1936 Adulthood

The months before the winter solstice were precious and short, so the staff of the Academy —and Orum, who had somehow found himself playing the role of an instructor — wasted no time.

The Sleepers were trained and educated according to a gruelling schedule. The system was not very sophisticated, yet, but they were already seeing good results. The youths were learning how to use their new powers, absorbing knowledge about the Dream Realm, and getting to know each other — which would help them fight side by side with fellow Awakened in the future.

Of course, teaching them was not a simple affair. Each Sleeper possessed a unique Aspect, after all, and had received a varied level of prior training. Evaluating their potential was similarly not easy.

Nevertheless, four of them emerged as undisputed standouts early on.

The first one, quite unsurprisingly, was Smile of Heaven — the girl who had received a True Name in her First Nightmare. She was bright and beautiful, and there was something subtle about her that made people feel warm and at ease in her company.

More importantly than that, however, was the fact that she was strong — shockingly strong, in fact. Her Aspect remained a mystery to Orum, since she had never said anything about it, but her extraordinary talent was apparent even without it.

Her physical prowess, martial technique, combat intelligence, and willpower were all incredible, making Smile of Heaven a natural leader among the Sleepers. It was just that her personality was not exactly serious enough to settle in that position, and she didn't seem interested in authority and status, either. So, she was more of everyone's favorite person than the leader of the pack.

Instead, two boys were competing for the title.

One of them was, naturally, Anvil. The serious young man was excellent in all regards, his conduct was flawless, and his battle prowess was exemplary. Added to the immense fame of his family, it was no surprise that other Sleepers looked up to him.

Interestingly enough, he seemed more interested in knowing weapons than he was in wielding them — although his combat technique was still stellar. His Aspect granted him a high affinity to metal, which he used to skillfully control a flying sword

or enhance his swordsmanship in a number of ingenious, and quite insidious, ways.

Both Smile of Heaven and Anvil showed a level of physical strength and endurance that Orum couldn't quite explain, and honestly found a little monstrous. However, he was happy to see the new generation thrive in the perilous world they had been born into.

The second candidate for the title of the very best among the crop of Sleepers, however, was a complete surprise. It was the brazen youth with grey eyes whose amusing remarks had made the entire class chuckle during the first combat class.

The young man had come out of nowhere and had no background to speak of. Nevertheless, he was truly a genius at all things having to do with swordsmanship and combat, easily holding his own against the scions of the most prestigious families and defeating them one after another.

His talent stood out starkly even when compared to the most excellent Sleepers in his class... perhaps of any Sleeper ever, really. His technique was rough, sure, but it was improving by leaps and bounds every day. It was to the point that Orum almost felt exasperated and insecure, unsure if he would have anything left to teach the rascal in a few more months.

The boy's Aspect was an unusual one, too. It had nothing to do with combat, but was instead connected to perception. The young man had an uncanny ability to perceive the underlying elements of various concepts and deduce the connections between them, granting him an unparalleled level of insight into all kinds of things — from how a battle style flowed to how communicators were built.

And lastly, there was Ki Song.

While not as bright and eye-catching as the other three, she soon quietly emerged as one of the strongest members of her generation. Everything about her was balanced and without glaring flaws — she could wield a wide variety of melee weapons with deadly skill, never missed a shot when handling a bow, and could bring most opponents down in hand-to-hand combat.

Above all else, she possessed a deep well of knowledge and skills in the area where many other Sleepers only knew the bare minimum —wilderness survival. Just like her mother, who was an experienced hunter, Ki Song excelled at adapting to any environment, subterfuge, tracking, and eliminating enemies in the most efficient way.

She couldn't really use her Aspect in the training, though, because it was quite an eerie one — her Dormant Ability was pretty much the opposite of healing, allowing her to exacerbate any wound in a slow, but exponential process. Even though she could not very well use it against fellow Sleepers, it would be quite a potent Ability to wiled in actual battles.

Orum made a point of paying special attention to preparing her for the Dream Realm — as much as he could without making it seem as though this one student was more important to him than all the rest.

He did his best...

But the passage of time was ruthless.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, several months passed, and the day of the winter solstice approached.

On the last day, the instructors led the Sleepers to their designated sleeping pods in the newly built medical complex of the Academy. Orum finally gave up on his pretense and guided Little Ki to her pod personally.

Eventually, it was just the two of them in a small underground chamber. The young woman already looked sleepy and fatigued, so he knew that he would have to leave soon to allow her to get ready and enter the sleeping pod.

Orum lingered, not knowing what to say. After a while, he sighed.

"You did well, Little Ki. Very well. I should say that I am less worried about you than about any other Sleeper who is going to enter the Dream Realm today, but that would be a lie. In fact, I am quite worried, against all sense."

She looked at him with her usual somber expression, then smiled slightly from the corner of her mouth.

"...It's alright, Uncle Orie. I won't let you down."

A little smile touched Orum's lips in response.

'Oh. So she does remember, after all!'

He hesitated for a few moments, feeling glad, then finally asked the question that he had wanted to ask for a long time.

"How is your mother doing, by the way?"

Ki Song turned away and faced the sleeping pod, her slender figure silhouetted by its pale glow in the darkness of the chamber.

Her voice sounded even when she answered:

"She is dead."

Her words struck Orum like a hammer. He froze, paralyzed by the immensity of she had said, and afraid to comprehend it.

A sharp pain pierced his heart, making him shudder.

The young woman sighed, and then said quietly:

"She died not long before my First Nightmare. The being that lived in the volcano emerged and attacked the Citadel, so... she decided to fight it instead of running away, to protect the Gateway and the people anchored to it. The people she was trying to protect, though, all decided to hide and leave her alone. The cowards."

Ki Song pressed a button, and the lid of the sleeping pod opened.

Turning to Orum, she looked at him calmly.

Her face was not the face of a teenager. Instead, it was already the face of an adult.

"The next time we meet, I will be an Awakened. See you soon, Uncle Orie."

A few weeks later, she returned to the waking world and fulfilled her promise.