispered lightly.

"It seems there is no change even after some time."

His tone was as if he was not dealing with bandits, but greeting familiar faces from a long lost home town. The bandits, thinking it odd that the three seated calmly on their horses were not startled, lit their torches and approached.

"What, did these kids freeze in fear? Why aren't they saying anything..."

One of the bandits with a rough face scarred from knife wounds approached and, seeing Jimmy on his horse, suddenly closed his mouth.

"What's up, why'd you stop talking? As I was saying about the toll..."

Another bandit who followed suit stopped mid-sentence as well.

"What's the matter? What's wrong... You, you are!"

"Hello. You're still here, I see."

Jimmy rubbed his nose as he greeted them from atop his horse. Of course, the recipients of the greeting did not appreciate his cheerful salutation.

"Bloody hell. It's the kid who said he was going to take some kind of test last time!"

"You, you... don't tell me you failed? Is that why you came back? Dammit!"

"No, I passed, of course. I have two other companions here with me besides myself."

Jimmy pointed at Yuder and Gakane with a smile. Only then did the bandits seem to realize the existence of the other two, their eyes darting in shock and fear.

"Don't tell me, those two are also... like you, cutting rocks with their swords...?"

"Ah. They are far more impressive than I am. How can you compare them to me, who is merely 12 years old?"

"Damn it, retreat. Retreat! Run!"

Just as Jimmy finished speaking, one of the bandits closest to them started running, waving his hands wildly. The other bandits, as if they had been waiting for such an order, scampered away without even looking back.

A sudden wind picked up on the dark mountain path, and the torch held by one of the bandits was hastily extinguished. The remaining bandits, who were further away, seemed to notice something was up and promptly vanished into the shadows.

"They fled already, and we didn't even do anything yet. What should we do?"

Jimmy murmured, looking worried as he watched their swift departure.

"Indeed. Hmm. Should we chase them?"

Gakane also turned to Yuder, a hint of uncertainty in his eyes. Normally, they would have given chase, but they were currently on an urgent mission to find Devran Hartude.

"What do you think, Yuder?"

"Summon the shadow clone to chase. Block the path and catch as many as possible."

"Got it."

At Yuder's order, the shadow clone of Gakane sprung forth from under his horse, darting in the direction the bandits had fled at an incredible speed. It moved so fast it was incomparable to a human running.

"Jimmy. Since when have bandits been lurking around here?"

As Gakane's shadow clone was carrying out its task, Yuder, with an impassive face, asked Jimmy. Lost in thought, Jimmy frowned slightly.

"Hmm. I'm not quite sure. In fact, there were many people who used to take this path until last year. But when I told my parents that I would be going alone to take the Cavalry test, they absolutely forbade me from going this way. They said it was dangerous because bandits had claimed the route and were demanding a toll. But it's much quicker than any other way, so... hehe."

"So, you're saying they've been here for at least a year."

"Why? Is that a significant point?"

Gakane, manipulating his shadow, tilted his head and turned his gaze towards Yuder. Thanks to the grueling training he had been doing, he was now able to control his shadow with a fair amount of ease. Yuder opened his mouth quietly, directing his words at both Gakane and Jimmy.

"Have you two not noticed it yet?"

"Noticed what?"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"There're Awakeners among those bandits."

"...What? Oh no."

The moment Gakane opened his mouth in surprise, a thud and a scream echoed from afar. It seemed he had accidentally used his shadow control too forcefully.

"Awakeners? Then why did they run away after seeing us? They wouldn't have needed to. No, more importantly, Yuder, how did you know that?"

"Torchlight. Wind. Darkness."

"Huh?"

"Ah, I see. I understand now!"

At Yuder's enigmatic words, Jimmy immediately brightened and exclaimed.

"They approached us with a torch, even though they hadn't been carrying one from the beginning. And when they ran away, the wind suddenly blew! And there's no moon or stars visible in the sky!"

