1719 Story Time

"Mom... moooom... mommyyyy..."

Effie patted Little Ling on the head and smiled.

"What do you want, dumpling?"

She was sitting in a comfy wooden chair, staring at the wooden ceiling absentmindedly. The little boy cuddled comfortably on her lap, hugging her like a little monkey. He looked up at her with his bright eyes and grinned sheepishly.

"Story!"

Effie laughed.

"Story? Which story?"

Little Ling was suddenly very thoughtful. He remained silent for a while, a comically concentrated expression on his face, and then beamed.

"Mommy defeating the giant!"

She hugged him and shifted slightly, then said in a deep voice:

"Alright, alright. Listen then! A long time ago, in a faraway land, six evil Saints imprisoned Hope in a tall tower. Hope was very lonely in the tower, and cried bitterly. So, your mom and her friends decided to defeat the evil Saints and rescue her."

The image of the damp stone cell under the Chalice Temple flashed in her memory. The smell of blood, the whimpers of the other girls the War Maldens, driven to madness by the Demon of Desire, were slowly "training" to death.

The graveyard of swords surrounding the ancient temple.

She chased the ghastly memory away and smiled warmly.

"Noctis, the Wicked Warlock of the East! Uncle Kai, who was a brave warrior from the Ivory City back then! Aunty Cassie, who was a wise priestess of the Night Temple! And, of course... your mom, who was a little girl! These were the four heroes who ventured to rescue Hope. Oh, and there was someone else, as well. A nameless shadow who had escaped its master and became friends with Noctis..."

Effie only had a vague recollection of the shadow devil who had followed Noctis, but it seemed rude not to mention him.

Her adorable son giggled.

"Huh? What's so funny?"

Ling Ling giggled again.

"Mommy is not little! How can mommy be little?" She smiled.

"I was a little kid once too, you know! Actually, I was a little kid twice. In any case, after we, the four heroes, met each other and swore to save Hope, the evil Saints learned about it and sent a messenger to scare us. It was a huge glant! As tall as a mountain, with a body made of polished steel... but your mom and her friends weren't afraid at all. That was because the kind priestesses of the Goddess of Life had taught me the secret art of slaying evil glants, you see..."

Effie continued to tell the fairy-tale version of her Second Nightmare, just as she had done a hundred times before. For some reason, this story was one of Ling Ling's favorites... maybe because the very idea of his mom being a little girl excited him endlessly.

She had no idea why, but looking back, it had indeed been a bit exciting. Effie had spent her actual childhood either in a hospital bed or in a wheelchair, so getting a little taste of what it meant to be a healthy kid was... special. Even if it was in the depths of a ghastly Nightmare.

Of course, she had removed all the distasteful parts from the story, replacing them with fantastical and exaggerated adventures. Flying ships, eccentric sorcerers, fire-breathing dragons, and a happy ending. The sugar-coated version of the Nightmare of Hope had everything one needed for a great fairy tale!

"...And so, Cassie dropped the flying ship right on the evil giant's head! Boom! Crash! Bang! The ship shattered into a thousand pieces, and the giant fell down, making the ground shake. Auntie was perfectly fine, of course - she had jumped away just in the nick of time and glided down with the help of her magical rapler. A huge shadow was still…”

Just then, the door opened, and a handsome young man walked into the room. Way too handsome, even!

Effie smiled at her husband and took and exhaled slowly, trying to maintain a relaxed expression.

"Daddy!"

Little Ling jumped off her lap and ran to hug his dad. Luckily, this time, he remembered to control his strength.

Picking the boy up, Ling's Dad smiled at him and then glanced at Effie.

He was hiding it well, but she could see that the smile did not reach his eyes.

"It's time?"

Her husband nodded, and then looked at the little boy in his arms.

"Hey, wolfie. How about you and dad go on a little adventure?"

Little Ling seemed to be torn.

"But mommy didn't finish the story..."

His dad laughed.

"The evil giant story? I'll finish it for her. Or, how about it? Dad has an evil giant story, too! There are really too many evil giants in the world, now that I think about it. This one was named Goliath, and only had one eye..."

Effie sighed, then rose from her chair and stretched slowly, Then, she followed her husband out of the room.

They were currently in their spacious, sunlit cottage. It had been built from natural wood by none other than him, and had a simple, cozy charm to it. The cottage was the centerpiece of the entire farm, which was a rather idyllic place.

