

<Why do you wish to be a Defender?>

This side of the road had always been familiar to her, the area filled with the smell of food ready to be sold to hungry customers at lunchtime. It was a good idea, Svana agreed, since the place was near the Eastern headquarters of the Tenpeace Union.

The Tenpeace Union. Her goal.

Silver hair covering the right half of her face, Svana S. shootstar darted her eye around to look for some nice options for food. Her gaze locked on an empty snack cart across the road, one she recognized the owner as the familiar, friendly face of Jane. Speaking of Jane, there she was, her entire figure almost hidden behind the tower of bags and boxes. Business was about to open, it seemed.

Svana stood behind the crosswalk, waiting for the red light on the other side to change. Jane didn't seem like she had the luxury to wait, however. The wobbly wall of ingredients was barely maintaining balance, seeming like it would crumble at any second. Sure enough, the toppling of a single can on the very top was enough to make the others follow suit, and Jane also started falling to the ground as well.

At the same time, the traffic light turned green as Grand Nature itself. Svana slowly walked toward the cart, and her eye, the fog-like hue turning into a blazing flame of orange, spared the falling products and her friend from the fate of touching the ground. Realizing that she was floating in the air, Jane's eyes opened to meet a single, focused orange, and she smiled seeing her savior of the day, "Svana!" she exclaimed, "Thanks a lot, it would've been a disaster if it wasn't for you. Hooray for telekinesis!"

A small smile was Svana's silent reply as the bags and boxes all moved to appropriate locations. The job was done, and her eye color returned to silver.

"So, what brings you here? Want a snack?" Jane asked.

"Ten pieces of fish-shaped bread, please," Svana answered.

"Ah, let me guess- for your siblings? Half of the ten red bean paste, and the other half cream, how does that sound?"

Svana nodded to her suggestion, to which Jane happily replied, "All right, that would be eighty Flitz!"

After the payment came the process of waiting, and while Svana did exactly just that, she noticed bundles of small notes hanging around the walls of the snack cart.

"Hmm? Oh, you noticed them, huh? This one here's CPR procedure and AED administration, the one on the left to that is about geography, and the two on the right are uh... General Union law and Criminal law!" Jane explained whilst watching Svana stare at the little notes, "... This year's going to mark my third attempt for the entrance exam," she added.

"For the Tenpeace Union?" Svana asked.

"Yeah, I'm still an Aegis fighter now, but I'm going to try my best so I can be a Defender this time!" was Jane's reply, "When are you going to take the entrance exam, Svana?"

"... Three years later, if possible. But Instructor Dahyae told me that regardless of the time I take to study for the written exam, I'll have no use for any of that knowledge unless I learn how to activate my valorite." Svana said, disappointed.

"But the combat exam doesn't check whether you can activate your valorite or not, right? There's way more people who don't even have one, anyways!"

Svana pulled out two crystals, one orange, the other one black. The regular octahedrons floated around her hand, "You're right, but I do agree with what she said. Valorites respond to strong emotions and resolve, so not being able to activate one shows how immature I am."

Jane asked, "The orange one's still giving you problems? The sword?"

To that, Svana nodded.

"I've seen you wield it in the past. How long has it been since then? Three years?"

"Yes. Around when I was sixteen."

"... I don't get it. You were able to summon that sword at any time by will when you were younger, but not when you're older? It's not like you don't have enough determination to become a Defender! You train day and night, not to mention how your dad told me that you've been studying a lot as well."

Svana frowned a little, "Speaking of him, I heard that you were going to train with him this evening. Has he been teaching you well for the past few years?" she asked, trying her best to sound soft and casual.

"Uh, yeah! He's a good teacher," Jane looked up at Svana, "Is something wrong?" she asked, a bit worried.

There was silence before she could hear a response, "... My father is against the idea of me becoming a Defender."

"What? Why?"

"I quote his words: 'It is too dangerous for you,'" retorted Svana.

"Oh..." Jane thought hard about what to say, "You've always wanted to be a Defender since the day I met you. I know that you didn't set your goal by impulse! Maybe that's what he's thinking. I could tell him to be more supportive of you, that you've been planning and preparing for this for a long time!"

"How much of a fool do you take my father to be, Jane? You and I both know that that is not the case. He's sharp. Observant. He knows," Svana said, "... Thank you, nonetheless. I just... hope I didn't get affected by his disapproval too much. I do wish to activate my valorite sword soon."

"Maybe that day will be today! Who knows?" Jane chirped.

Svana smiled back, "Perhaps," She tucked the crystals away back into her pockets before asking her a new question, "Jane, why do you wish to be a Defender?"

"Huh? Well, for starters, I have Jason and Ryan to take care of. Sure, I can earn as an Aegis fighter, but Defenders are associated with the Tenpeace Union. More missions available and higher pay! That, and because I have the responsibility to protect this world. It's our home, after all," Jane looked at Svana straight in the eye before finishing, slowly, with a low tone, "And I won't let it burn to ashes again."

Black hair, dark brown eyes with a red periphery, and an orange cape clasped around her shoulders, Jane Kim asked the same question back to her, "What about you, Svana?" she asked with a smile.

