1306 Paths of Ascension

Sunny could not really treat Ananke to the staples of the waking world cuisine, since he lacked the ingredients. He couldn't even cook up the few classic military dishes, which were mostly based on using synthetic rations in inventive ways.

However, he and Nephis still managed to make a delicious meal — they were Awakened, after all, and Awakened were supreme masters of turning monster meat into all kinds of delightful dishes.

In fact, Awakened cuisine was as varied as its basic ingredients were limited. There were some fundamental skills taught to everyone, but each Citadel and region of the Dream Realm added its own flavor to the tradition. So, each Awakened cook was, in a sense, unique.

Take Sunny, for example... his fundamental skills had been taught to him by Teacher Julius. Since Teacher Julius was anchored in Bastion, Sunny's cooking acquired a hint of Bastion's tradition. Later, it was influenced by the flavor passed down to Nephis by the Immortal Flame clan, and then assimilated the improvised habits of the Sleepers of the Dark City.

After that, he absorbed the local tradition of the Chained Isles, as well as learning this and that from the government Awakened in Antarctica. Since there was no other Awakened whose culinary skills were the result of this exact combination of influences, the flavor of Sunny's cooking was unique.

...Soon, the chamber was filled with a delicious smell. The meal they prepared was not the most visually stunning, but its fragrance was tantalizing. The meat had just the right amount of crust on the outside, while the insides were juicy and moist. It had absorbed the spices and the heat of the coals, becoming tender enough to melt on the tongue.

Still, it didn't look too pretty... Awakened did not really care about the presentation, since their meals were usually eaten in a hurry while keeping one eye out for the prowling abominations.

There were some side dishes, at least.

Ananke tasted the dish presented to her with diligently hidden caution, but then, her eyes widened slightly. Throwing a quick glance at Sunny and Nephis, she hesitated for a few moments, and then attacked her food like a hungry wolf.

Sunny smiled.

'That's better...'

It was a far cry from the start of their journey together, when he had to force her to eat even a single small pie. The old woman‘s appetite was not making him worry anymore.

'That said... why was she so surprised? Huh? Do I not look like a guy who can outcook every damned cook out there?‘

Sunny grimaced.

Well... maybe it was because he was going around boasting about how he had eaten nothing but rotten mimic meat for a month. It was only fair for people to doubt his taste after hearing such things. Still...

'I better get Aiko to do the promotions when I open my restaurant. And, uh... maybe write me a guide on what I should and shouldn't say...'

He could have the shop and the restaurant in the same building. Customers would come to browse the Memories, then have a meal to celebrate the purchase. And he would receive the money for both!

chuckling, Sunny focused on his own portion.

Soon, they were done with the supper and were preparing to rest. The House of Parting consisted of the main ceremonial hall, several smaller halls, and a scattering of rooms for the departing and their close ones to sleep in before saying the final goodbyes.

So, Sunny and Nephis were going to enjoy sleeping on actual beds tonight, for the first time since leaving the siege capital to participate in the Battle of the Black Skull.

Before that, however, all three of them remained around the table, drinking tea and savoring its refreshing warmth.

Despite the solemn nature of their surroundings, the atmosphere was light and uplifting. It was hard not to enjoy the simple comforts after spending months in the wilderness. Maybe it was this relaxed mood that prompted Sunny to ask the question he had been hesitating to ask for a while. Putting down his cup, he glanced at the old woman and asked:

"Ananke... can I ask what Rank you are?"

She looked at him curiously.

"My Rank? Why, of course... I have reached Transcendence not too long ago, my Lord." Sunny nodded slowly. He had initially suspected that Ananke was a being of much greater power, but after getting to know her and learning about the fate of Weave, his impression changed.

It felt a bit strange, to meet an Awakened who was two hundred years old, but only as powerful as someone like Saint Tyris... the immortal Chain Lords notwithstanding. The Spell had descended into the waking world only half a century ago, after all, but there were already Saints and Sovereigns.

However, it made sense... the original inhabitants of the Great Realm had not been cursed with as cruel a teacher as the Nightmare Spell. They had not benefited from its merciless guidance and the lethal necessity to either ascend or die.

Even Ananke, who was a priestess of the Spell and bestowed with some of its powers, did not know anything about Nightmares.

Without the Nightmares... How had the ancient humans even Awakened?

That was something Sunny had been curious about for a long time. In fact, he knew very little about how the ancient Awakened did anything without the Spell.

He leaned forward a little and asked, his voice full of curiosity:

"How does one become Transcendent?"

Ananke looked at him in surprise.

"You don't know, my Lord?"

Sunny shook his head. "

"I do know, of course, how one might Transcend — in the future, where the Nightmare Spell controls all these matters. But I don't know how people rose to greater power before."

Nephis pricked her ears, as well.

The old woman smiled, lingered for a while, and then said thoughtfully:

"...Although my knowledge is limited, I will try to explain as best I can. Let's see... the first step is, of course, to Awaken. To Awaken, one must gain control over their soul essence, and use that control to form the soul core."

Sunny blinked.

"...In that order?"

Ananke did not seem to understand the question.

"Naturally. How would one form the core without being able to control essence? It is like trying to build a building without bricks. There are some powerful creatures who are born with their soul cores already formed, sure, and have to learn to move their essence as they mature. But most are born Dormant, like us humans."

She paused for a moment.

"Learning how to control essence is the hardest part. Forming the core takes time and effort, but as long as you have the knowledge, success is all but guaranteed. Well... some still fail, of course, and die after their souls collapse."

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other.

So... the ancient humans Awakened in the reverse order compared to modern humans, who formed their soul core after the First Nightmare and gained the ability to control essence after surviving the first journey to the Dream Reahn. That was how the Spell arranged things.

'Interesting.‘

Nephis took a sip of her tea and asked, her voice tinged with a hint of curiosity:

"Then how does one learn to control their essence?"

The Awakened of the waking world received the ability to sense their essence from the Spell. The intuitive knowledge of how to control it was gifted to them, too... it just took time and practice to turn that control into a practical skill.

Most received these gifts after Awakening, while Nephis had to catch up after becoming a Master.

Ananke thought for a few moments.

"There is... no single way to gain control over your soul essence. In fact, it is a unique experience for many. Some spend long years meditating and perfecting their souls, eventually entering a state of unity between mind and soul. Some attune themselves to the world and gather insights about the nature of living things, traveling from realm to realm. Some follow the teachings of great warriors and train their bodies, testing themselves through hardship and battle. Some even receive sudden epiphanies in a moment of dire crisis with no preparation whatsoever."

She hesitated for a bit.

"However, there is a path that anyone can walk — both the simplest and the most dangerous, as well as the most vile."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"And what is that path?"

Ananke sighed.

"...It is to absorb soul essence that has already Awakened. Through killing those who have already Awakened, and plundering their soul shards."

Her face turned grim.

"The Awakened essence already knows how to be controlled, so when it is mixed with the essence of Dormant beings, it will change that essence... a little. Absorb enough of it, and your essence will Awaken, too. Things were simple during the Age of Heroes, when many Corrupted prowled the realms, and humans had to battle them to survive. But as the eras changed and there were fewer monsters to kill... some humans and noble creatures turned to killing each other, instead."