

Turning 39

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Chapter 39

"I was worried yesterday that the retrieval might be difficult, but I congratulate you on your successful completion," General Gino, who had moved slightly ahead to avoid the energy spewing from the box, said to Kishiar.

Judging by the direction he was walking, he seemed to intend to accompany Kishiar until he reached his quarters.

"Thank you. I'm glad it ended quickly."

"Thanks to you, our Southern Army will be able to leave this place for the first time in two years."

"I'm sure you must be happy to regain your freedom after a few months."

Hearing Kishiar's casual response, a faint smile appeared on General Gino's face. He had always seemed so serious that it was surprising to see that even he had grown tired of this place.

"But, it's strange that the stone threatens to explode if touched by a person, but is fine when placed in an object. How did you guess that?"

"I think it's not exactly about human touch that makes it explode."

For a moment, Kishiar's gaze turned toward the box held by Yuder.

"It's still a hypothesis, but I think the likely trigger is Awakeners, like me or the Cavalry members I brought. It reacts to direct contact and to the use of abilities."

"I see. So that's why you decided to move it with a shovel and a box, which have no connection with the Awakeners."

While stroking his chin, lost in thought, General Gino asked Kishiar another question after a moment's pause.

"Then, it's possible that those of us who have not gained power from the Red Stone, like me, might not cause it to explode if we touched it. What do you think?"

"Maybe. But what does it matter? Ordinary people can touch it but can't approach it, and the Awakeners can approach but not touch it directly. The best option was to shovel it into the box. Fortunately, it worked."

"Quite strange."

General Gino slightly furrowed his brow. He looked at the box containing the Red Stone as if it were a magic bomb ready to explode at the slightest touch.

"General. We will leave early tomorrow morning. As previously discussed, the withdrawal of the Southern Army stationed here should commence once you receive the signal that we have arrived at the capital."

"Understood."

"Try to skip the greetings tomorrow as well. It could draw unnecessary attention."

Upon hearing Kishiar say that he would even skip greetings, General Gino let out a sigh.

"You say we may not see each other again once we part, but you want to leave without even saying goodbye to this old general?"

"Haha. Wasn't playing dozens of strategy games with you over the past two days for this very moment?"

"Considering we haven't seen each other in years, it's only right that you do at least that much."

Despite not appearing to be significantly older, General Gino's gaze towards Kishiar was as affectionate as a grandfather looking at his grandson.

Yuder suddenly remembered that the reputedly upright and reticent General Gino had never had children, having devoted his life to the way of the sword.

"We've arrived, so let's go into our quarters."

Not long after, Kishiar's quarters, located on the outskirts of the village, came into view. Unlike the other relatively shabby houses, it was a beautiful mansion, properly constructed with bricks.

Yuder was a bit surprised to find such a lodging in this place, but he guessed it was probably a summer villa built by someone in the past.

"Always take care of your health, Your Majesty."

"I'm always healthy. Aren't you due for retirement soon, General? Do patrol the border areas moderately and come to Peletta after you retire."

"You always speak so sweetly."

General Gino bowed his head with a laugh, said his farewells, and turned to leave. Yuder also bowed his head towards him, but as expected, there was no response to a mere soldier like him. Yuder quietly watched the General's figure as it quickly receded into the distance.

This time, there was no opportunity for him to have a personal conversation with the General. But he wasn't disappointed. It was enough to know that Kishiar was considering inviting the retired General to his side.

Their relationship seemed deeper than he had expected, so as long as Kishiar was alive, there would undoubtedly be another opportunity to meet in the future.

"Don't feel left out. The General is older than he looks. He still doesn't fully understand the value of the Awakeners."

Thinking Yuder might be upset about the General's indifference, Kishiar quietly initiated the conversation. Yuder didn't immediately understand what he meant, blinked in confusion, then nodded in realization.

"I'm not upset. Rather, if he showed too much interest, it would have been burdensome."

He was sincere. How much attention could someone like General Gino, who had lived high up for a long time, show to a greenhorn like himself who had just joined the cavalry?

In his eyes, the members of the Cavalry were no different from the common soldiers that populated the Southern Army.

They might be interesting because of their unique abilities, but that was about it. There was no reason at all to treat them as equals to someone like Kishiar, whom he had watched since his young prince days.

