1935 Four Prodigies

"I'm Instructor Orum."

Orum looked at the youths crowding the dojo, hiding his confusion behind a cold expression. How the hell did he end up becoming a teacher? Doing something like that had never been a part of his plans.

In fact, he was supposed to be preparing to challenge the Second Nightmare right now. His soul core had long been saturated, and he had carefully assembled a potent arsenal of suitable Memories. He was even in negotiations to purchase a powerful Echo.

He was also in contact with several seasoned Awakened, searching for reliable companions to enter the Seed. Each of them had endured the horrors of the Nightmare Spell shoulder to shoulder with Orum at some point in the past, so he trusted both their skill and their character. However, assembling a strong cohort was about more than mere power.

There was also the question of complementing each other's powers and covering for each other's weaknesses... not to mention that most people were unwilling to even entertain the thought of gambling away their lives by challenging the Second Nightmare. In short, the process was slow.

So why was he at the Awakened Academy, preparing to teach a combat class?

Orum's gaze briefly fell on a young woman with raven hair and gloomy eyes.

There was his reason.

Of course, he did not let it show. It would not do Little Ki any good if everyone knew that she was favored by one of the instructors, and more than that, he was not here to be her friend. He was here to teach her how to survive, and the lessons she needed to learn were all harsh and unforgiving. So, he had to maintain a stern facade.

Plus... Orum was ashamed to admit that he had not been a good elder to Little Ki. So, it was questionable if he even had the right to act friendly around her.

Looking at the crowd of Sleepers, he lingered for a few moments, and then asked in a cold voice:

"I will be teaching you combat. All of you here have already faced the First Nightmare, so you are not children anymore. You'll be treated as adults. Don't expect any pity from me — the world is a ruthless place, after all, and the Spell will not show you any mercy."

Orum smiled darkly.

"...What do you think the essence of combat is?"

Most youths remained silent, afraid to speak in front of the stern instructor. Only a few of them remained calm.

Anvil — the tall young man with a cold and unapproachable expression — raised his chin slightly and answered in a calm, clear voice:

"The essence of combat is a confrontation between warriors. The warrior who wields a better weapon and knows how to use it with greater skill wins. Combat is the purest expression of one's valor and will, and therefore, its essence is glory."

Orum stared at him silently.

'So many words... so little sense!'

This poor kid must have spent too much time with his father. Warden of Valor was a great man, sure, but his solemn adherence to knightly values often went too far. It was more than enough to indoctrinate an impressionable child into having strange ideas, no doubt.

Granted, young Anvil seemed better than he could have been. At least Orum saw a hint of cold practicality in him — his words might have been lofty, but he still remained grounded.

'Now, how do I disabuse him of these nonsensical notions without sounding too harsh...'

Before Orum could say anything, however, another voice resounded in the dojo — it was the youth with black hair and grey eyes he had noticed during the ceremony, speaking in an confident tone:

"The essence of combat is murder."

His simple answer caused a few chuckles from the crowd of Sleepers. Orum, however, looked at him with interest.

"Elaborate."

The youth looked at him in confusion.

"What is there to elaborate? The enemy wants to murder you, and you want to murder the bastard first. That's all there is to it — everything else is just nonsense."

Orum suppressed a smile.

'What a feral child.'

The youth had been delivered to the Northern Quadrant by ship, so he had no friends and no family here... or anywhere, most likely, considering his habits and attitude. Orum shook his head lightly.

"Not every battle is fought with the intent of killing the enemy."

The youth suddenly smiled.

"Well, that just means that you're fighting it wrong."

There was another wave of chuckles, and Orum blinked.

'That rascal...'

Something was telling him that he would have his hands full with this one.

Smile of Heaven glanced at the cynical youth and hurriedly covered her mouth with a hand, trying to suppress laughter. Anvil, meanwhile, looked unamused... he even lost his flawless composure for a moment, shaking his head and uttering in a disapproving tone:

"Ridiculous..."

Well, at least Warden's son was still a human.

Orum shifted his gaze to Little Ki, who was standing in the back row, and asked neutrally:

"What do you think?"

The Sleepers turned around, not sure whom he was asking. Ki Song did not seem to have made an impression, so many looked confused.

Put on the spot, she frowned slightly. Her answer, however, was calm:

"The essence of combat is failure. If you are forced to fight, you have already lost."

Orum raised an eyebrow, surprised by her answer. It had some merit, sure — more than that, he was somewhat inclined to agree. The second-best way to resolve a conflict was to never give the enemy a chance to fight you, in the first place — by killing them before the battle could even begin. The best way to resolve a conflict was to prevent it from happening entirely.

However, very few would have given such an answer in this era of strife and bloodshed. Awakened prided themselves on being skilled warriors above all else.

Smile of Heaven looked at the older girl with a hint of mirth in her eyes.

"You've just insulted every Awakened in the world... uh... Ki? Including our venerable parents... and Instructor Orum..."

Little Ki threw a gloomy glance at her, then turned her gaze to Orum and looked him right in the eyes.

"...It's not my problem if they feel insulted by the truth."

Smile of Heaven finally couldn't hold herself back and laughed.

Orum sighed quietly.

'I'm going to have my hands full with this one too, aren't I?'

He couldn't have known, of course...

But Sunny, who was experiencing his memories, did.

He knew that this was the first conversation between four people who would go on to shake the very foundation of the world.