"One, because my father's also a Defender and I want to be like him. Two, I wish to meet a certain person. There's nothing that I know about them, to be honest. But joining the Tenpeace Union might give me a better chance at finding them."

"So... You're searching for someone you don't know?"

"... They wore dark-colored full body armor and had the ability to somehow fix damaged objects using something that seemed like the night sky. But most importantly, they were strong enough to save me and my brother from the verge of death. I've never told you this story before, have I? I believe it was only a few months before we first met. That person protected us, healed us, and for me, became someone I wished to meet again."

Jane said nothing. She just stared at her. Silently.

"Certainly, someone as powerful as that individual is among the Defenders. And should I become one myself in the future someday, well, it'd be proof that I was able to pay it forward. Proof that their choice that day wasn't wrong."

"... Gives me more reasons why I should pass that test," Jane murmured.

"Hmm?"

"I-I mean, if I pass this year, I'll be able to give you some exam tips, and a heads-up about life as a Defender! That, and... I might be able to help you find that person."

Svana smiled, "I'll look forward to it."

A few moments later, she watched Jane put the hot pieces of bread in a paper bag and noticed that she had also baked a waffle as well. Jane handed the waffle in question, filled with strawberry cream, to her. Svana stared at her in confusion, "It's on the house! For a fellow Aegis fighter and soon-to-be Defender!" Jane said.

Svana let out a soft laughter, this made her day. She loved strawberries.

Today's training might feel easier than usual thanks to this, she thought.

Nothing was easy, of course.

Svana quickly realized that the moment she felt herself crash into the ground. But there was no room to groan or complain, just enough time to roll over to dodge a blade, get up, and notice where her opponent was. Instructor Dahyae was merciless. Magic formed sharp projectiles, and they were fired to hunt her down. Svana's answer to that was running toward her target, shattering all projectiles in her way with a swing of a sword. But Dahyae didn't let her land a single blow. Svana jumped back, but now it was time for the instructor's counterattack. She dashed forward, purged the sword out of Svana's hand,

grabbed her wrist, and violently twisted it, flipping her around like a ragdoll.

Svana could almost hear her joints cry out in pain, and now, disarmed and caught with her arms crossed behind her back, there was nothing she was able to do except trying her best not to fall flat on the ground.

"Svana! What's the matter with you? You're rustier than usual, even a child would be able to snap your neck with ease!" Dahyae shouted. In response, Svana aimed for a kick in the stomach, which Dahyae easily dodged in exchange for letting her go. She was in the air, Svana noticed, and she knew very well that this was her chance. Orange aura formed around her left hand, and energy quickly gathered around to create a source for a beam attack. Coreblast.

Half of the training ground was engulfed by the orange beam, with smoke and debris filling the air. A single silver eye gazed at the result of the powerful skill.

But just when the thought of looking for her lost sword crossed her mind, Svana felt the eerily cold, narrow touch of steel against her throat. A signal telling her not to move a single limb. She heard the voice of her teacher creep behind her ears, "Shooting a machine gun would be quicker than a coreblast of that speed,"

The fight was over, audible by the buzzer ringing across the entire place

following her defeat, "All right, that's it for today! Catch your breath, lie down, do whatever you want. Well done!" Dahyae announced as she sheathed her sword.

Svana fell to her knees. She was out of breath, and could barely move. It took her some time to process everything that had happened, and after that, she pulled out the orange valorite and listened to the sound of footsteps, which grew louder with time. She looked up and saw Instructor Jeong Dahyae handing her a bottle of water and her lost sword, "Thank you," she said. It took her a few more minutes before she opened her mouth again, "Instructor," she began, the orange crystal floating around her hand, "Do you think I'll ever be able to activate my valorite again?" she asked.

Dahyae stared at her, dumbfounded, "What? Svana, don't tell me that three sentences out of my mouth are enough to crack your confidence like that!"

"No, Dahyae, it's not that... Do you remember the time I told you about Jane?"

"Ah, your friend? Your dad's student? Sort of. What about her?"

"I met her this afternoon. Father had told her about how I was studying a lot. I appreciate the acknowledgement, but not like this. It doesn't matter how much he praises me, I'm not there to hear a single word. What I do hear, is an opinion

of opposition. It's almost as if he wants me to believe that he truly is against my goals."

"And that's been affecting you these days?" she asked.

"Don't get me wrong, Instructor. I am not pitching all the blame onto him."

"I know. Defenders have to put their lives on the line every day. Your dad and I, we both experienced fighting Spectral storms and criminal organizations firsthand. I wouldn't want you to get hurt either had I been in his shoes."

Svana caressed her valorite before replying, "In all honesty, I know very well why I can't activate this anymore. I became an Aegis fighter primarily because my sister and I had to survive, but also because I sought revenge. And my sword, it responded to my vengeance. I'm surprised it continued to answer me for years since the day I heard news that the ones who brought us despair were finally brought down... I remember how, on the day I was unable to activate my valorite anymore, you bought me a cake and told me that everything was going to be okay. Did you know?"

