2096 Island of Peace  
  
After Condemnation was slain and its city was reduced to a black wasteland, nothing stood in the way of the King's plan to pass below the Lesser Crossing and attack the impregnable stronghold of the Song Army from the rear.  
  
Except for the ancient jungle itself.  
  
The biggest threat had been eliminated, but the Hollows still remained a dark and deadly hell. The King and his Saints still had to clear a safe path for the soldiers, and that was a task of a much greater scale.  
  
Various units of the Sword Army were secretly pulled back from both siege camps, starting to clear a subterranean pathway from Vanishing Lake to the entrance to the First Rib Hollow. No matter how fast they worked, it was still going to take them days, if not weeks, to ensure safe passage for the actual invasion force.  
  
They were protected by the flying swords of the King, which moved like rivers above the cleared path, sometimes diving to the ground to eliminate unseen threats.  
  
The Saints, meanwhile, were taming the surrounding jungle — hunting down ancient predators that dwelled beneath the scarlet canopy, uprooting man-eating trees, and eradicating swarms of abominable vermin.  
  
Sunny had rarely spent such a prolonged period of time in the Hollows before, and all of it — the appalling scarlet jungle, the dim twilight of the great bone cavern, the torrents of swords flowing like torrents of steel high above — was starting to feel like a feverish nightmare.  
  
But no matter how nightmarish the Hollows were, what was happening on the surface seemed far more dreadful.  
  
There, the siege of the Two Crossings continued, with tired soldiers losing more of what little sanity they had left with each passing day.  
  
The fearsome strongholds of the Song Army had already repelled countless assaults, stubbornly refusing to fall. No matter how the tactics of the besieging army evolved, the defenders never surrendered the ramparts. No matter how terribly the fortifications were damaged, they were repaired and reinforced each time.   
  
The white bone was painted rust-red by blood, and the losses of both armies steadily continued to mount.  
  
The Saints were forced to play a passive role in the slaughter, since neither of the Supremes could afford to lose any more of them to the ravages of war… unless there was no other choice, at least.   
  
Strangely enough, doing nothing was far more demoralizing than risking their lives in battle would have been.  
  
The Two Crossing had become a purgatory.  
  
…On one of these ominous days, Nephis returned to the Ivory Tower after receiving the report on the casualties of the latest battle. Her expression was somber, and there were cold white flames burning in her beautiful eyes.  
  
Instead of returning to her chambers immediately, she went to a dark hall where dozens of luminous Memories burned, surrounded by solemn shadows.  
  
These Memories belonged to the Fire Keepers, and had been left here to indicate that their masters were still alive. Once an Awakened died, their Memories were destroyed — so, every time an enchanted lantern disappeared, it most likely signified the death of one of her warriors.  
  
There had been almost fifty luminous Memories in the hall once. But now, a handful of them were gone, extinguished forever.  
  
Nephis spent a long time looking at the levitating lanterns, her face motionless.  
  
That was where Sunny found her after a while.  
  
He glanced at the shining Memories, then walked over and placed his hands on her shoulders, massaging them gently.  
  
"How bad were the casualties yesterday?"  
  
Nephis let out a heavy sigh, then raised her hand and placed it on one of his own.  
  
"As bad as we expected."  
  
She lingered for a while, looking at the lanterns.  
  
"...You know, there were more than a thousand people living in the Dark City before I came there."  
  
Her voice grew a little lower.  
  
"But by the time I was done with it, there were only a hundred."  
  
And now, there were a few less.  
  
Sunny was not sure if she was reminiscing about the fate of the Dreamer Army and the burden of leadership she had taken upon on the Forgotten Shore, or the responsibility for the Sword Army — and the Song Army, really — she was carrying at the moment. Perhaps it was both, and the parallel between the two.  
  
Her shoulders were strong, but even Nephis felt oppressed by the weight of it all, sometimes.   
  
Who wouldn't?  
  
He embraced her from behind.   
  
"There would have been none left without you."  
  
And there would not be, perhaps.   
  
Nephis leaned back a little and sighed.   
  
"I know. But it doesn't make it easy."  
  
Sunny remained still for a while, holding her softly, then drew away and smiled.   
  
"Come. I prepared dinner, and it is waiting for you impatiently."  
  
The dishes he had prepared were all her favorites, of course… not that Nephis was very passionate about food. Still, that indifference of hers was slowly succumbing under his influence, so recently, she had been showing glimpses of enthusiasm about this and that.   
  
Sunny led Nephis to the highest level of the Ivory Tower, where a scrumptious dinner was set out beautifully on the wooden table. They enjoyed it in an atmosphere that was not quite peaceful, considering the misery of the siege camp below, but close to it.  
  
Despite everything, they made an effort not to discuss the war. That was somewhat of an unspoken rule instituted by Sunny — he did not want them to be the kind of people who could only talk about pragmatic matters, so they simply chatted about whatever came to their minds during the meals.  
  
After all, Master Sunless was supposed to be Neph's small island of peace in the tumultuous waters of her dire life. If he could give her a few short moments of respite from the strenuous burdens she carried, then his job was done.  
  
Which was why what he was about to tell her was hard to say.  
  
Once they finished dinner, Sunny looked at Nephis, hesitated for a few moments, and then sighed.  
  
"...I have to leave, for a short while."