1624 Crazy Girl

Far to the northwest of Bastion, across the chain of Death Zones crowned by Godgrive, lay the vast human enclave ruled by the Great Clan Song. Although younger and smaller in territory than the Sword Domain, the kingdom of Ki Song was nevertheless Just as populous and potent.

Unlike Bastion Itself, which lay at the heart of Valor's territory, the capital of Song was located at the northernmost point of her domain, on the slopes of a towering mountain chain that branched out from the Hollow Mountains. It was a stark and beautiful place nestled between snowy peaks and fuming volcanoes, shrouded in snowstorms and raining ash.

Its name was Ravenheart. The Great Citadel had another name in the runic language of the Nightmare Spell, but after an obscure figure from the first generation of the Awakened conquered it, people gradually started calling the remote mountain palace by her True Name.

That obscure Awakened warrior was the founder of the Song clan and Ki Song's late mother. Her daughter elevated their minor clan to prominence, and then to the very height of power. Similarly, Ravenheart had grown from the stronghold of a lesser Legacy clan to one of the Great Citadels of humanity, sheltering hundreds of thousands of Awakened.

And now, after the Chain of Nightmares, it was home to millions of mundane humans, as well.

The Citadel Itself was a magnificent palace that stood on the slope of a snowy mountain, perched at the very edge of a bottomless chasm. The legends said that it had been cut from pure white Jade once, but after enduring the wrath of the surrounding volcanoes for thousands of years, it turned entirely black, as if made from obsidian glass. Still, contrasted against pristine white snow, its sublime beauty had only become more tantalizing.

A titanic stone bridge spanned the vast chasm between the mountain and the volcano standing opposite it, connecting the two branches of the mountain chain like a road meant for giants. Its black pillars were decorated with intricate engravings, and the scale of the construct defied reason.

These days, the members of the Song Clan inhabited the frozen obsidian palace, while the titanic bridge had become a town for the Awakened warriors, who could withstand the cold. The city itself had been built on the slopes of the volcano, where its warmth protected the mundane citizens of Ravenheart from the inhumanly harsh climate of the snowy region.

They did not have to be wary of sudden eruptions, either, because Queen Song and her Transcendent daughters could protect them from any disaster.

Ravenheart was a harsh place. But it was also an incredibly beautiful place.

And therefore, life here was harsh, but also thriving.

The surrounding lands had long been cleared of the truly dangerous Nightmare Creatures, but they were more dangerous than the heartland of the Dream Realm, where Bastion stood. Many abominations still dwelled in the snowy mountains, and the environment itself was deadly for those unprepared to face its cruelty.

At the same time, there was a lot of fertile soil in the lowlands, which had been generously fertilized by volcanic ash. There was also geothermal heat, countless hot springs, and precious minerals of all kinds everywhere around. The people who had been evacuated here from Antarctica found their lives turning stark and intense, but also intensely enjoyable.

If one grew accustomed to the solemn and eerie power of Queen Song, of course, which they quickly had.

In any case, there was endless work to be done, from plowing the ashen fields to mining mystical ores, to building a semblance of a modern infrastructure by using endless geothermal energy.

And since there were many Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the mountains, there was also a dire need for someone to protect all these workers. Which was why Rain was buried in the ash, sweating as she waited motionlessly. She had been laying there for a few hours already, keeping absolutely still.

Around a hundred meters away from her, where the slope of the gorge rose sharply, a hideous creature was slowly dragging its body from between the cliffs. It resembled a scaled worm with six long, thin limbs, each ending with dagger-like claws. Its maw was a horrid circular mess of sharp, needle-like fangs.

'Damnation'

She had expected a Beast, but was faced with a Monster instead. Granted, the Stone Worms were merely Dormant abominations...

But since Rain wasn't even a Sleeper, but a powerless mundane human instead, that thing could rip her apart in a matter of seconds. No, not even seconds... a second.

'No wonder everyone calls me "the crazy girl"... I am indeed crazy. I'm crazy to have listened to you, mad bastard!'

If not for the nagging of her teacher, she would have long ago applied to return to the waking world, thus challenging the First Nightmare and becoming an Awakened. But no... he just had to Insist that his student could only Awaken naturally, without becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell.

And, young and naive as she had been, she actually believed in his nonsense!

Years had already passed, and yet she was still a mundane human, Granted, she could somewhat feel her essence now... which supposedly was the hardest step.

Still! Her teacher was without a doubt a brazen scam artist!

'Damn you, you damned ghost... or vampire... ar whatever the hell you are...'

As she was thinking that, a quiet voice suddenly resounded from behind her. Rain was startled, but, remembering her training, remained absolutely motionless despite that. She didn't have to turn around to know that it was her shadow talking.

It said:

"You wouldn't be thinking something strange about me again, would you?"

Stone Worms had very bad hearing, but could feel the smallest vibration spreading through the ground. She coughed quietly, then answered in a whisper:

"What? Of course not, respected teacher! Your pupil... would never dare do something that disloyal..."

The quiet voice responded dubiously:

"Really? Well... good! You should hurry up, though. The wind is changing."

Rain uttered a stifled curse and slowly rose to one knee.

It was time to kill another Dormant Monster, 'How many have I killed, already?

It was time to kill another Dormant Monster.

'How many have I killed, already?'

More than any Sleeper she knew, certainly. And more than many young Awakened in Ravenheart, as well, despite being mundane.

But she still had to be extremely cautious. She couldn't allow a single mistake... it was just like how her teacher always said. One mistake was all it took to turn into a corpse.

And becoming a corpse in Ravenheart was just too creepy.

Granted... teacher would probably save her if something happened.

Probably.

‘...Right?’