1976. Rani of Shadow

Sunny failed to dodge Rain's punch.

...So, she hurt her hand.

They ascended the stairs silently, but the silence was much less awkward than it had been a few minutes ago. In fact, it was quite comfortable, almost like before... well, if not for the fact that Rain groaned from time to time, cradling her bruised hand.

"What the hell are you made of, stone?"

Sunny looked at her and smiled.

"Actually... yeah, sort of. You see, there was this suit of armor I had, a Memory of something forged by the ruler of the Underwolrd..."

Rain shook her head decisively.

"No, no, stop. I don't want to know!"

He chuckled.

There were some Valor troops stationed at the Nameless Temple, but their camp was outside its walls. Still, they had access to the main hall and the Gateway located there, so Sunny took a roundabout way to the inner sanctum the courtyard beyond.

There, a tall tree stood in absolute darkness, its leaves rustling quietly in the wind.

Sunny led Rain across the black marble plates. As he did, the darkness around them stirred and surged, eventually manifesting into a long bench - sitting down, Sunny leaned back and inhaled deeply.

Rain sat down, too, looking around with curiosity. Her gaze grew a little tense at the sight of the tree, and she studied it cautiously.

Her caution was easy to understand - here in Godgrave, the only trees were those spawned by the abominable jungle. She had seen too many of her comrades being killed and consumed by them, enough so that the sound of rustling leaves had already become an instinctual fear.

Sunny sighed.

"Calm down. I brought it here from the waking world... it is a perfectly mundane tree."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"Well, at least it should be.”

In truth, he wasn't quite sure. After being tended to by Shakti the Fire Keeper, this tree of his had recovered from its former malaise. It was doing quite well now, already having grown a bit taller... too well, even, considering the environment. It was only ever surrounded by shadows, after all.

Sunny honestly had no idea what was happening to his tree.

Hearing his words, Rain seemed to calm down. She looked around once more, and then asked suddenly:

"Wait. If you really are a Saint who rules a Citadel... and my brother... then…”

Her expression became a little strange.

"...Doesn't that make me an actual Legacy? I'm a Legacy?"

Sunny stared at her silently for a few moments.

That was an interesting question, actually.

He was one of the six most powerful humans in the world, did indeed conquer a Citadel with his own two hands, and had even unlocked his Aspect Legacy. More than that, Rain was a direct beneficiary of that Legacy now that she bore the Mark of Shadows.

There was no codified definition of what a Legacy clan was, really. Most of them had been founded by the prominent Awakened of the First Generation - those powerful and lucky enough to survive and thrive in the dire world of the Nightmare Spell. Ruling a Citadel and having a Legacy heirloom were common traits shared by many clans, but not all of them.

In fact, the hierarchy of the Awakened nobility had been shaken in recent years. With so many new Masters and Saints making a name for themselves in the wake of the Chain of Nightmares, some old families had suddenly found themselves inferior to the nameless newcomers.

Old clans fell out of power, and new ones were being established. Take the Han Li clan, for example, who had lost its most promising scion and never managed to produce a Saint- although not entirely forgotten, it had definitely declined, losing all influence.

It was funny to think that Sunny had once been afraid of their retaliation.

He scoffed.

"Girl... if you don't qualify to be a Legacy, then no one in the world can claim that they do."

Rain blinked a couple of times, then suddenly smiled.

"Well, well, well... who would have thought? Turns out I'm just as much of a princess as Tamar is. Ha! That is an entirely new perspective... how should I break the news to her, I wonder!"

She remained silent for a few moments.

"Wait, so what do I call myself? Rain of the Shadow Clan? Rain of Shadow? I mean... Rani of Shadow? That does sound kind of cool…”

Sunny did not answer immediately, since he was stumped himself.

What about him? Was he supposed to call himself Sunny of Shadow? Sunless of Shadow? No, that did not sound even remotely right.

But then again, Neph's grandfather had not called himself Immortal Flame of the Immortal Flame...

He was simply Immortal Flame.

So, Sunny did not have to call himself anything.

"You can call yourself whatever you want. However, do remember that if anyone learns of our relationship, the royal clan will probably capture and execute you as a spy. The Lord of Shadows is a champion of the Sword Domain, after all."

Rain smiled dimmed a little.

"Right. I guess I'll continue playing the peasant and let Tamar be the princess... for a while longer. But then!"

She laughed.

"I'll force her to call me Young Lady Rani for a week straight!"

After that, Rain gave Sunny a curious look, hesitated for a few moments, and said in a tone that was a little more subdued:

"If it was you who fought Princess Revel at Vanishing Lake, then you must have crossed swords with Tamar's dad, as well."

Her words hung in the silence, making the courtyard of the Nameless Temple feel a bit grim.

Sunny knew what Rain had left unsaid. It was that he could have become the murderer of her friend's father... and that fighting on the different sides of a bloody war was not as inconsequential as Sunny tried to make it look.

He shrugged.

"That Citadel was quite large. I only saw him from the distance, actually.”

Then, he looked at her and added:

"It is not your place or responsibility to think about these matters, Rain. You are merely an Awakened... in the grand scheme of the war, your beliefs and actions are insignificant. Not that they don't have value. In any case, you don't have to feel burdened by what is happening to the world. All you can do is follow your principles and do your best."

Sunny turned to the tree, remained silent, and then added, a hint of coldness finding its way into his voice:

"People like me will deal with the rest.”

Rain studied him for a while, then asked neutrally:

"Because your beliefs and actions are significant, unlike mine?"

Sunny smiled darkly and shook his head.

"The only difference between you and me... is that I am strong enough to force my beliefs onto others, and reshape the world with my actions. Strength is the only virtue that matters, in the end. And weakness is the only sin."

She let out a quiet sigh and looked at the tree, as well, listening to the peaceful rustle of its leaves.

After a while, Rain asked:

Why did you bring a tree from the waking world here, anyway?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then smiled.

"Because it is my grave."