1934 First Class

The turrets on the massive wall were still being calibrated by an army of technicians, but the Academy was already welcoming its first crop of young Dreamers. This late in the year, there were a considerable number of them — almost five hundred.

Some had come from here in NQSC, some had arrived from other cities in the Northern Quadrant. Many had even been brought across the oceans on heavily armored naval convoys — not only from Africa, Antarctica, and Australia, but also from the Americas. It was a clear sign of how seriously the government was taking the establishment of the Academy.

There were many distinguished guests, as well. Orum was one of them, observing the ceremony silently. Jest had not shown up, which was probably for the best, but he saw a lot of familiar faces.

Warden of Valor did indeed give a speech... and it was indeed a little boring. Filtering out the man's stern voice, Orum looked at the young Dreamers.

They had already done well to survive the First Nightmare. In fact, there were much more survivors this year than ever before. It was most likely because the kids infected by the Spell this year had all been born after its descent, and grew up in its ruthless claws. They were a different breed.

Honestly, Orum sometimes felt scared of the new generation.

In any case, there was another trial waiting for them now. The winter solstice was not that far, and soon, they would be sent to the Dream Realm. How many would be left alive? He hoped that all of them would, but of course, his wish was not meant to come true.

At least the impressive roster of instructors employed by the Academy would be able to prepare them for the journey better. Naturally, those instructors were not Awakened of the highest caliber, but they were competent enough to earn his trust.

He recognized a few of the Sleepers, as well.

The tall youth with a cold expression was Anvil, Old Valor's son. He gave off an unapproachable impression and was easily noticeable because of his flawless poise and composure. His dark hair was cut neatly, and his gaze was sharp... unlike most of the Sleepers, who seemed traumatized by their Nightmares and frightened of the solstice, he was calm and collected.

As if he was born to carry the Nightmare Spell.

The youngest son of Valor was not the center of attention, though. Instead, it was a beautiful young woman standing next to him, wearing an easy smile on her lips. She was like a ray of sunshine in the somber atmosphere of the underground hall, attracting many furtive gazes from other youths.

She was Smile of Heaven, Immortal Flame's daughter... and already a trailblazer, just like her father. After all, she was the first human to have earned a True Name in the First Nightmare. Her future was undoubtedly bright.

Orum vaguely remembered seeing these two a few years ago, when they were still little kids. Now, both were sixteen, and already tempered by the cruelty of the Nightmare Spell.

To his surprise, though...

There was someone else who drew his attention. He did not know this youth, and couldn't place him. The young man did not look like a child from any of the powerful families that had emerged since the descent of the Spell...

Unlike Anvil and Smile of Heaven, the youth was wearing cheap clothes that were most of the way to becoming rags. He had black hair and piercing grey eyes, his gaze strangely heated. There was a quality of sharpness about him that only those who had witnessed a lot possessed, but also a hint of gentleness that was both endearing and out of place.

Orum instincts told him that the youth was special in some way, but he couldn't quite put a finger on it.

'Ah. I see.'

He finally understood why the young man stood out among his peers, and smiled slightly.

It was because everyone else was trying to hide their glances, but the youth was staring at Smile of Heaven brazenly.

'What a brave fellow.'

Shaking his head, Orum looked away and threw another look at the sea of youthful faces.

Then, he froze for a moment.

There was another familiar face in the crowd, quite far from the center of attention. One that he knew far better than that of Valor's son or Immortal Flame's daughter.

'Little Ki...'

A dull pain pierced Orum's heart.

She was a couple of years older than the other two, at the edge of the age susceptible to the plunder of the Nightmare Spell.

She had almost been safe.

Her youthful awkwardness was gone, replaced by quiet confidence. The hint of gloominess remained, though.

Orum gritted his teeth and looked away.

'...Of course.'

Her mother was such an outstanding Awakened, after all. If even his niece and nephews were at risk, then Little Ki would be, too.

He sighed heavily.

'It's alright.'

She was Ravenheart's daughter. An apple did not fall far from the tree, and her mother would have prepared her well.

Little Ki had already survived her First Nightmare, proving that she was strong enough to endure the cruelty of the Nightmare Spell. Yes, her future would be one of bloodshed and peril, like that of all Awakened... but Orum had been living this life for a while, and he was fine.

Surely, she would be fine, too.

Her mother ruled a Citadel in the Dream Realm. Although the Song family was not very renowned, it was still one of the most distinguished families of the modern era. Little Ki had plenty of advantages to help her survive both in the Waking World and in the Dream Realm.

And he had his own problems to deal with. Too many of them to waste time on the child of an old acquaintance...

Soon, the ceremony was over. The Sleepers were taken to their dormitories by the attendants, and the distinguished guests were guided to a banquet hall. Orum found himself in the middle of a celebration once again. He did not attempt to socialize with his peers, though, standing in the corner with a somber expression.

Eventually, he found his way to the center of the hall, where a small crowd was gathered around an exalted figure.

"...Congratulations, sir! "

"Your son has definitely inherited his father's valiance."

"How goes the struggle against the Dark Forest? I haven't visited Bastion in a while..."

Orum patiently made his way through the circle of sycophants and bowed slightly.

"Ascended Warden."

The man — Warden of Valor — looked at him in confusion for a moment, then smiled slightly.

"Awakened Orum. It is nice to see you again... how is your Citadel doing? If that Fallen Demon is still causing trouble in your territory, I can send some of my knights to assist you."

Orum smiled politely.

"Thank you, but I have dealt with it already. Rather, I wanted to talk to you regarding something else..."

Warden's smile brightened a little, and he patted Orum on the shoulder.

"You took down a Fallen Demon, Orum? As expected... great! That is what an Awakened should strive to be."

He threw a derisive glance at the other people around them, then looked back to Orum.

"What did you want to talk about?"

Orum lingered for a moment, then said in a neutral tone:

"Actually... I was quite touched by your speech. Everything you said is true — these children are indeed our future. So, I was wondering if there is an instructor's position left open at the Academy. I'm quite busy handling my territory and the Citadel, of course, but I think I can stay at the Academy for a few months. Learning from a seasoned veteran like me should benefit the kids, don't you think?"