2004. Seeds of Rebellion

Sunny was not having the greatest of days.

In fact, he was in quite a grim mood.

Not only was he forced to watch the senseless and wasteful deaths of too many Awakened warriors – who were supposed to be the blade mankind wielded against the Nightmare Spell, not against itself – but his own sister was hopelessly mired in the very epicenter of the slaughter, as well, a hair's breadth away from being killed herself.

Sunny had promised himself not to trample her agency unless there was no other choice. So, he could not simply pull Rain into the shadows and whisk her away to safety... whatever safety looked like, in this godforsaken place. All he could do was remain as alert as possible, ready to interfere at a moment's notice to save her life.

This constant state of alarm and tension was taking its toll.

More than that, he was having the worst luck today.

Why did Rain and the members of her cohort have to clash with the warriors of the White Feather clan, of all people? Worse still, Rain just had to go and encounter Telle of White Feather.

From the moment their brutal duel started, Sunny had to focus his full attention on the two young Awakened. Obviously, he couldn't allow Rain to die... but now, he couldn't allow her enemy to die, either.

Despite having first met Telle many years ago, on the Chained Isles, Sunny did not know her well. Still, he had a good impression of her. Much more importantly, her parents were none other than Tyris and Roan – their daughter could absolutely not be killed on his watch, let alone with his assistance.

So, he waited, getting ready to stop Rain at the last moment – should she win.

Or stop Telle should she lose.

Needless to say, watching them trying to kill each other with all their might was quite nerve-wracking.

In the end, however, Sunny had not been forced to do anything.

Strangely enough, Rain never tried to deliver the fatal blow. He felt a complicated storm of emotions in her just before that, and then a brief moment of striking, unrelenting clarity.

And something else, as well. Something deep and vast, almost... inexorable. But hidden from his senses at the same time.

Both her inexplicable lack of action and this strange emotion confused Sunny to no end. He struggled to understand what could have stopped Rain from at least trying to finish off the deadly enemy... he would have definitely used the precious opportunity himself, and he had taught her better than to lose composure in the middle of a lethal fight.

There was no time to focus on Rain's emotions, though, because almost at the same time, Nephis plummeted from the sky and landed in the middle of the calamitous battlefield like an falling star.

Sunny let out a mental sigh of relief.

‘Just in time.’

He watched her raptly.

His star... was so breathtakingly beautiful.

Even surrounded by blood and tragedy, her radiant light was pure and full of splendor.

Neph's arrival halted the fighting across the entire center of the battlefield. And she...

She did not hold back.

Her flames spread outward, healing countless people – both the soldiers of the Sword Army and the soldiers of the Song Army, not making any distinctions between friend or foe.

Of course, there was still a limit to whom Nephis could save. Her healing flames would only affect those who were connected to her as part of her nascent Domain from a distance – if a person was not integrated into the net of longing she had inspired deep enough, however, she could only affect them through direct touch.

Just as she did with the dying Handmaiden.

Had she sensed Seishan approaching, or had she truly wanted to save the former member of the Dream Army?

Sunny wasn't sure.

He could not help but admire Neph's showmanship, though.

The entire battlefield was enthralled by her and her actions, without a doubt. The seeds of longing were falling into the fertile soil of countless hurting souls, thus expanding the foundation of her future Domain. People needed hope the most in the depths of hell, after all, and this battlefield was no different from a hellish nightmare.

At the same time, the seeds of political intrigue that Cassie, Nephis, and Sunny had sown far in advance were blooming, as well.

Nephis had already established herself as a reluctant participant in the war and the only voice of dissent among the warmongers. Considering her previous feats and her flawless adherence to the noble duty of an Awakened, her reputation was stellar among the warriors of both the Song Domain and the Sword Domain.

And now, that reputation was being cemented in their hearts. The countless soldiers she had saved, and everyone who had seen her saving them, would never forget the grace and mercy of Changing Star of the Immortal Flame... contrasted sharply against the ruthless will of the Sovereigns.

...And the more disillusioned and tired of the war they grew, the easier it would be for them to accept her eventual rebellion.

They might applaud her for betraying her adopted family and engaging in a little bit of royal patricide, even, when the time came.

Even Sunny was having trouble discerning if Neph's actions at the moment were sincere or calculated. They very well could have been both of those things...

He did know that she was putting on at least a bit of an intentional show, however.

That was because Nephis had never attempted healing on such a massive scale before. Not only would saving countless soldiers have consumed a truly terrifying amount of soul essence, but it would have also brought her immeasurable pain.

Her humanity would have been scorched and burned by the agony. It was a miracle that she had managed to keep the suffering from showing on her face, really... in any case, she would not be in a state to show benevolence, let alone compassion.

So, at least some of her actions were a coldly premeditated act.

The soldiers saw her as a beautiful, merciful, and noble savior.

And she was all that – but at the same time, beneath the surface and above all else, she was a ruthless, calculating, and chillingly ambitious destroyer.

A herald of change and ruin.

...She was beautiful in either case, though.

As Nephis spoke to Seishan, challenging the Saints of the Song Domain to battle, Sunny smiled.

The goddess had already descended onto the battlefield.

Now, it was time for the devil to make his entrance, as well.