1941 Children of a New Era

The inhabitants of the Citadel noticed their approach from afar. By the time Orum and Little Ki reached the gates of the palace, a small crowd had already gathered in the great hall beyond, looking at them with varied emotions.

There were very few Awakened anchored here —no more than thirty. Some of them looked surprised, some were tense. The latter were probably those who recognized Little Ki, and knew that they had sinned against this young woman.

The two battered clay dolls following her attracted quite a few stares, as well.

Orum stayed back, giving Little Ki space. She walked forward with confident steps, keeping her hand on the hilt of a Memory sword that rested in a makeshift scabbard on her belt.

One of the Awakened took a few steps forward, as well, facing her with a smile. He was a man a few years younger than Orum, with handsome features and long blonde hair.

There was insincere warmth in his friendly voice:

"Little Ki! Or should I say Awakened Song? Welcome to Jade Palace... we were all happy to hear that you have survived the winter solstice unscathed. Warms my heart, really, to know that you are doing well... granted, I am surprised to see you all the way here. Didn't the Spell send you to Rivergate? How come you are not there?"

The young woman remained silent for a while, studying him and the other Awakened gathered in the dark hall. Her expression was cold, and her eyes were once again full of somber glum... no, not even glum.

They were simply full of darkness, devoid of any human warmth.

Little Ki looked at the blonde man and said calmly:

"Where else would I be? This is my Citadel. I have come to claim what is mine."

The man hesitated, his smile growing a little cold.

"...Come on, girl. Surely you didn't take what I said the last time we met seriously? I was just being polite because of how thankful we all were to your mother. You are an adult now, so you should know better. You and your friend are most welcome here... in our Citadel. But someone as young and inexperienced as you is not fit to rule it. Don't you think?"

Little Ki stared at him silently and ignored his question.

Instead, she suddenly asked one of her own:

"Where were you when my mother died?"

The man blinked.

"What?"

She looked around the hall, piercing every Awakened with a cold gaze, and repeated her question.

"Where were you when my mother died? All of you. She had welcomed you here. She had fed and protected you. And yet, when she was fighting against that thing, bleeding, dying... where were you?"

Some of the Awakened looked away, some met her gaze with anger.

The young woman snarled.

"All of you are complicit. All of you are her murderers. And yet you have the audacity to claim that this is your Citadel. That I am too weak to rule it. You... you cowards are calling me weak?"

The blonde man's smile disappeared, replaced by a dark expression. His eyes were suddenly full of malice, making Orum tense up.

"Listen, little girl... I will forgive your rudeness this once. I am quite a magnanimous person, after all, and so are my people. Considering what we owe your mother, we are willing to let this entire misunderstanding go. She was a benevolent and generous person, too... so you should show the same grace and forgive us as well, like she would have. Carrying resentment in your heart won't be good for you."

There was a subtle threat in that last sentence.

Little Ki looked at him for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"...Gods might forgive. But I won't."

He frowned.

"What?"

Little Ki closed her eyes for a moment.

"Then again, gods are dead. And my kind mother is dead, too."

The man's frown deepened...

But before he could say anything, the young woman's hand moved, and her sword pierced his neck.

His eyes widened, and a torrent of blood flowed from his mouth.

Standing near the gate of the palace, Orum flinched, shocked.

Little Ki, meanwhile, shook the corpse of the blonde man off her sword and took a step forward. Her expression did not change at all, as if she had not just killed a human being.

The rest of the Awakened were a few seconds too late to react. Some reeled back, some reached for their weapons or began to summon Memories.

The young woman wielding a bloodied sword did not say anything more, dashing forward in eerie silence. Her two puppets moved, too.

Orum stood frozen near the wall, watching the battle in horror. He had already known how skilled Little Ki was, and how eerie her Aspect was... but he had never seen her Ability used against fellow humans.

Only when he saw Awakened scream and try to stem the flow of blood from wounds that had seemed shallow, falling to the ground in agony, did he realize how terrifying and morbid the young woman's power truly was.

And how chillingly ruthless she was.

Taking lives, gifting death.

There were almost thirty Awakened in the Jade Palace, but they were no match for one of the most talented students of the Academy. If they were strong, they would not have run away or hidden themselves when Ravenheart faced her last enemy... still, they could have easily overwhelmed Little Ki with sheer numbers.

If they were brave enough, and decisive enough.

But they were not, and she gave them no time to get their fear under control.

No... in fact, she purposefully terrified and intimidated them, killing the first few in the most gruesome and cruel way.

After that... it was a slaughter.

The clay puppets eventually fell, their bodies broken and shattered, but the young woman was relentless.

As Orum stood, motionless, she methodically killed most of the Awakened in the hall. Some tried to escape, but she hunted them down one after another. No one was spared. Her retribution was cruel, thorough, and merciless.

Some time later, the dark hall of the Jade Palace was the scene of a morbid massacre. Dozens of mutilated bodies littered the floor, and a lake of blood gathered on the floor, glistening coldly in the light of crude torches.

Little Ki was standing in the center of that crimson lake, breathing heavily. She was soaked in the blood herself from head to toe — much of this blood was her own, but most was not.

And yet...

Her expression was still calm and indifferent, as if what she had done was nothing special.

As if what she had done was only natural.

It was not the slaughter, but that lack of shock, trauma, and remorse that made Orum feel as if his heart was constricted and full of terror.

This was that they were lake...

The children of the new era.

Those born into the world of the Nightmare Spell.

Frowning deeply, Orum finally moved and walked slowly toward Little Ki... toward Ki Song.

As he approached, he looked at him and smiled.

"Uncle Orie... I am done here. We can take the Gateway next."

She did not even seem to notice how disturbed he was, and had not assumed that he would be.

Orum studied the bleeding corpses silently.

Eventually, he faced her and asked, his voice trembling a little:

"This... this... do you think that this is what your mother would have wanted?"

The young woman looked at him strangely.

She frowned a little, as if confused by his question once again.

Then, she shook her head.

"No, of course not. My mother was a very kind person."

Before he could say anything, Ki Song sighed and added, her voice an odd mix of sorrow, longing, and resentment:

"That is why she is dead."

She looked at the people she had killed, gave one of the corpses a kick, and looked at Orum with calm indifference.

"It is just how you have taught us, Uncle Orie. The world is a ruthless place, and the Spell will not show us any mercy. There is no place for kindness in this world."

He shivered slightly, hearing his own words come out of her bloodied mouth, spoken so easily and with such confidence. As if it was a trivial truth.

'That is not... what I meant...'

But instead of saying that, Orum winced and covered his face with a palm for a moment. Eventually, he sighed.

"You still made a mistake, Ki Song. Whether they deserved to die or not, you still needed them. One person can't defend a Citadel... you should have executed the leaders and brought others to heel. You need warriors to serve you! Otherwise, the first swarm of Nightmare Creatures will make the Jade Palace their nest."

The young woman looked around, then smiled brightly.

"About that... I've been thinking about my Aspect lately, Uncle Orie. These clay puppets we've made, I think they were the wrong solution all along."

Orum frowned, not understanding what she meant.

...He remained confused up until the moment the first of the corpses suddenly moved, and then slowly rose to the ground.

Ki Song rubbed her chin, and then nodded in satisfaction.

"Yes. This works much better."