A beautiful view of the emerald meadow opened from the front porch.

Of course, the meadow had transformed in the last four years. There were fields, vegetable gardens, barns, and livestock corrals. There were also a few other buildings, some of them hidden in the forest.

Most of these buildings were built of wood, but some included more advanced materials - the latter extended underground, and served a different purpose.

These buildings included barracks, armories, and all the other essentials of a military base.

That was because the Beast Farm often moonlighted as a dimensional carrier for the Wolf Army.

"Boss!"

"Boss is here!"

"Atten-tion!"

A scattering of soldiers stood at attention. Most were hidden from sight, but some had gone out to stretch their legs.

Little Ling waved at them excitedly, causing a wave of smiles.

"Uncles are funny..."

Effie nodded at the nearest soldier and said in a quiet tone:

"Assemble the troops. ETA is one hour, so be ready to be deployed at a moment's notice. We are going to spearhead the breaching maneuver by the Western Quadrant Defense Forces. The mission is just as the briefing said - push the abominations back and establish a fire line. Funnel the civilians, if there are any left, into the designated safe zone."

The soldier - a rowdy-looking man who had been under her command from the first days of the deployment to Antarctica - nodded with a roguish smile.

"What about the big bastards, boss?" Effie inhaled slowly.

"Don't worry about them. The government is sending the entire cavalry this time... we'll take care of the Gate Guardians. And also..."

She frowned and glared at him.

"Watch your language in front of Ling Ling, you reprobate, Aren't you already a Master? Why are you still so brainless?"

The man blinked a couple of times, then gave her a terribly guilty look.

"Oh... sorry, boss... I forget…”

He didn't seem too sincere, though, no doubt Itching to accuse her of hypocrisy and double standards.

Effie shook her head and pushed him away.

"Go get ready."

With that, she turned to her husband and son, putting on a bright smile.

"Shall we go?"

She took her husband's hand, and a moment later, the three of them disappeared from the meadow.

Instead, they appeared in a room with alloy walls, situated in the depths of a government fortress. The furnishings were sparse, but there was a large screen displaying the arid landscape of the Western Quadrant on one of the walls.

Little Ling looked at the sand dunes with interest.

"Daddy, what is that?"

His dad smiled.

"This is a desert, wolfie. We are in the Western Quadrant... aren't you a lucky kid, to get to travel all around the world and see all kinds of places?"

The boy was thoughtful for a moment.

"Daddy... aren't you a little silly? It's a picture. Little Ling has seen a lot of pictures already,"

Effie's husband laughed.

"I guess you are right..."

He glanced at Effie and nodded. She remained silent for a bit, then patted Little Ling on the shoulder and said in her usual carefree tone:

"Dumpling... mom has to go to work now. Be a good boy and listen to dad, okay?"

He grinned and waved at her absentmindedly.

"Bye, mommy! Have fun at work!"

A second later, Little Ling was already asking his dad about deserts and sand. The handsome young man exchanged a poignant look with her, silently mouthed three words, and then took their son out of the room.

Outside, a high-ranking government envoy was already waiting for them.

Left alone, Effie took a deep breath and said quietly:

"I love you, too."

Then, the smile slowly disappeared from her face, replaced by a grim expression.

She remained motionless for a while, then nodded and summoned her armor. Soon, her athletic figure was covered by a skintight layer of polished metal, as if she had been dipped in liquid steel. She also summoned the Starlight Shard, shaping it into two strips of white cloth. One was tied around her waist, the other covered her chest.

Effie was ready for war.

Well... as much as anyone could be ready for war. Which, in her experience, was not much at all.

Picking up the Black Beast Locket, she hung it around her neck and walked to the door.

In the corridor outside, two figures were waiting for her.

An annoyingly stunning man with auburn hair and green eyes, and a chillingly beautiful woman with pale skin and raven-black hair.

Effie erased the grim expression from her face and smiled mischievously.

"Hey there, handsome... oh, and you too, Kai. Guys, you won't believe what I saw in Bastion! Princess found herself a boyfriend! At least I think that she found him... she might have just kidnapped the poor man to do unspeakable things to him. I know L..."

She froze suddenly, looked behind her with a cautious expression, then relaxed visibly and added in a quieter tone:

"...I know I would, if I wasn't such a prim and proper, virtuous married woman!”