They were all correct. Only then did Gakane look up at the sky, surprised at the pitch-black darkness where neither moon nor stars could be seen.

"I didn't realize. How did this happen? Despite the sky being so dark, I didn't find it strange because I could see my surroundings so clearly."

Even this acceptance of the situation could be due to someone's ability. Yuder, swallowing his final answer, watched as Gakane's shadow clone handled three bandits who were struggling in the shadow's grasp.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"Damn. I told you I had a bad feeling for the past few days and suggested we stop our operations until the boss returns, didn't I?"

"Shut up, you stinky bastard. Your butt is poking my face!"

"I've been telling you over and over that I've had a bad feeling since the fire the other day!"

"So what does that have to do with us!"

Yuder dismounted his horse to look down at the bandits, who were cursing and struggling. Gakane and Jimmy followed suit.

"Gakane."

"Yeah."

Just hearing his name was enough; Gakane instantly understood Yuder's intention. As soon as the shadow clone released the bandits, the three men collapsed on the ground, screaming in pain.

"Ouch! Ah, my back!"

"Damn it, if you're going to kill us, do it quickly! But you won't be able to get anything from us! Our boss will avenge us!"

As the noisy bandits yelled out, Yuder took a closer look at their faces. In the dim light of the flickering torch, he hadn't noticed it before, but they were all younger than he had initially thought. Only one of them was carrying a knife.

If they were the type to make a living from such activities, they wouldn't have been so poorly armed. Yuder's curiosity about their true identities grew stronger.

"Why are Awakeners here, acting like bandits, extracting tolls?"

"What's it to you? What do you know? Stop blabbing."

Instead of answering, Yuder conjured a flame in his palm. Though small, the threatening flame flared brightly, illuminating their surroundings and drawing everyone's gaze. Fear and alarm flashed across the faces of the three bandits.

"Yuder, you can now summon flames without a sword?"

Unable to hide his amazement, Gakane whispered in his ear.

"With the wind, with the fire... How does your ability keep developing like this?"

The truth was, he had been capable of doing it all along. But had he said that, Gakane would surely have asked why he'd kept it a secret. The only answer Yuder could provide, as before, was...

"...Training with you guys has improved me somewhat."

"Somewhat? You call this somewhat?"

"Hey, can we just talk this out? Yes, we made a mistake in not recognizing who we were dealing with and asking for a toll. But we're not like that, really. We're good guys. We've never killed anyone, we just took a tiny, tiny toll when people passed through! Don't forget you're the one who brought us here when we did nothing!"

Thankfully, one of the bandits raised his voice, preventing Gakane from asking further. Feeling slightly grateful to the bandits, Yuder approached them. As he did, fear heightened on the bandits' faces.

"I just want an answer to my question."

"If... if we answer, you won't kill us, right?"

"Keep your mouth shut when talking to the enemy..."

Yuder extended his other hand and summoned a gust of wind. The bandit who had tried to talk was silenced by the fierce wind that hit his jaw, closing his mouth in an instant.

Witnessing Yuder simultaneously wielding wind and fire, the bandits' eyes widened in terror.

"Let me ask you again. Why are people who wouldn't normally do this sort of thing acting as bandits here? Including Awakeners."

"..."

"Answer me."

"I'll answer that if you let my brothers go."

"Boss!" The bandits turned around in unison and cried out. Yuder looked at a man who had appeared out of nowhere.

He was a remarkably handsome young man, too young to be believed to be a bandit leader. However, the left half of his face was horribly scarred, and his left eye had lost its color, with the pupil dilated, inducing a feeling of fright rather than his inherent handsomeness.

Among the people Yuder had met, this man, with a starkly different impression from the most beautiful man Kishiar, left an unforgettable impact.

"Did you start all this? Leading them into this mess?"

"No. The sequence of events is the reverse."

The man answered surprisingly calmly.

"They first fled from the tyranny of a noble, and then they met me."