1933 Legacy

Several years later, Orum found himself standing at the edges of a desolate lot, watching massive construction machines moving some distance away. A tall alloy wall had been raised near the outer radius of NQSC, enclosing a vast space. The city had been quite crowded lately, with many people even having to settle outside the barriers... how they survived out there, he could not imagine. But they did.

So, the value of this plot of land was astronomical — it could be measured in human lives, after all.

The construction was nearing the end. The wall was mostly complete, the moat in front of it had been dug. Fearsome turrets were already installed atop the rampart, although none had been brought online yet. It looked like a fortress ready to repel an attack by a titan.

As he watched, a large group of Awakened used their inhuman strength to hoist an immense alloy gate up — painted red, it stood out starkly against the dull metallic surface of the wall. A swarm of construction workers rappelled down a few moments later, ready to guide the enormous slab of red alloy into a complicated locking mechanism.

"When gods close a door, the Nightmare Spell opens a window..."

Hearing someone speak beside him, Orum turned his head in surprise. He had not felt anyone's presence there before. Considering how sharp his instincts were, sneaking up on him was a difficult task — and yet, someone seemed to have managed to do just that.

'Disconeerting.'

Orum noted the slurred words and the drunken giggle that followed the sudden proclamation, then smelled alcohol in the air. He frowned.

There, just a step away from him, a dishevelled man in expensive clothes was leaning on a wall, holding a mostly empty bottle of liquor in his hand. There was a snide smile on his lips, and a strange expression in his cold, cold eyes.

Orum looked away and smiled.

"I didn't know that it was possible for a Master to get drunk. Are you pulling a prank on me, Ascended Jest?"

The man turned to him and grinned.

"Yo, Awakened Orum! Funny to run into you here."

Orurn pursed his lips.

He knew Jest rather well, and although the two of them were on friendly terms, the man always made him feel uncomfortable. Everyone was aware what role the Jest played in Warden's cohort, and how many people had died by his hand... plenty of fringe factions had been quietly eliminated to restore the order in the world, after all. Despite his carefree attitude and humorous appearance, the man had quite a twisted and sinister side.

lest turned to the towering alloy wall and asked, his voice curious:

"Have you come to take a look too, Orum? Awakened Academy... what a grand name! Ah, but these lazy bastards... the opening is in a few days, and they haven't even finished setting up the defense systems."

He sighed.

"Well, on the other hand. Some might say that they're right on time."

The Awakened Academy was a project that had been forced on the government by the factions of several renowned Masters.

Or rather, the government was forced to make it a priority — there had always been plans of creating a centralized education facility to newly infected carriers of the Nightmare Spell and the younger Awakened, but considering how difficult and complicated the logistics of such an endeavor were, it always ended up on the backburner. Until now.

That was because almost eighteen years had passed since the descent of the Spell, and the children of many original Awakened were swiftly approaching the age that would allow them to be infected.

In fact, some already had been.

Much worse, the rate of infection among the relatives of Awakened had been proven to be much higher than among the general population. The grim news had shaken the Awakened a great deal.

So, those in power had finally taken off the gloves and showed the government in no uncertain terms what its place was.

Jest looked at the alloy wall somberly, the smile slowly disappearing from his face.

"You must have heard, right? Old Valor's youngest boy is infected. Immortal Flame's girl, too... and so many others. They'll be the first class of the Awakened Academy. "

Orum remained silent for a few moments.

"What about your kids?"

Jest smiled.

"Nope, my kids aren't infected. My youngest is not of age yet. My oldest... he's dead. He didn't pass the first trial, so he's technically not infected anymore. There. This Academy has nothing to do with me."

As Orum looked away with a sigh, Jest took another sip of liquor and laughed.

"Ain't it a joke, Drum? The nightmare... it never ends. All the dirty things we've done, and it's only getting worse. Worse, and worse, and worse... ah, it's hilarious."

He looked down, his gaze turning cold once again.

"Your sister's children are what, around ten? You must be thinking about a lot of things right now, too. Huh, Orum?"

Orum nodded slowly.

"Yeah. I am thinking... I really hope that they won't become infected. Of course, I'll need to prepare them well, in case they do."

Everyone would probably be thinking the same, at the moment. The Awakened Academy was one thing, but the entire education system would have to be reworked. There were more and more infection cases every year, so it was not enough to teach children literature, sciences, and basic self— defense anymore. They needed to be taught how to survive, how to fight, and how to kill...

Which, in turn, would make them even sharper and more cruel than they already were.

Jest smiled again.

"...That is why I like you, Orum. Thank the gods you're still normal, at least."

His expression changed again, growing cold and resentful. At this point, it was unclear if he was really drunk or just pretending — in any case, Jest uttered through gritted teeth, his voice full of contempt:

"Do you know what the others are thinking, though?"

Orum silently shook his head.

Jest smiled darkly.

"They are praying for their children to be infected and carry on their legacy. There's talk about dynasties, control over Citadels, and consolidating power everywhere. Well, I get it... fools like us have grown used to our lofty status, and that status only exists because of strength. If our children remain mundane, it will disappear like dew after we die. There'll be no legacy."

Orum looked at him, unamused.

"I'd rather not leave a legacy, then."

Jest simply laughed.

"As if you have a choice. Orum, my friend, listen to this fool... abandon hope. In this era, the only thing worth believing in is the Nightmare Spell, and the Spell is a cruel bitch. Just... teach your kids well. Teach them really well, bastard."

With that, he finished his liquor, waved a hand weakly, and headed away.

"See you at the opening ceremony, Orum! Old Valor is giving a speech... ah, I love the scumbag, but he is so dreadfully boring. And yet, he refuses to accept the jokes I wrote for him! Honestly, I'd skip the entire thing if I were you..."

Orum watched him go in silence, his gaze heavy.

Despite the piece of friendly advice, he did attend the opening ceremony of the Awakened Academy a few days later.

It was there that he met Ki Song once again...