1629 Roads to the Future

Eventually, Rain reached one of the roads leading from the lowlands to the city. These mountain roads had been in use from before the Chain of Nightmares... it was hard to remember now after the population of Ravenheart exploded to many millions, but it had been a Great Citadel even prior to that.

The roads leading to the great bridge, and the beautiful palace beyond it, were actually thousands of years old. Granted, they had been in a state of desolation and disrepair when the Song clan made the ancient Citadel their home.

The Awakened of the great Legacy clan had restored them to their former glory, and the whole network was further expanded to account for the increased traffic in the past four years.

Now, heavily protected road crews were far away from the Citadel, building safe highways to other cities within the Song Domain. Many Awakened with Utility Aspects were participating in the construction, and many warriors were employed to defend the moving builder camps from the roving Nightmare Creatures. Rain had even tried to get hired for one of the crews, but no one wanted to employ a mundane fighter.

The best they could do was remain polite and not laugh in her face,

‘Ah…’

She couldn't really blame them. In any case, now that she had reached the wide and well-maintained road, the rest of the ascent would become much easier. There was probably a metaphor about the unnecessary hardships of walking the untrodden path somewhere in there, but Rain wasn't going to start complaining to her teacher again.

He had retreated into her shadow, anyway, unwilling to be seen by other people.

Rain rested for a bit, quenched her thirst from a military canteen, and continued on her way.

There were many people on the road. Workers descending into the lowlands or returning from their shifts, Song warriors on patrols, caravans loaded with heavy cargo... life was thriving, and the young city was boiling with activity.

Rain had grown up in the vast human jungle of NQSC, so Ravenheart did not seem that large, in comparison. However, it somehow felt much more vibrant. Its atmosphere was entirely different, as though everyone here was looking forward to the future, instead of trying not to think about it while being afraid of the past.

Four years ago, she did not understand the decision her parents had made to relocate the whole family, including her younger siblings, into the Dream Realm. Sure, her father had been offered a new position as one of the government liaisons in the Song Domain, which was technically a big promotion…

But was it worth it, to uproot the family, abandon the safety and modern convenience of NQSC, and tie the lives of their children to the Dream Realm? Returning to the waking world or leaving the Domain meant being sent into the First Nightmare, after all. No matter how well-prepared you were, it was a deadly gamble.

When Rain asked her parents why they wanted to move to Ravenheart, her father had answered simply:

"Because that is where the future is."

Now, she thought she understood what he had meant. The future of humanity was, indeed, here.

Currently, the waking world was incomparably more populous and developed than the Dream Realm... but in a generation or two, their positions would be reversed. Eventually, the dying birthplace of humanity might even be entirely abandoned, making this harsh and dreadful world their only home.

And those who had left the cradle early would have an advantage in that future. So, the decision her parents had made was ultimately for the sake of Rain and her siblings. It was all to give them a head start.

'If humanity can even survive in the Dream Realm.!’

Which was not a given, despite the power of the two Sovereigns.

She sighed and stepped aside to let a heavy wagon roll past her. Some of these wagons were being pulled by Awakened, who were much stronger and more resilient than any beast of burden could be, while some were not.

The one rolling past Rain was being pulled by... a a Nightmare Creature.

A hideous beast that resembled a nightmarish fusion of a carnivorous bull and a horned reptile was attached to a harness, dragging the wagon behind it.

There were no draught animals in the Dream Realm, or any other kind of cattle. However, here in Ravenheart, Nightmare Creatures were often used to pull wagons, plow the fields, and perform all kinds of labor-intensive or dangerous jobs.

It was all thanks to Saint Song Eunbin, better known as Beastmaster. Funnily enough, the most terrifying of Ki Song's daughters had also done the most to ease the lives of the citizens of Ravenheart. If not for her, the development of the city, and the Song Domain as a whole, would have never been as fast or as explosive.

Of course, it was still a bit creepy to be around the subjugated Nightmare Creatures, and one had to be cautious around them. Even enchanted by Beastmaster, they were dangerous beasts, so each had to be watched over by a trained handler.

Looking at the wagon roll away, Rain sighed.

"Saint Eunbin is amazing"

Her teacher's voice resounded from the shadows, sounding a bit wistful:

"Oh? Beastmaster? Well, she's not bad..., you know, she once asked me to run away with her. Of course, I refused. Your teacher is not someone who can be swayed by a pretty face!"

Rain gave her shadow a dubious glance, but kept her remarks to herself.

Grimacing, she carried her heavy pack and continued forward.

The closer to the city she got, the more crowded the road became. There were more Awakened patrolling it, too, some even accompanied by Echoes. The temperature slowly rose until it was warm enough for her to take off her coat. She even unbuttoned her jacket.

By the time the distant cold sun was ready to disappear behind the horizon, Rain finally reached her destination.

In front of her, built on the slope of the tall volcano, stood the gates of Ravenheart.