1942 Master Orum

The last memory of Master Orum Cassie showed Sunny took place several years later. By then, the Jade Palace — now known as Ravenheart — had already become a thriving Citadel, attracting thousands of humans from the eastern reaches of the Dream Realm.

Ki Song herself had become a renowned Awakened, her fame second only to that of those three brilliant stars of her generation — Smile of Heaven, Broken Sword, and Anvil of Valor. Her influence and authority spread all the way to the estuary of the River of Tears, where a Corrupted Terror still dwelled, blocking convenient access to the Stormsea.

The prominent families of the First Generation were already being called the Legacy Clans. Valor, Immortal Flame, and the newly established House of Night were at the height of their power, known as the best among equals. No one called them the Great Clans, yet, but the idea of some distinguished families being a cut above the rest was already apparent.

Clan Song was relatively small and unassuming when compared to these titans.

Orum's relationship with Ki Song, however... had grown distant over the years. After helping her settle in the newly retaken Jade Palace, he made the long journey back home, where his own Citadel was waiting for him. They still saw each other in the waking world from time to time, but not too often.

It was partially because both were terribly busy with their own affairs, and partially because Orum did not feel completely comfortable around Little Ki anymore. That strange discomfort made him feel both ashamed and conflicted, but he could not do anything about how he felt.

That young woman... frightened him, a little.

Many things happened since the day she massacred the people whom her mother had died to protect. New regions of the Dream Realm were explored and conquered. The number of Awakened continued to grow exponentially. Orum himself finally challenged the Second Nightmare and became a Master, receiving his Legacy Relic as a reward.

His niece turned sixteen and became a carrier of the Nightmare Spell.

Which was why he was now back at the Awakened Academy, preparing to continue educating her in an official capacity.

The first batch of Sleepers had yet to arrive, so there was nothing much for him to do. Orum checked the equipment in the dojo, then visited the medical complex, and finally made his way to the cafeteria to have an early lunch.

His steps slowed down as soon as he entered, though.

That was because there was someone familiar sitting behind one of the tables in the mostly empty dining hall.

Little Ki looked quite different now. She was still young, but the teenage girl he remembered was gone, replaced by a mature young woman. She had to be... twenty-four, twenty-five by now? Her gloomy awkwardness was replaced by confident grace, and her ravishing beauty was impossible to ignore.

Orum hesitated for a moment, then put on a smile and headed in her direction.

"Awakened Song. It is so nice to see you, young lady... how have you been?"

Her own charming smile seemed quite sincere.

"Master Orum! I didn't expect to run into you here. I am doing well, thank you... what about you?"

He sighed.

"My niece has just conquered her First Nightmare, so I am back at the Academy to help prepare her for the winter solstice. But what brings you here? Are planning to teach a class or consulting one of the specialists?"

Ki Song leaned back a little, glanced at the empty chairs surrounding her table, and echoed his sigh.

"No. I am meeting a few colleagues to discuss an important matter. We chose the Academy to reminisce a little. Sadly, they seem to be running a little late... well, their time can be said to be more valuable than mine."

There was a gentle hint of dissatisfaction in her voice.

Orum remained silent for a moment, then smiled.

"Well, I'll scold them if you want. For now, though, I'll leave you and go get something to eat... we should catch up after your meeting is over, though. I really want to hear all about how your Citadel is doing."

The shallow politeness of their conversation pained him deeply. But at the same time, he felt a little relieved to have a way out.

Orum excused himself and went to take a seat a few tables away.

By the time his food arrived, a few new faces appeared in the cafeteria.

It was a very august reunion.

Smile and Heaven and Broken Sword — his former students — arrived first. The two had been attached at the hip ever since their days at the Academy, but were officially married now.

They were a beautiful couple, indeed.

Broken Sword spoke first, his calm voice too strong and confident to be ignored:

"Awakened Song. Please forgive us for being late."

Smile of Heaven grinned and landed on a chair next to Ki Song, grasping her shoulder in a friendly manner.

"Song! I haven't seen you in ages... since the wedding, I think? What, did you not like the cake? Impossible... mom personally made that cake..."

Not long after, two more people arrived.