Yuder never for a moment fooled himself into thinking that his status had elevated simply because he had joined the Cavalry and received a title.

"I like that you're consistent."

Kishiar chuckled and opened the door. The unusually high, arched wooden door was heavy enough to be hard to open even with both hands, but Kishiar easily opened it with one hand.

"Now, let's go in."

Kishiar, who had opened the unusually high, arched entrance door with one hand, gestured for them to go inside.

It was a completely different behavior from when he was walking elegantly with General Gino.

"...Where should I put the box?"

"Just put it anywhere nearby. You'll have to come back and get it tomorrow anyway."

Normally, the knights of Peletta would have taken care of it, but they couldn't even approach the box containing the Red Stone. The reason they had decided to follow at a distance from the Cavalry on the way back tomorrow was also due to this.

Yuder set the box down under a pillar's shadow, where it wasn't very noticeable inside the entrance. As he moved away from the box, his skin felt significantly less prickly.

"Then, I'll be heading back."

"You've worked hard carrying it all the way here, it would be quite heartless of me to just let you go. At least have a cup of tea before you leave."

"No, I'll be....."

"Don't tell me you're planning to heartlessly reject the request of a leader who has spent two whole nights without an adjutant? Even so, that would be going too far. I believe that Yuder Aile, who deeply cares for his fellow Awakener, wouldn't do such a thing."

'Since when did you know that?'

Before Yuder could reject the idea, Kishiar had already made the first move. He had lit a fire in the magic-stone stove of the mansion's parlor. A handful of magic stones thrown in crackled as they burned, quickly illuminating the room and filling it with warmth.

As the room brightened, the summer-mansion-style interior of the house became visible to Yuder.

When the fire was out, he thought the place was too old and decrepit for anyone to stay alone, but it was not the case.

Though not luxurious, the interior was cozy, and the emblem of the aristocratic family who were the original owners was engraved in various places. The emblem was a long-tailed blue bird next to a shield.

"You won't have many opportunities to drink tea that I've personally prepared. Are you still leaving?"

Despite having stayed here for only two nights, Kishiar moved as freely as if he were the original owner.

Yuder watched as he filled the empty teapot with water, placed it on the stove, and scooped tea leaves from a shelf onto it. His movements were as fluid as flowing water.

"..."

Finally, Yuder sighed and sat in the chair Kishiar pointed to in front of the stove. Not long after, steam rose from the teapot, and a savory, aromatic scent tickled his nose. Kishiar poured the hot water into two tea cups he had brought from somewhere and set them on the table.

"You don't seem surprised. Usually, people are surprised when I do this."

How regrettable it was that he couldn't respond that he had drunk this tea many times in the past.

Swallowing a fragment of an old memory, Yuder shook his head.

"I am surprised, in my own way."

"You don't look like it."

"That's just my face."

A grim expressionless face. Emotionless, chilling eyes. A pallid, sallow face like a corpse's. These were common remarks Yuder had heard about his face since long ago.

"There's no one who's naturally like that. Anyone can learn to have a brighter expression. How about practicing in front of a mirror? I can help if you want."

"...That won't be necessary."

"No need to refuse."

Why on earth was he having this ridiculous conversation with Kishiar? Despite his resolve not to be swayed, Yuder found himself startled to realize that he was responding dutifully to his absurd comments.

'I can't afford to let my guard down.'

"How is the tea?"

Previously, Yuder had left without drinking the tea that Kishiar's adjutant, Nathan, had brewed at the Cavalry barracks. This time, he couldn't. As he lifted the tea cup with a feeling of lifting a heavy stone and moistened his lips, Kishiar asked as if he had been waiting.

"I'm from a peasant background, so I don't really know the taste of such fine things."

"So you mean you don't want to talk. Still, finish your tea."

Kishiar hit a nerve, and Yuder was momentarily at a loss for words.

"...That's not what I meant."

"I was just kidding."

Knowing it yet being struck by the other person's words wasn't a pleasant feeling. Feeling a slight headache, Yuder decided to finish his tea as quickly as possible.

"Yuder. How was it while you were carrying the box?"

But before he could take a sip, Kishiar started talking again. From his gaze, Yuder had a hunch that this was going to be the main point.

"What do you mean by 'how was it'?"

"When you first saw the stone yesterday and when you carried it in the box today. Didn't you feel any difference in the energy emanating from the stone, being so close to it?"