1940 Ugly Side

Orum's confidence had not been in vain. In the end, they did make it across the entirety of the explored area of the Dream Realm alive, even if it took them many months.

The journey had been dreadful and permeated by the stench of blood, but he and Little Ki had not had to endure it without respite. They travelled from one Citadel to another, slowly moving north, and took breaks when arriving at a new human stronghold.

Sometimes, they simply remained at the Citadel, enjoying the hospitality of the locals, patching up their wounds, and recuperating. Sometimes, they used the Gateways to return to the waking world, climb out of the sleeping pods, and let their tired minds and souls rest by enjoying the lavish offerings of the modern era.

In the process, Orum had to reevaluate his opinion of the western human territory in the Dream Realm. Yes, it was far less lively and populated than the eastern enclaves, but there were still far more people using the isolated Citadels as shelter than he had expected.

It made sense, in hindsight. The number of Awakened in the world was increasing with every year, and it was already incomparable to the early days of the Nightmare Spell that he remembered.

Back then, the Dream Realm was alien and frightening, and meeting a single human here felt like a blessing. But now, there were whole communities with hundreds or even thousands Awakened living here. Many of those Awakened did not even have to fight for their lives every day, providing valuable services to the warriors or working to maintaining and improve the Citadels — even in the west.

Some of the Citadels here were small and constantly besieged by abominations, but others were like small towns, with strong garrisons and powerful lords leading the people to if not prosperity, then at least stability. The only thing that was missing was a figure like Warden —someone strong enough and influential enough to unite the disparate groups of struggling Awakened and build connections between their strongholds, allowing humans to cooperate and support each other.

Little Ki was absorbing the reality of this wild land like a sponge, observing the lives of the local Awakened with her serious, gloomy eyes. She didn't speak much, but the further north they went, the more her gaze seemed full of determination.

Eventually, they scaled the Moonriver Plains and came in view of the mountains where her mother's Citadel stood.

On that day, Orum looked at the sky and saw dark flakes of ash fall from it like snow.

He lingered for a while, then sighed and then looked at the silent young woman by his side.

In these months they had spent together, Little Ki had grown from a newly Awakened novice to an experienced warrior. The excellent foundation of martial techniques taught to her by Ravenheart bloomed, becoming actual skill. That skill had been sharpened by countless battles with Nightmare Creatures, and her character had undergone a subtle change, giving her more confidence.

Her soul core was also much more potent now, reinforced by hundreds of soul shards. She had also earned quite a few Memories, and was not at all a destitute Awakened she had been after her inheritance was stolen by unscrupulous people.

However...

Orum had not taught her the most important lesson. One that he was reluctant to teach the daughter of his dead friend and benefactor, but nevertheless had to.

There was no place for naiveté and innocence in the Dream Realm.

He sighed.

"Little Ki... we will reach the Jade Palace soon."

She nodded, then smiled a little.

Her smile looked a little dark with ash swirling around her pale face.

"Finally."

Orum hesitated for a moment.

"...What do you think will happen when we do? When those people promised to surrender their claim to your mother's Citadel, they weren't necessarily being sincere... you know that, right?"

The young woman just stared at him silently, as if not understanding the question.

He pursed his lips.

"You've grown quite good as battling Nightmare Creatures, Little Ki. You've done well to survive so far. But you need to realize something important... out here in the Dream Realm, abominations are not the only danger. Humans can be just as dangerous as abominations, and just as monstrous. Do you understand what I am trying to say?"

Orum had matured in the chaos caused by the descent of the Nightmare Spell, so he knew all too well how hideous and vile humans could be. Little Ki, however, was raised in the world where relative stability had already been established —she did not have an opportunity to witness the ugly side of humanity yet.

Which was a mercy, as far as he was concerned.

The young woman considered his question for a while, then tilted her head a little, confusion still apparent in her eyes.

"Of course, I understand."

She lingered for a moment, and then added matter-of-factly:

"I'm a human too."

Orum sighed, then nodded and headed west.

"Good. Let's be done with this dreadful journey, then."

They traversed the Moonriver Plain and scaled the mountains, eventually coming in view of a colossal stone bridge. On its other side, a beautiful palace that seemed to be cut from obsidian stood, shrouded in a billowing cloud of ash.

This was where Ravenheart had lived, fought, and died.

The stark landscape was lonesome and beautiful, just like she was in Orum's mind.

He shivered in the cold and took a step forward.

"We should cross the bridge as fast as we can."

Little Ki followed. As they stepped on the bridge and walked across it, struggling against the powerful winds, she said suddenly:

"Uncle Orie..."

He spared her a glance.

The young woman remained silent for a few moments, and then said quietly:

"No matter what happens once we reach the Citadel, don't interfere. I have to handle it myself. Promise me."

Orum hesitated, but eventually nodded.

"Alright. I won't do anything."

'Unless you're in danger.'

She looked at the distant edifice of the dark palace, cold determination burning in her eyes.

Suddenly, Orum felt a chilling premonition grasp his heart.

He couldn't quite explain it, but grew tense nonetheless.