1307 Before the Nightmare Spell

The old woman fell silent. Sunny and Nephis were somber, too. It was too easy to imagine what vile acts those who lusted for power could commit in a world that rewarded murder with strength.

In fact, the same vileness could have consumed the waking world, where absorbing the essence of slain humans was easier than hunting down countless Nightmare Creatures. If not for the government and people like Jet, who maintained order and suppressed the darker side of the Awakened society with an iron fist, things would have turned grim long ago.

Legacy clans also played their part, preventing human enclaves in the Dream Realm from spiraling into lawlessness.

Eventually, Sunny sighed and shook his head.

"So... once your soul essence Awakens and you can control it, the next step is to patiently work on forming the soul core. What happens then?"

Ananke smiled and pointed to her chest, where the soul core of a human was usually located.

"Accumulation of power. Ascension is a step of rising above one's mortal nature by improving the quality of their essence, and their body as well. This step can be slow if one refines themselves naturally, or fast, if one improves their essence by absorbing the essence of stronger beings. Once the soul essence reaches a qualitative change, the soul core will reform itself and grow stronger, as well. Of course, it won't happen without some conscious refinement, either."

Sunny tilted his head.

"Uh... how does one refine their essence, exactly?"

Ananke laughed.

"It's not something I can explain in one conversation! There are methods and techniques,

the knowledge of which has been accumulated over countless generations and is taught to disciples over many years. Even then, very few manage to succeed. Ah... of course, all those who do succeed have to find the way into their Soul Sea first. Without the ability to enter the Soul Sea, it would take one many lifetimes to Ascend even with the best refinement technique."

She shook her head with a smile.

"At least that is how it is for us humans. Some of the noble creatures have their own ways... they can possess multiple soul cores, as well, and walk the path of Ascension more naturally."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Wait... people have to learn how to enter their Soul Seas?"

The old woman nodded matter—of—factly.

"Of course. That is... without the guidance of the Nightmare Spell. Weaver gave us mortals a gift that can hasten each step on the path of Ascension, including the discovery of one's Soul Sea."

"That's... unexpected.”

Everyone just assumed that being able to access the Soul Sea was a natural ability of all Awakened — including Sleepers. As it turned out, that was another thing that the Spell had simplified for the humans of the waking world.

'Ruthless, relentless, and... immensely effective. That is how the Spell is.’’

The more Sunny learned about the Nightmare Spell, the more he realized how ingenious and cruelly effective it was in helping... no, forcing people to become stronger, stronger, and stronger still — until they either rose as high as they could and higher than that, or died.

For what purpose, he did not know.

Nephis sighed.

"What about Transcendence?"

Ananke nodded.

"'Transcendence is different. It is not just about accumulation... It is a step of profound transformation, where a mortal assumes the first qualities of the divine. The soul essence has to become much more potent, the soul core has to become much more voluminous. Most importantly, an Awakened has to become one with the world and be recognized by it. Their soul has to be... expanded beyond the confines of the body and fused, to a small extent, with the world. It is... hard to explain with words, forgive me."

Sunny tilted his head, thinking. Ananke's words did indeed sound very vague and esoteric, but he felt that he understood what she was talking about.

It was like when Saint Tyris appeared and the sunlight seemed to shift a little, as if wishing to be close to her. The world itself responded to the Transcendent, and even bent to their will sometimes.

Then again, it also responded to a few people below the Transcendent Rank... like Nephis, or let, or Sunny himself.

That was... peculiar.

Ananke took a sip of tea and added, her voice bright:

"Of course, the connection between a Transcendent and the world is not all-encompassing. Rather, it is a connection to one or, very rarely, several aspects of the world... be it water, wind, shadow, light, or something else entirely. And, therefore, the most important step an Ascended human has to take to achieve Transcendence is to awaken their Aspect."

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other in confusion.

"Awaken their Aspect? What do you mean?"

The old woman coughed.

"Uh... but that is exactly what I mean? That one must possess an Aspect to Transcend?" Sunny massaged his temples.

"Wait... don't all Awakened possess an Aspect?"

Ananke chuckled.

"Of course not! Every Awakened human possesses the potential to realize an Aspect, but there are plenty of those who never do. Maybe even most. However, the higher you rise on the path of Ascension, the harder it becomes to move further without claiming your Aspect, as well as your Flaw. It is impossible to Transcend without them."

That information was truly shocking. Neither Sunny nor Nephis could digest it quickly. Awakened without Aspects? There was such a thing?

Sunny tried to remember every human he had fought in the First and Second Nightmares. Had all of them shown Aspect Abilities? He really couldn't remember... or rather, he could not tell based on his memories.

Nephis, meanwhile, frowned and asked, her voice full of contemplation:

"Why is it that only humans possess Aspects? Why don't creatures... noble creatures… have them as well?"

To the humans of the waking world, everything that was not a human was a Nightmare Creature. But, of course, Sunny had learned a long time ago that this wasn't the case. There were humans, and there were creatures — like the original Saint or Nightmare.

It was only after they succumbed to Corruption did the "noble creatures", as Ananke called such beings, become abominations. The problem was that there were only humans in the waking world, while every creature in the Dream Realm was already corrupted. That was why the concept of something that was not human, but also not abominable, was hard to accept.

However... in the ancient times, humans and noble creatures lived side by side. Nevertheless, the difference between them was the same — humans could only rise in possessed Aspects, while noble creatures rose both in Rank and Class, but had no Aspects of their own.

So, the question Nephis asked was indeed interesting.

Ananke smiled.

"Why, it is because noble creatures were created by the gods, while we humans weren‘t." Sunny blinked.

'Huh?‘

He did know that creating living things was an authority exclusive to the gods — which was why Nether's feat of making Saint and her people was so remarkable.

Now, he learned that all creatures were the result of the gods exercising that authority. But what did Ananke mean when she said that humans weren't made the same way? Noticing their confusion, she chuckled.

"Humans weren‘t created by anyone, and instead just appeared from the same stuff the gods were born from. It's just that... if the gods were the flame, then we humans were tiny sparks that shot out as the bonfire was dying out. Nevertheless, we come from the same source. Which is why all humans possess the potential to become divine, as well as the ability to awaken an Aspect. Why the path of Ascension is open to us."

Sunny frowned.

'There was an ever—changing void, where Desire was born. From it came Direction, and the gods...'

He still did not really understand the meaning of these mysterious words, but if Ananke was telling the truth — and not just retelling baseless myths — humans came from the "Desire" and "Direction" as well, just as the gods had.

He shook his head.

"Alright... I can understand that. But why did you say that it's not only an Aspect that is required to Transcend, but also the Flaw?"

The old woman sighed.

"Because one can‘t exist without the other. Imperfection is also an absolute law, just like death... and so, nothing is flawless. Even the world itself is flawed. Even the gods, who were born flawless, are not perfect anymore. And so, we humans are flawed, too."

She smiled and added, her voice calm:

"But that is a good thing. Flawless things are perfect, and so, they can never improve. They can never grow. They can only remain still and unchanging, which is no different from being dead. Being flawed is the essence of life, my Lord and Lady. It is also the essence of growth. After all, what is Iii e if not a constant struggle to grow and improve?"