1932 Second Generation

Orum had not seen Ravenheart and her daughter often since that day they spent together in NQSC.

They were living in turbulent and tumultuous times, and he had had family matters to deal with back then. Later, his focus shifted to the Dream Realm. He pursued his ambitions and eventually conquered a Citadel of his own, wishing to build a livelihood for himself and his family.

Awakened were naturally grouped together by the region of the Dream Realm they traveled to at night. Ravenheart was simply too far away, in a place where few others had been sent by the Nightmare Spell. She was not very sociable, either, so the two of them had grown distant, eventually losing contact altogether.

He used to hear about her from time to time, feeling happy to know that she was doing fine. Ravenheart's life seemed quite tough, considering how remote and dangerous her corner of the Dream Realm was. There were not many Awakened there, and even less Citadels — unlike the region where Orum himself was anchored.

People there had rallied around the impressive Citadel of the Warden of Valor, which was now a bastion of humanity in the dangerous alien world. It almost seemed like it was the center of the Dream Realm, with everything else existing on the periphery.

Well, there were the elusive Nightwalker and other unfortunate souls who had found themselves in a nebulous sea, of course, as well as isolated Citadels scattered here and there across the vast expanse of the Dream Realm. Considering its nature, it was hard to even establish where they were located in relation to more populated areas, let alone carve a path to them.

The last Orum heard about Ravenheart, she had conquered a Citadel somewhere far north, near a colossal mountain chain that stretched from east to west as far as humans explored.

Preoccupied with other things, he had not thought of her for many years.

But now, seeing her daughter, the memories of all the time they had spent together flooded his mind.

Orum felt nostalgia, tenderness, bittersweet wistfulness... and shame. Ravenheart had done so much for him, but he never paid her back. Instead, he had simply forgotten about her, too busy with his own affairs and the complexities of life.

Little Ki — already a teenager — looked up at him and frowned in confusion.

It seemed that she once again did not remember who he was.

Still dazed a little, Orum offered her a smile.

"I'm Awakened Orum... Uncle Orie. I'm a friend of your mom."

There was no hint of recognition in her eyes.

The teenage girl shifted awkwardly, her gloomy face untouched by a smile.

"Oh... it is nice to meet you, Awakened Orum."

He hesitated, not knowing what to say, then suddenly looked around.

"Is your mother here?"

Little Ki... although he should probably stop calling her that... shook her head.

"No... mom's Citadel is situated in a dangerous region of the Dream Realm, and many people use it as shelter. Since they need her protection, she spends most of her time sleeping."

She lingered for a few moments, then added stiffly:

"Mom told me to spend more time with children of other Awakened families, though, so I accepted the invitation on her behalf. To represent our family."

There was a hint of pride in her last words, which prompted Orum to look at her closely.

"You don't seem to be spending time with other children, though."

Little Ki's eyes widened.

"Well! That... that... I will approach them in due time. I'm just gathering my thoughts."

Orum smiled, having a suspicion about why Ravenheart had told her daughter to socialize with other kids more.

"Are you having a hard time?"

Little Ki gave him a long look, then sighed.

"...A little."

Then, she added bitterly:

"They all know each other, already. Plus, the families of other Named Awakened are all... are all... better off than we are. When I introduced myself, they just said hi and lost interest immediately."

Orum suppressed a wince.

The families of people like Immortal Flame and the Warden were indeed a bit of an exclusive club. They had to be, considering how many sycophants sought out their favor, often with little or no sincerity.

He regretted that his niece and nephews weren't here... although they were much younger than this shunned girl. She would probably not know what to talk with them about, either.

He remained silent for a few moments, then smiled again.

"I was on my way to get some snacks... do you want to come with me? After all, it is far easier to endure these events on a full stomach. Plus, I want to know more about how your mom is doing. We are from the same hometown, you know? In fact, I wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for her. My sister, too. Come to think about it, I absolutely must tell you all about how she rescued us — after all, it would be a crime if you didn't know how amazing your mother is..." Finally, the familiar shy smile appeared on the teenage girl's face.

"Oh... alright. But I already know how amazing she is..."

Orum spent some time with Little Ki, talking about Ravenheart and the early days of the Nightmare Spell. She was still the same sweet child underneath the veneer of teenage gloominess, which made him happy. In the process, he introduced her to a few people and helped her mix in with the crowd. Her awkwardness receded, and she eventually left his side to talk to a few kids from the less influential families.

He was quite glad at the chance to help his benefactor's daughter, even if it was in such a small way.

There was a small smile on his lips.

'I hope my sister's troublemakers get to know her when they grow up.'

After that day, though, life became turbulent once again. Immortal Flame's achievement had made an enormous splash, and a tidal wave of change rattled the entire world. Those changes were especially poignant for Awakened like him. Soon, more Ascended — called Masters now — emerged. The existence of the Category Three Gates was revealed, plunging humanity into chaos for a while. Eventually, Orum started to make tentative preparations, planning on challenging the Second Nightmare himself.

In all that turmoil, he had not thought about little Ki Song a lot.

Until the day came when he regretted it bitterly.

That was because, by then, the first generation of children born after the descent of the Nightmare Spell reached the age that allowed them to become infected by it.

And Awakened like him quickly discovered that the children of: those who had passed the trial of the Spell were much more likely to become its victims.