1939 Life and Death

Orum had seen too many terrible things to count, both before and after the descent of the Nightmare Spell... but the voyage across the Stormsea was by far the most harrowing experience of his life.

The nebulous ocean was boundless and unfathomably deep, with untold horrors dwelling beneath its restless waves. It was shrouded in impenetrable fog sometimes, and at over times, surged and boiled in the throes of devastating storms. Night and day never followed a set pattern, sometimes coming and going in an instant, sometimes lingering for far too long.

Most of the time, though, there was twilight, with countless pale stars shining on the velvet background of the distant sky. All of it felt as if the world was fragmented and disconnected here, and that made Orum feel lost.

The fact that he was away from land, which was the foundation of his Aspect, did not help one bit.

The wooden ship they sailed upon was constantly assaulted — either by the towering waves and hurricane winds or by dreadful abominations that dwelled beneath the waves. And that was even after their experienced captain had set a course that took them past the dwellings of the truly deadly Nightmare Creatures, sticking close to the shore, where the danger was less severe.

Both Orum and Little Ki were forced to participate in many battles, barely surviving a few of them.

'...And I thought that Warden and his people, who had chosen to settle in the middle of an actual Titan, were insane.'

Nightwalker and his ilk were far more crazy. The captain — a beautiful Ascended woman with strange indigo eyes — seemed perfectly at ease in these terrifying waters, though, never losing her cheerful mood. The only times she looked wistful was then talking about her newborn baby, an infant boy named Naeve, whom she had left in the waking world to make this journey.

Orum felt a bit guilty for cashing in the favor she owed him.

In any case, he was having trouble maintaining his composure at sea. Considering that Little Ki had just Awakened and did not have a lot of experience, he would have expected her to struggle much more... but to his surprise, he took the horrors of the Stormsea in stride, never showing any signs of fear or agitation.

It took him some time to understand that it was because she had never expected anything else from the world, to begin with. Orum and the other Awakened of his generation had a frame of reference and were able to compare reality to how it used to be before the Nightmare Spell.

Little Ki and her peers, however, had been born into the dread of the Spell and grew up surrounded by Nightmare Gates, murderous abominations, and chilling stories of the Dream Realm. They had never known anything else, and so, the terrors of the modern era were simply mundane reality to them.

Orum understood that rationally, but the young woman's callous indifference still seemed eerie to him. It was more than a little inhuman.

Nevertheless, it was quite helpful on this dangerous journey.

The Stormsea was harrowing, but it did not claim their lives. Eventually, the ship made landfall on a desolate shore far west of Bastion and Rivergate, past the impenetrable barrier of Death Zones.

Orum and Little Ki said their goodbyes to the ship's crew and captain and headed deeper inland alone.

It took them a few weeks to reach the River of Tears, which would serve as their guide on the way north. The estuary of the great river was ruled by a particularly terrifying Nightmare Creatures, so ships couldn't enter it from the Stormsea — that was why Orum and the young woman he was escorting had to travel by land.

Looking at the vast river, Little Ki sighed.

"It's a shame. If someone managed to slay that thing and conquer the estuary, human territories in the west would have become connected to the Stormsea, and therefore to the eastern enclaves. They would have started to develop much faster."

Orum smiled.

"Well, maybe someone will one day in the future. For now, however, a Corrupted Terror is too dire of an enemy for us humans... it's not impossible to kill one if enough Ascended joined forces, but many of them would probably perish."

His smile dimmed a little, and he sighed.

"For now, all we humans can do in the Dream Realm is survive... and even then just barely. I don't think we'll be able to concern ourselves with things like progress and development any time soon."

Little Ki remained motionless for a while, looking over the vast expanse of flowing water with a

thoughtful expression. Eventually, he turned away and aimed her gaze north.

"Let's go, Uncle Orie."

And so, they did.

There was a Citadel on the shore of the River of Tears a few weeks of travel north. From there, they would be able to hire a rowboat and sail upstream — either all the way to the edges of the Moonriver Plains, or until the boat was destroyed by the abominations populating the river.

Orum and Little Ki had plenty of opportunities to fight side by side on the way to the Citadel. Of course, he was the main force of the small cohort — but due to his power and his experience. However, these skirmishes helped Orum understand just how precious the young woman's Aspect truly was.

It was not even her Awakened Ability, which allowed Little Ki to bring inanimate puppets to life — those were strong and convenient to have around, sure, but heavily limited by her ability to construct them. After all, animating a log would not be very helpful, considering that a log was relatively fragile and, most importantly, had no articulated limbs.

The young woman had made a few crude dolls out of clay that Orum had summoned, hardened to resemble granite, and shaped. They were quite handy, drawing the attention of the Nightmare Creatures away, stalling the enemies, and giving him a chance to slay the abominations without risking his own body. If one was destroyed, another one could be built.

Sadly, these dolls were still too weak, no stronger than mundane humans would be and far more clumsy. Perhaps if Little Ki had spent a fortune to commission one or two from an Awakened craftsman, things could have been different, but it was not something they could do now.

...It was her Dormant Ability, however, that made Orum reevaluate the young woman's Aspect.

Little Ki's insidious power was reasonably strong on its own... but it was when she fought side by side with someone else that it truly shone. Especially someone like Orum, who possessed an Aspect capable of dealing direct damage to the enemy.

With the young woman by his side, his own effectiveness increased exponentially. That was because Orum did not have to deal fatal wounds to Nightmare Creatures anymore, which was quite difficult to do. Instead, any wound sufficed, from relatively severe ones to insignificant and shallow.

If he managed to as much as scratch an abomination by controlling the earth, Little Ki's power would infect the little wound, slowly making it more and more dire. The cut would continuously widen and grow deeper, more and more blood would flow from it, and the flesh surrounding it would start to rot.

If enough time passed, the scratch would become a deadly wound, draining the Nightmare Creature of all life. And the more deep the initial wound was, the less time had to pass.

Watching the abominations die in agony was quite chilling... but also quite satisfying.

More than that, Orum felt at peace, knowing that with such power, Little Ki would be welcomed by any cohort. Even the best warriors would benefit greatly from having her by their side, and that was not even considering her excellent martial talent and keen mind. So, her future was all but set.

If she survived that journey, of course...

Ensuring that was his job.