1938 Dispossessed

It took Orum a few days to arrange his affairs and prepare to depart for Rivergate. He was not a pillar of humanity by any means, but he was still a very wealthy man — even if the worst happened, his sister and her kids would not want for anything. They shared his high rank in the controversial citizenship system established by the government a few years back, as well.

That said, Orum was not planning on dying in some godforsaken corner of the Dream Realm on the way to the Jade Palace. He was not arrogant, but he was confident in himself. Seasoned Awakened like him were few and far between — in the whole world, there were maybe only a few dozen.

He had not only survived, but also thrived during the darkest days of humanity. So, the Nightmare Spell would have to work really hard to bring him down.

Leaving his body in a sleeping pod and walking through the gates of his Citadel, Orum traveled south. Traversing the wilderness reminded him of his younger days, but he did not allow nostalgia to make him complacent. A couple of weeks later, he arrived at the edges of an ancient forest.

His armor had a few scratches, and there was a scattering of soul shards in his pack. A trail of dead abominations was left in his wake.

The forest, however... the forest was an entirely different kind of beast. Entering it alone was simply asking to be swallowed by it.

So, Orum made camp and waited for a while. The sea of leaves rustled in the distance, and the nearby river murmured as it flowed south, disappearing between the tall trees.

He spent a restless night on its bank. On the next day, a battered ship appeared from somewhere upstream, and Orum used his chance to brave the strong current and climb aboard — the crew was surprised to see him, but glad to have another Awakened blade with them for the last and most dangerous leg of the journey.

The river was teeming with Nightmare Creatures, but it was still safer than the dark expanse of the forest. So, unless someone had a cohort of Warden's knights escorting them, they preferred to travel by water.

Orum reached the Mirror Lake, changed ships at Bastion, and continued on his way to Rivergate.

By the time he met Little Ki there, he was carrying quite a few soul shards with him.

"Here. Take them... the more saturated your core is, the easier it will be for us to travel."

The young woman took the shards silently and crushed them one by one in her fist.

They were currently in the dining hall of Rivergate. There was a small crowd of Awakened having a meal there — some of them warriors serving Jest, some simply people anchored at the ancient fortress.

The master of the Citadel himself, luckily, was nowhere to be seen. Now that Anvil had Awakened, his father's old comrades — those of them who were still alive — were probably busy guiding the young man in hunting down Nightmare Creatures in the wilderness, both to saturate his core and to help him gain experience. Warden had big hopes for his youngest son.

Orum looked at Little Ki quietly.

She was wearing an enchanted black leather armor, trying to look calm and confident. However, he knew that she was most likely disoriented and afraid. It took time to get used to the Dream Realm... and most people never did.

Those like him who were at home here were the minority.

He hesitated for a few moments.

"Why do you really want to go to the Jade Palace? Are you planning to take revenge on the Nightmare Creature that killed your mother? If so... sure, let's do it. But we'll have to be careful. Ravenheart was strong, so if that thing managed to kill her, we have our work cut out for us."

She paused for a moment, then shook her head.

"No. The Nightmare Creature... it's already dead. Mom killed it before succumbing to her wounds."

Orum raised an eyebrow.

"Why, then?"

Little Ki gave him her usual gloomy look and remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she said:

"She arranged for the Citadel to become mine, in case anything happened to her. The uncles and aunties who live there... they were supposed to take care of me and carry out her will."

Orum frowned, already suspecting what had happened.

"But they haven't?"

She smiled darkly.

"No. They took the shards and Memories she set aside for me, and they've taken the Citadel, too. They told me that they'll gladly surrender it to me if I Awaken and come to claim ownership of the Jade Palace, though."

Orum sighed. Of course, they had said that — knowing perfectly well that the Dream Realm was vast, and her chances of making it to that remote place alive were very slim. A young girl with no connections would not dare to travel far across the wilderness, in the first place.

Ruling a Citadel was both prestigious and lucrative, so the newly ownerless Jade Palace would ignite people's greed.

They had underestimated Little Ki's determination, though.

As well as her connections.

He shook his head and asked in a business-like tone:

"What is your Awakened Ability?"

She hesitated for a few moments.

"...I can animate inanimate objects and control them like puppets."

Orum considered that Ability for a while. It sounded useful... almost as if Little Ki could create surrogate Echoes without actually receiving them from the Spell. Of course, he would have to see just how powerful her puppets were, and how well she could control them in a fight.

A puppeteer was quite a frightening existence, though. Orum had battled a few abominations with similar powers in the past, and each time was a real nightmare.

He nodded.

"What about your Flaw?"

The young woman stared at him silently.

"...I'm not telling."

Orum laughed.

"Good. I would have stopped you if you tried. Never reveal your Flaw to anyone, girl. Not even your family."

She continued to stare at him with the same expression.

"I don't have a family."

He hid his pain and discomfort behind a smile.

"Well, you will. Hopefully, one day soon."

At that, her expression subtly changed, turning even more gloomy.

They left Rivergate the next day, traveling by boat to the shores of the Stormsea.

There, a large ship was already waiting for them — Orum had pulled some strings and arranged passage west for himself and Little Ki. Despite the fact that he knew the captain, hiring her had cost him a fortune.

Soon, the ship set sail and dove into the perilous mists of the nebulous ocean.