One was Anvil of Valor, as composed and serious as ever, while the other... the other was an unfamiliar youth with a pleasant smile on his lips. Orum would have mistaken him for one of the Sleepers who were supposed to arrive at the Academy in the next few days, if not for the fact that the teenager was obviously already an Awakened.

The two of them took their places across from Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven, Anvil greeting everyone with a few short words.

The five Awakened remained silent for a few moments, but then Broke Sword suddenly slapped Anvil on the shoulder and smiled brightly.

"Congratulations! I hear you're a father now. Gods, you didn't waste any time, did you, Vale? I can't believe you have a son…"

Anvil glanced coldly at his shoulder, then cleared his throat.

"Well. Yes. In any case... we should discuss the preparations, shouldn't we? You know that I have invited Awakened Song to join us. Naturally, she needs no introduction — we all know how excellent Ki is. This young man, however..."

He looked at the smiling youth, lingered for a moment, and then added calmly:

"This is Asterion. We met in Bastion, and I believe that he will be of great help when we challenge the Second Nightmare..."

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Orum's memory ended there. He moved further away to avoid eavesdropping on the conversation, not knowing that what he was witnessing was the inception of the legendary cohort that would shake the foundations of the world.

After that, Sunny found himself back in the damp cell, looking into Cassie's beautiful blue eyes through Orum's own. The ironclad figure of the King of Sword towered behind her — both familiar and unrecognizably changed.

The features of the young man Orum had once taught could still be recognized on the somber face of the Sovereign, but just barely. Anvil's gaze was infinitely heavier than it had been once, and there was no hint of human emotions in it anymore.

Only the cold indifference of sharpened steel.

Cassie lingered for a moment, feeling tired and drained of essence. There were other spies she would have to interrogate, too...

She sighed, and then rose from her knees. Taking a step back, she faced Anvil.

"...I have learned what you asked for, Your Majesty."

Cassie lingered for a moment before adding:

"For what it's worth, Master Orum's family does not seem to be aware of his actions. Saint Helie... her loyalty was not compromised."

Anvil gave her a curt nod and stepped closer to Orum, looking down at him with a cold expression.

When he spoke, however, a hint of emotion finally found its way into his usually even voice:

"...Was it worth it, teacher? To betray your own for that woman? I wonder what she had offered you to change sides."

Orum looked up at him and smiled darkly, no sign of fear or regret written on his weathered face.

After a few moments of silence, he said slowly:

"Worth it? Sure... I guess it was. I finally managed to repay my debt, at least."

Anvil took a deep breath and looked away.

"You are a fool. She is a monster, don't you know? To her, people's lives have little value. She'll gladly rule the living, but if that's not an option... she'll rule the dead, as well. Did you really wish to leave your family in a world she would create?"

Orum looked at him for a while, then snarled, his eyes turning cold with contempt.

"A monster? All of you are monsters. But she... sees us as people, at least. To you, we're all just tools to be studied, used, and reforged. We're merely your swords. Say what you will about that girl, but Littke Ki... she has never treated people as objects. Look at her daughters. She has done right by them."

He looked at Anvil with pity and smiled.

His smile was pale and sad, but there was also a hint of defiant pride in his tired eyes.

"...What have you done? What kind of heartless world are you going to create?"

Anvil stared down at the old man from above, not saying anything.

The silence stretched for a few moments, but then...

Something moved.

Cassie felt piercing pain and flinched, her hand jerking up to grasp her neck.

At the same time, her vision spun.

For a moment, she saw the stone roof of the chamber, then its damp wall, then the floor. And finally, a body falling over, surrounded by the rattling of chains.

Then, Cassie was blind once again.

She was standing motionlessly near the King of Swords, while Master Orum... Master Orum's beheaded body lay at her feet.

He was dead.

The nauseating stench of blood assaulted Cassie's nostrils, and she held her breath.

Then, she raised her hands and hid her eyes behind her blue blindfold.

Somewhere near, Anvil let out a heavy sigh.

He remained silent for a dozen seconds, then turned to her, regaining his emotionless composure.

His voice sounded calm:

"Lady Cassia... there are more prisoners waiting to be interrogated. If you will."

She allowed herself to linger for a moment, and then bowed her head respectfully.

"...Yes, my king."