Dahyae laughed, "Of course I knew! Figured it was going to happen one day, you're getting happier, less bound by the past, and more connected to the ones

you love. It's time for you to graduate from survival and learn peace, ambition, empathy, humor, and all that good stuff. I won't sugar-coat anything, though. It's going to be a painful process before you can make sense of it all."

"... Tell me, Dahyae. You've lived longer than any other person I know. What's the most painless way to break someone's heart? The heart of the same person who, despite everything, wants the best for me, the one who would feel joy and pride, concern and guilt at the same time when I achieve my goal?"

Dahyae wrapped one arm around Svana's shoulders and gave her a soft pat.

"I'm scared... Scared that whatever path I take would end up hurting my friends and family. People around me always seem so sure of their decisions, yet I'm still confused and easily shaken in comparison," Svana whimpered.

Her mentor hugged her tighter and didn't say anything for minutes. It was only after her breathing calmed down that Dahyae spoke, "Everyone seems so self-assured, huh? Wanna know something about your dad? He actually retired once, back when he was thirty."

This was unexpected for Svana. Her father, Captain of a team in the Tenpeace Union, so devoted to his work, mentioned in a sentence including retirement?

"Well, looks like someone's surprised! He became a barista and ran a coffee shop for years. Probably would've stayed that way had he been allowed to. Every time I visited the small place, I could see that he was happy with his new career. Smiled more often, too. But life's unfair, kid. Your dad would've never dreamed of rejoining the Union seven years later, but it happened, and here we are," Dahyae said. She looked at Svana and noticed that her eye was staring at her own two red ones, which were filled with grief, "You might be thinking, things would've been easier had the orange valorite also worked the same way the black one does. Affection is a positive feeling. It's easier to use. But anger's what makes us yearn for change and seek justice. We feel it for a reason," Svana felt a pat on the shoulder, "So now, here comes the question: Can you accept and use them both?"

At night, everyone slept. Everyone but the ones who kept its peace and safety by sacrificing their own. There, from afar, was a light blue dome, a barrier that allowed entry, but forbade exit. And it was dissipating, a sign that a battle was over. Many areas of this world had at least one of those barriers around this

hour. It was a usual sight for Svana. Then, she saw it. A wall briefly covered in thick darkness before returning to normal. Creatures of destruction were near.

She looked around and noticed several black blobs, heading towards where the barrier was.

It was time to assist whoever was fighting over there, Svana decided. She looked up to take another good look at the blobs, but what now decorated the area where the blue barrier once stood, were little pieces of night, so alien, so beautiful, and they were spreading to the vicinity accompanied by specks of red and blue. The 'night sky' owned by the one who saved her from peril. Svana started running.

Meanwhile, Jane was tired. She was already injured enough, and restoring the razed battlefield into an ordinary park took a lot of her energy. A sudden pain-silent, but sharp- struck her back. Turning around, Jane saw the same black blobs, too, each with a red eye. As soon as she summoned a crimson scythe, one blob changed form into a sharp, black, serrated disc, and flew at full speed to strike her. The scythe clashed with the disc and deflected it, which morphed back into a spherical blob. But that one was just a trap to buy time for the rest to morph, she

realized, when she saw about fifty dagger-like blades behind it. Jane charged up a red beam to counter them all, but she knew that it was game over for her.

Or so it seemed. All the blades were pushed back into the air in just a blink of an eye. There stood Svana, steel sword in hand, who made it just in time. And she looked pretty surprised seeing who she just saved. Regardless, she began to check the situation with urgency, but in a calm manner, "Jane, what's going on?"

"Spectral storms! I defeated them all a few minutes ago, but there's more now!"

Svana noticed the stab wound on her back, "You're wounded. Let's retreat to a nearby hospital, I'll call in other Aegis fighters to replace us," she suggested.

"I already requested reinforcement, but there are no active fighters available excluding me and you here! We don't have much time!" Jane shouted, setting up another barrier using a magic gem, "And I won't back away from this."

More Spectral storm blobs arrived, "Destroying them by usual means requires slicing them into small pieces, but there are hundreds of them now," Svana said.

"That would take too long! We need a different, quicker option!" Jane exclaimed.

At that moment, Svana knew what she had to do. She pulled out her valorites, the black one transforming into a cloak, "Keep this on," she said, giving the cloak to Jane, "It'll protect you," As for the orange one, she held it in her hand and took a deep breath. She thought about her family, old and new. Then about the enemies of the past, violent and powerful. Not being able to stop them would take her friends and family away from her again. And that, Svana thought, was unacceptable.

Wrath charged up the orange crystal, making it shine so brightly. But the emotion controlled her no more, nor did it cloud her logic and reason. Anger was a different form of empathy, a natural reaction to cruelty. It was evidence that she cared, the charm that burned all her fears away.

An orange sword made its appearance amidst the light, right where the valorite was. She grabbed it, and swung it around proficiently, easily destroying a few blobs in the process. Jane gazed at her valorite sword in awe, while Svana turned around and smiled at the one who she searched for so long, yet was right there in her life, never too far away, "... Thank you," And now, it was time to fight. She

wished to be a Defender to live in a more peaceful future and protect those she loved, after all.

GIST 2023 Fall Short story contest winner