1937 Her Last Trace

Orum spent several weeks after the solstice feeling numb. There was little to do at the Academy now that the students were away, and he did not want to keep vigil next to their sleeping pods, like some other instructors did in secret.

So, he returned home, spending time with his sister and her children during the day and concentrating on taking care of his Citadel at night.

But even when Orum was with other people, he remained quiet and detached, his expression subdued. His mind was far away.

He was thinking about Ravenheart, his heart full of anguish and regret.

Death was an old friend to the original Awakened like himself, and he had lost many friends and comrades to its clutches. And yet, her death wounded him much deeper than anything had in the past.

It was bitterly ironic, in hindsight. Orum had lived a long life, and the time the two of them had spent together was not that long. The last time he had seen her was more than a decade ago. And yet... now that Ravenheart was gone, he realized that the great volume of space she inhabited in his heart was incomparable to the fleeting brevity of the few short months they had spent as companions.

But there was nothing he could do, anymore. He could never see her again, and he would never be able to repay his debt to her. It was too late. Ravenheart had died alone, far away, with no one standing by her side.

Now, her presence in his heart was replaced with a hollow absence, and all he was left with was regret.

The only trace of her that remained was her daughter.

"Orie, are you alright?"

He glanced at his sister, hearing concern in her voice, and smiled gently.

"Sure. Don't worry."

Orum hesitated for a few moments, then asked suddenly:

"Do you remember Ravenheart?"

Seeing confusion in her eyes, he corrected himself.

"Jiwon. Do you remember her?"

His sister frowned, started to shake her head, but then brightened.

"Ah! Auntie Jiwon? She was with us when we arrived at NQSC, right? Sure, I remember... she was very kind. Why are you asking?"

Orum looked away.

"...It's nothing. I met her daughter at the Academy recently, so I was just thinking about the past."

His sister smiled.

"Her daughter? Then you have to take good care of her! Oh, and protect her well from the male students... if she's as pretty as her mother, then they'll be making trouble!"

Orum forced out another smile and nodded.

"Sure. I will."

Soon enough, he found himself back at the Academy. By then, many of the Sleepers had undergone the Awakening and returned from the Dream Realm. A particular grey-eyes, brazen youth had even managed to earn himself a True Name on his first visit to the Dream Realm, and was now known as... Broken Sword? Orum would have to check the records again to be sure.

Ki Song was the last of the four front-runners to come back.

He found her in the dormitory cafeteria, eating a light meal in solitude. The Awakening had made the young woman even more beautiful, earning her quite a few stares, but he couldn't see her as anything but a child...

Even though he knew that she was not — not anymore, and not by a long shot.

"Uncle Orie."

He sat down across from her and looked at her silently, not knowing what to say.

Was he supposed to offer her condolences? Beg her for forgiveness? Promise her that everything will be fine?

All these words sounded hypocritical and hollow in his mind.

Eventually, Orum said:

"I heard that you ended up south of Bastion."

Ki Song nodded slowly.

"Yes. I was sent to the shores of the Stormsea. It took me some time to make it all the way to Rivergate."

He considered the known geography of the Dream Realm for a few moments, then smiled.

"It's not that far from my own Citadel. If you want... I can reach Rivergate in a few weeks and take you back with me. You'll be welcome among my people. I'll take care of you."

The young woman looked at him silently, her gaze calm and strangely dark. He couldn't read what she was thinking at all.

Eventually, she asked:

"Why would you go to all the trouble on my behalf?"

Orum met her gaze, then leaned back with a sigh.

Indeed, they were passing acquaintances at best. Little Ki was an orphan now, with no valuable connections to speak of. While talented, she had not proven herself yet, so there would be no factions clamoring to recruit her at all costs. Considering all that, his offer to brave the dangers of the Dream Realm for her sake could hardly be explained... unless one considered less savory motives.

Orum shook his head and answered simply:

"Because I owe your mother a debt."

He had wanted to say that he was Ravenheart's friend, but realized that he did not even deserve to make that claim.

Ki Song sighed deeply and looked away. After a while, she suddenly asked:

"How great a debt?"

Orum hesitated, unsure how to answer. Eventually, he simply shrugged and said in a neutral tone:

"Great enough."

The young woman nodded slowly and faced him once again.

"Then I have a favor to ask you, Uncle Orie. A big one."

She paused for a moment, then said in a determined tone:

"Please help me reach my mother's Citadel."

Orum frowned.

'Ravenheart's Citadel...'

From what he remembered, it was called Jade Palace, and very little was known about it — after all, it was so remote, infinitely far from most populous human enclaves in the Dream Realm.

Many regions of the Dream Realm had already been explored, but few were under human control. The area around Bastion was relatively known, stretching all the way to the inhospitable mountain chain in the north. Beyond the mountains lay a vast and largely untamed wilderness, and beyond even that, a titanic mountain range known as the Hollow Mountains rose toward the sky.

A few daredevils had crossed the first mountain chain in the past, but no one had ever returned alive from the Hollow Mountains. They were a Death Zone, which was a name given to those regions of the Dream Realm where no human could ever survive.

The Jade Palace was said to be situated near the Hollow Mountains, but far, far to the west. The problem was that if one traveled west of Bastion, they would hit an impenetrable barrier of Death Zones, as well.

So, the only way to do what Little Ki wanted to do was to travel south of Rivergate, reach the Stormsea, sail west along its shore, make landfall beyond the wall of Death Zones, and then brave the perils of the Dream Realm all the way to the northern boundary of its known area.

It was a journey spanning tens of thousands of kilometers, full of unknown dangers and deadly threats. Even if they were to travel most of the distance by boat, it would still take them many months to reach the destination... if they weren't eaten by some dreadful Nightmare Creature on

the way, of course.

The other option was to somehow find a Nightmare Gate connected to a Seed in the vicinity of the Jade Palace and follow the Call there.

The favor Little Ki was asking of him was indeed a big one.

Orum remained silent for a few moments, studying her youthful face somberly.

Eventually, he asked:

"Why do you want to go there?"

The young woman met his heavy gaze with dark determination, then raised her chin slightly and answered in an even tone:

"Because it's mine."

Orum stared at her before looking away with a sigh.

There were a lot of things he had to consider before making the decision. His own Citadel, the preparations to challenge the Second Nightmare, potential risks... whether it was worth it to put himself in danger to help this young woman, who was practically a stranger, to begin with...

But really, deep down, he already knew what he was going to do.

Orum nodded.

"Alright, Little Ki... Awakened Song. I will help you reach the Jade Palace."

And he would make sure that she got there alive and well.