1308 Weave

Sunny almost choked on his tea.

He had grown accustomed to Ananke being helpful and accommodating, so he did not expect her to become philosophical all of a sudden. Worse still, because of his own Flaw, he had no chance but to answer her philosophical question.

'What is life, huh?' He coughed.

"Well, I don't know. To me, life is all about being rich and comfortable. Throw a little decadence in the mix, and it's even better! If I ever manage to build such a delightful life for myself, I'll be more than happy to never improve or grow... apart from growing fatter, that is..."

The old woman laughed.

"That is a remarkable dream, my Lord."

Nephis threw a burning gaze at him at the mention of decadence, then turned to Ananke.

"Then what about the next step? How does one become Supreme?" Her voice was tense.

The old woman lingered for a while, then shook her head with a sigh.

"That I don't know... and there is no one left to teach me. I am sorry that I can't be of help."

Sunny shook his head.

"No, no... you've already been very helpful. We learned a lot from you." Ananke smiled.

"In that case, thank you for this meal, my Lord and Lady. I've been blessed by your grace. Rest well tonight."

She rose and added, her voice tinged with melancholy: "...Tomorrow, we sail to the center of the city."

After she left, Sunny and Nephis remained silent for a while. Both were thoughtful, pondering the startling truths of how the ancient humans walked the path of Ascension before the Nightmare Spell.

Eventually, Sunny sighed.

"It seems that Awakening took a lot longer before, but was not nearly as fatal as it is with the Nightmare Spell."

Nephis nodded silently. He scratched the back of his head and added:

"I'm more curious about something else, though. If it is possible to Awaken without the help of the Spell, then why has no one accomplished just that in the waking world? Why were there no Awakened in our history?"

She frowned.

"Maybe it is because the waking world has nothing to do with the Dream Realm, and functions... functioned according to a different set of laws. Or maybe there were Awakened in our history, but their stories have become mere myths."

Nephis shook her head and added, her voice uncertain:

"It would also not be surprising if the possibility was there, but no one has ever managed to grasp it. After all, all steps except the first one — gaining the ability to sense your essence — require some kind of knowledge. Forming the core, refining essence, expanding the soul... you wouldn't be able to do it blindly. For the ancient humans of the Dream Realm, it was not too hard to gain that knowledge. All they had to do was observe the Awakened creatures or learn directly from one of the deities."

Sunny nodded.

"But those deities are all long dead. There were only humans in the waking world, and so, they had no one to learn from and no one to show them that there was something to be learned. Yes... it is a good theory. The theory that our world is simply different from the Dream Realm is also good. As well as that there were actually a few Awakened in history. They're all good theories. Which one do you think is the correct one?"

Nephis lingered before answering. After a while, she sighed.

"There's no way to tell. We still know too little about the Dream Realm. We also don't know how the Nightmare Spell infected our world, and why. But, personally... I don't buy that there has always been a connection between the two. If so, then why is the waking world so isolated, so unique... so singular?"

She shook her head.

"Why are there no similarities in the languages, the myths, the traditions? Why has there never been an Awakened creature on Earth before the Nightmare Spell? No soul shards, no sorcery, no Aspects, and no Flaws? Why was there no Corruption?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking. Then, he said tentatively:

"Maybe it was created as a sanctuary... or an ark. If so, then perhaps it is precisely because there were no Awakened, no soul shards, no sorcery, and no Aspects... that there was no Corruption."

He shrugged with a sigh.

"As for the languages and myths, I don't know. To be honest, I don't really believe in that sanctuary stuff. I just said what came to mind. You are right... our world is the only place that was drastically different from the Dream Realm, before the Nightmare Spell infected it. We don't know anything about anything, so how would we know the reason why?"

Sunny shook his head and rose to wash the dishes.

"In any case, I am tired, and it is time to rest. Where are you going to sleep?"

Nephis gave him a long look.

"...Is there a particular reason you're asking?"

Hearing that, he almost dropped the dirty plates.

"What... I just want to know which room you chose, to pick a different one!"

He huffed, glanced at her, and grinned.

"Although..."

But Nephis was already standing up.

"Goodnight!"

A few moments later, she was gone.

Sunny remained standing for a while, alone in the empty chamber.

Eventually, he sighed.

"...How come I'm the only one doing dishes?" \*\*\*

"Look!"

The ketch was flying across the water, its sails full of wind. Sunny was standing at the bow, staring into the distance curiously. Nephis was a few steps back, sitting on the deck with her eyes closed.

Hearing his voice, she opened them and looked ahead.

There, a floating city was slowly appearing from beyond the horizon. Weave.

It was much larger than Sunny had imagined, with countless artificial islands connected together to form a single whole. There was a network of canals between the various districts that served as roads, and a forest of narrow towers rising into the sky. Most of them were windcatchers, just like the tower of the House of Parting was — some blades still rotated, some were broken and still.

Torn scarlet fabric fluttered in the wind.

The architecture of Weave was varied, airy, and beautiful. Some buildings were constructed out of stone, some seemed to be carved of ivory, some were pavilions of sun-bleached, bright silk. There were districts with homes and houses, groves of fruit trees, and even entire city-ships taken entirely by a single elegant palace or a solemn temple.

Some distance away from the residential districts, separated from them by a wide stretch of water, were vast floating fields and gardens.

Bathed in the light of the seven suns, the floating city was strange and fantastical.

However, neither Sunny nor Nephis were enchanted by its dreamlike beauty. Because, above all else, Weave seemed... eerie and forlorn.

The tall windcatchers were still or broken. The streets and canals were empty, with no soul in sight. The groves were overgrown and wild, while the fields were desolate and empty. Some city-ships were drifting apart, their mechanisms broken, while others were tilted and partially submerged in water.

It was a ghost town.

Strangely, though, while some buildings bore scars or had collapsed, most were intact. This was not the picture of destruction and devastation that they had imagined.

"Welcome to Weave, my Lord and Lady." Ananke's voice sounded slightly mournful.

...It also sounded very different from before. There had been a time when her voice was weak and creaky, like dry wood. Now, it was bright and melodious like a clear stream.

'Right.'

Sunny still felt rather strange when talking to the current Ananke.

The old priestess... no, he couldn't even call her that anymore, because Ananke wasn't old anymore.

Turning around, he looked at the young woman steering the ketch. She seemed only a few years older than Sunny and Nephis, if any...

More than that, she was exquisitely beautiful. With her small stature and glistening ebony hair, dusky skin and piercing blue eyes, Ananke looked like an enchanting river spirit. Her lovely face was lively and captivating, and her disarming smile was bright enough to illuminate the world.

'...Weird! It's weird!'

Sunny was deeply uncomfortable for the last couple of days because of how young Ananke had become. On top of that... despite being ten times his age, she seemed too earnest and even slightly naive.

That was the person he had been calling Grandmother!

With a sigh, Sunny tried to shake off the feeling of incongruity and asked in a strange tone:

"Haven't you told us that Weave was destroyed, Ananke? It... doesn't seem damaged that terribly."

The young priestess remained silent for a while, then answered with a sad smile: "There is more than one way to destroy a city, my Lord."

With that, she moved the steering oar and sent the ketch flying toward the central district of the eerie city of Weave, where only the wind disrupted the ghostly silence and emptiness permeated desolate streets.