1827 Cleansing

Hidden in the shadows, Sunny let out a secretive sight of relief.

The past week had been a terrible ordeal for Rain. . . but it had not been easy for him, either.

A long time ago, Sunny had told Rain that he could teach her how to wield a sword, how to traverse the Dream Realm, and how to kill her enemies. . . but he could not teach her how to be strong. The world was a cold and ruthless place, and his little sister was much too soft to endure its cruelty.

Even now, all these years later, she retained that softness. She had learned how to wield weapons, survive in the wild, and hunt down abominations, but her nature was still the same. Rain had never suffered heartbreaking loss, had never felt the lightless depths of true despair, and had never faced the darkest sides of humanity.

Despite her cool appearance and tough reputation, at her core, she was still the same kind and sweet girl.

Which was a solace to Sunny. He never wanted her to lose that part of herself.

And yet, he couldn't coddle her too much, either. It would only do Rain harm if she learned to rely on him too much.

So, he had laboriously created the persona of Shadow, her mercurial teacher — who was both friendly and caring, but also a little sinister and not completely reliable.

That way, she could still feel a false sense of danger while being protected by him from the shadows, and grow stronger for it.

It would have been fine to let Rain Awakened at her own pace, but the war was too close. So, Sunny had used the chance encounter with the Awakened

Tyrant to design a trial for her.

His own version of the First Nightmare.

The irony of how similar it was to his personal Fist Nightmare had not escaped him. A punishing escape through the wild reaches of the Dream Realm, in the company of an Awakened swordsman, pursued by a blind Tyrant. . .

Of course, there were differences, as well.

And although Rain had never been in real danger due to him observing her from the shadows, she definitely had not felt that way.

Her struggle had been real, her suffering had been real, and her eventual triumph was real.

Sunny, meanwhile, had not struggled himself — all he had done was eliminate any Fallen abominations that could have stumbled onto the two escaping girls and keep an eye on the survey team to make sure that they made it back to the main camp alright.

And yet, he felt completely exhausted.

Watching Rain suffer was not easy for him. He wouldn't go as far as to say that it had been harder than it had been for Rain, but still.

Sunny felt like his heart was bleeding.

And that was saying much, considering how difficult it was for him to bleed!

Similarly, while Rain felt incredible joy and pride at being able to Awakened, his heart was full of emotion, as well.

However, for Sunny. . . he felt even more.

That was because he could see more, and understood more.

Rain had a deep connection to her soul, for a mundane person, and could control her essence well. But Sunny perceived it on a much deeper level.

That was why he could see a tiny bead of hideous darkness that nestled in her sister's soul. A seed of

Corruption. . . the Nightmare Seed. Every mundane person who had entered the Dream Realm carried one within them, just like those infected by the Nightmare Spell in the waking world did.

Although. . . Sunny was not entirely sure which came first — the Seed of Nightmare or the infection. Perhaps it was precisely because some people carried hideous darkness within their souls that the Spell chose them.

In any case, the Seed in Rain's soul had not grown in the past four years, and would not bloom into a Category One Nightmare Gate unless certain conditions were met. That was because it was small and miniscule enough to be suppressed by the authority of Queen Song.

As long as Rain remained in the Song Domain, her First Nightmare would never come.

But it would also make her an eternal hostage of a Domain unless she accepted the Spell and challenged the Nightmare.

While the storm was raging and Rain was going through the final stage of her Awakening, Sunny observed her soul in somber silence.

The numerous sparks of light — the crystals of solidified essence — fused under the pressure. A luminous sea ignited at the depths of Rain's soul.

Forged in the heat of that sea, her soul core slowly came to shape.

And at the same time, unnoticed. . .

The bead of darkness dissolved in the light, destroyed by it.

Sunny had seen a Seed of Corruption bloom in the soul of a Sleeper once. Watching the opposite process take place was both poignant and miraculous.

‘Is that the purpose of the First Nightmare? To push the infected into Awakening, and thus destroy the Seed, preventing Corruption from blooming? ’

Awakening was the first step toward divinity, after all, and divinity was in direct opposition to

Corruption. So, it only made sense that coming closer to divinity would render one immune to the weaker manifestation of its enemy.

That was the second way Sunny knew of for a soul to be cleansed of Corruption.

The first way was known to everyone, but very few ever considered it as such.

It was death.

Awakened were used to collecting soul shards from the Nightmare Creatures, but they really questioned why was it that the remnant fragments of corrupted souls were pure and untainted.

What happened at the moment of death that purified them?

Or was it death itself that eliminated the hideous darkness?

Now that Sunny knew more about the world, the

Void, and the origin of death, he understood that death was a weapon to destroy Corruption.

And that was what it did.

He observed the Tyrant's tainted soul collapse and be cleansed, as well. The moment the abomination lost its life, the vile darkness shrouding its soul withered and died.

In the end, only five radiant shards were left.

So, Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

Finally, the ordeal was over.

Rain's grisly trial was finished, and the broader threat to her life was not as pressing anymore, either.

Now that her soul had been cleansed, Sunny would be able to take her out of the Song Domain. He had many more options now.

Of course. . . it wasn't certain that she would want to leave.

Remaining in the shadows, Sunny glanced at her.

At the moment, Rain was stumbling back to where Tamar was leaning on her spear with a pained expression on her face.

He followed stealthily.

‘This next part. . . is going to be tricky.’