1631 Hidden Menace

The outer wall of the mundane district was thick and tall. Rain passed through the gateway, still thinking about what her teacher had said...

'Pretty? I'm pretty? He was teasing me, right? That scoundrel! Maybe if he allowed me to have a mirror at home, I wouldn't have had to ask!’

Her thoughts were interrupted by an Awakened warrior who suddenly appeared in her way. His equipment was visibly more potent than that of the young men and women whom she had met outside, and his face was much more mature.

Unlike those inexperienced greenhorns, he was a true warrior of Song.

"This way, please."

Rain obediently followed the Awakened to the side, where a cohort of veterans like him was keeping a watchful eye on everyone entering the city. They were led by a stunningly beautiful woman wearing an enchanted robe of fine wine-colored silk.

A Master.

There was no sign of Rain's teacher, as if he had dove deeper into the shadows. She approached the beautiful woman and bowed respectfully.

The Ascended smiled.

"Oh, it's you, little sister, Rain, was it? Please don't move”

A torrent of ethereal sparks swirled around her hand, and a red flower appeared on her palm. Its dark petals seemed to be glistening with dew, and it emanated a pleasant fragrance.

The woman raised her hand, as if offering the flower to Rain. Of course, Rain did not take it. Instead, she froze and looked at the crimson blossom solemnly. A few moments passed in tense silence, then a few more.

She glanced at the beautiful Master. The woman was still smiling, but her eyes were cold and full of dark... something.

'Murder math.’

That's what her teacher called it. Rain remembered the strange term well, because he often lamented the fact that she seemed to lack that cold quality, whatever it was.

In any case, the powerful Ascended was calmly calculating how to kill her, should the need arise. It was more than a little bit unnerving.

Luckily, nothing of the sort ended up happening. A dozen seconds later, the Ascended's smile finally reached her eyes. Moving her hand, she dismissed the red flower and gestured for Rain to leave.

"Welcome back. Have a nice evening."

Rain bowed one more time and walked away.

Internally, she sighed.

The strange meeting... was actually not strange at all. It was something that everyone entering Ravenheart or any other Citadel in the Song Domain, she would imagine - had to go through. The Sword Domain had their own version of the ritual, and there were versions of it in the waking world, as well.

Its purpose was to prevent the dreadful bane, Skinwalker, from infiltrating more human settlements.

Although all other abominable things that had invaded the waking world during the Chain of Nightmare were either slain or remained in Antarctica, Skinwalker was different. It had entered the siege capitals by pretending to be human before the Dream Gates were even opened. Once there, Skinwalker spread like a curse...

There were little details about how it had been stopped, but Rain heard that the government forces led by Wake of Ruin and the great clans had joined forces to eradicate the creature. The Sovereigns emerged, and Lady Nephis returned from the Third Nightmare with five other Saints just in time. Eventually, they managed to prevent Skinwalker from spreading to the rest of the Quadrants.

But they had not managed to destroy it completely.

Today, Skinwalker was like a nightmare that haunted all of humanity, Its vessels were somewhere out there, in the shadows, hiding in the vast reaches of the Dream Realm or in the poisonous wilds of the waking world. Worst of all, the creature had learned and adapted, its act becoming almost indistinguishable from normal humans.

Several Citadels had already fallen after being infiltrated by Skinwalker, and if rumors were true, a several cities in the Eastern Quadrant had, as well. That was why there were new security measures everywhere humans lived, aimed at preventing similar tragedies from happening again.

Apart from the appearance of the Dream Gates and the great wave of colonization that followed, the existence of Skinwalker had caused the single most significant change, perhaps, in how humans lived after the Chain of Nightmares.

So, Rain didn't mind being checked while entering Ravenheart. If she had indeed been taken by the harrowing fiend, the flower the beautiful Master summoned would have wilted, alerting her to the presence of a pretender.

There was one thing she did not quite understand, though...

Once Rain walked far enough from the gate, she whispered:

"Teacher... can I ask you a question?"

The answer came almost immediately:

"You sure can."

She lingered for a moment.

"What would they have done if I was truly a vessel of Skinwalker? A cohort of Awakened and a single Master... no matter how powerful she is, a Great Nightmare Creature can wipe them out in seconds. They would have stood no chance."

This time, there was a longer pause before her teacher answered:

“...Have you noticed a bronze mirror installed on the wall behind them?"

Rain nodded.

"Sure. There are mirrors like that everywhere in Ravenheart."

He sighed.

"They would have asked the mirror to help. That is already more than you should know, so don't ask anything else."

Rain couldn't help but throw a startled glance at her shadow.

They would have... asked the mirror to help?

'Don't tell me...'

Did her teacher's irrational fear of mirrors have an actual reason behind it?

Unsure what to think, Rain dove into the bustling labyrinth of Ravenheart's streets. Since the mundane district was sprawled on the slope of the volcano, it was divided into many vertical levels - not unlike the terrace neighborhood in NQSC where she had grown up.

Granted, the terraces that had been carved on the black slope were of a much greater scale, supporting numerous buildings and housing millions of people. The lower levels were where most of the work took place, while the higher levels were mostly residential.

Additionally, the more affluent neighborhoods were situated closer to the great bridge, while the poorer ones were situated further from it.

Rain's parents lived in one of the former, while her own den was in one of the latter. Actually, it was not too far from the city gate, which felt like a blessing today.

Dead tired, Rain found her way home, unlocked the door, and finally dropped the heavy pack.

A few minutes later, she crawled under her warm fur blanket and closed her eyes. The moment her head hit the pillow, all thoughts disappeared from it.

Rain yawned, curled into a ball, and said drowsily:

“...Goodnight, teacher."

He responded a moment later:

"You too. Sleep tight."

Her teacher's familiar voice was like a lullaby. Knowing that he would protect her if anything happened at night, Rain allowed herself to relax, and comfortably fell into the embrace of sleep.