2178 Sea of Yearning Stars  
  
At the same time as the Lord of Shadows descended into the Hollows, Master Sunless ascended the steps of the Tower of Hope.  
  
The Ivory Island drifted above the siege camр of the Sword Army, seven torn chains hanging below it аnd rustling in the wind. There was no need to land the flying Citadel and anchor it securely, since Tyris of White Feather was nearby, keeping the veil of radiant clouds intact.  
  
Below it, the vast encampment sprawled like a dark stain on the white surface of the ancient bone. Countless tents stood in long rows, with more permanent structures towering between them here and there. Myriads of soldiers were busy preparing for the next battle or seeking shelter from the sweltering heat.  
  
Some sat motionlessly with crude blindfolds covering their eyes, tired from the everlasting radiance of day and longing for the soothing touch of darkness. Some were simply too numb to move.  
  
Across the chasm from the vast camp, the Greater Crossing Stronghold stood like a rugged cliff. The battered walls of the impregnable fortress were covered in endless layers of soot and dried blood.  
  
The patchwork of repairs held them together, but in some places, the ramparts seemed to sink under their own weight or tilt precariously, marred with numerous deep wounds.  
  
An unbearable miasma rose from the depths of the dark chasm, which had become a collective grave for countless soldiers and enthralled Nightmare Creatures.  
  
Above it all...  
  
Saint Nephis — Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan — stood on the balcony of the Ivory Tower, observing the camp and the stronghold with a detached expression on her breathtakingly beautiful face.  
  
Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes.  
  
But even with her eyes closed, she could still feel them.  
  
Tiny sparks of longing shining like countless stars in the darkness, merging into a great celestial bonfire.  
  
The heavens were burning.  
  
Nephis was burning, as well... she was flame itself. All those stars were connected to her, inspired by her. Bathing her in their light, and scorching her with their fire.  
  
The waning flames were growing stronger because of her.  
  
It was easier to sense them with her eyes closed.  
  
The souls illuminating the darkness were her nascent Domain.  
  
Here in Godgrave, under the walls of the bloodstained fortress, these souls were shining especially bright. The siege had been a harrowing, numbing, never-ending nightmare... one would think that those who survived would abandon themselves to hopelessness. But instead, their longing was only growing more intense, more demanding... scorching.  
  
After all, those who were desperate were the ones who hoped desperately.  
  
Their hope had been undergoing a change as of late — or perhaps it was Nephis who was changing.  
  
Before, her nascent Domain was simply there. Her souгce element. She felt a connection to the souls burning with the spark of longing, and could draw spirit essence from them.  
  
But now, it was as if the sea of yearning stars had grown so vast that it possessed a mass. That mass... was pulling at her. Calling her. Demanding from her that their hopes were answered.  
  
It was almost painful.  
  
It was almost like the Call of Nightmare.  
  
Maddening.  
  
Nephis sighed.  
  
'How do I completе it?'  
  
She was tired, frustrated... and vexed.  
  
The battles continued. The soldiers kept dying. She had even failed to protect her Fire Keepers... a few of those who survived the Forgotten Shore were now gone.  
  
And yet, Supremacy still remained unattainable.  
  
Everything was in place, and yet something was lacking.  
  
Nephis had prepared the foundation of her future Domain... if anything, it was overdeveloped, by now. Her source element was thriving, and her connection to it was both deep and vast.  
  
Her Transcendent Battle Art was refined to nearly a flawless state.  
  
Her willpower was firm. That had been the easiest part, really... after all, if Nephis lacked willpower, she would have crumbled the first time she experienced the excruciating pain of her Flaw. Every step she took, every battle she fought, every spark of flame she summoned was an act of overcoming herself.  
  
She had never been shy about forcing her will upon the world, either. She sharpened her will against her own soul and used it to cut existence. From the very start, her goal had been to reshape the world according to her… she already knew how to use it in order to fuel her powers.  
  
She had learned sorcery, and thus knew the feeling of bending the world to her whims all too well. At its core, the act of invoking True Names of things to affect them was no different from exerting her will upon them, because the Sorcery of Names could not work without being fueled by the willpower of the sorcerer.  
  
She had a talent for it.  
  
It was almost as if Nephis was custom-made to become a Sovereign.  
  
She had even changed her ways and opened her arms to another, exploring passion and longing with her own heart and body. That was a strange and unexpected journey, as well.  
  
But she still did not know how to galvanize her source element and ignite the sea of yearning stars into a blazing pyre.  
  
There was no trick to it. She simply had to will her Domain to be, but her will could not reach the countless flames of longing. It simply passed through them, unable to exert any influence.  
  
'An act of defiance...'  
  
Wasn't she defiant enough?  
  
She had defied impossible odds numerous times. She was defying the Sovereigns... she was defying the Nightmare Spell itself.  
  
What else could she do?  
  
Nephis opened her eyes and looked at the siege camp of the Sword Army.  
  
A sigh escaped from her lips.  
  
Time was running out...  
  
At that moment, she heard the sound of light steps and turned around to see who was coming.  
  
Her mysterious lover stepped onto the balcony and looked at her, a genuine smile illuminating his enchanting face.  
  
A few moments later, he spoke in a pleasant voice:  
  
"I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?"  
  
Nephis lingered for a moment, involuntary smiling back.  
  
"Let's start with the bad news."  
  
He sighed.  
  
"I am quite certain that Anvil will accelerate the assault on the Lesser Crossing. It might very well start by the end of the day."  
  
Nephis froze, momentarily stunned by the implication.  
  
She frowned.  
  
"What is the good news, then?"  
  
Sunny studied her for a bit, then chuckled.  
  
"The news of Cassie's death was greatly exaggerated."  
  
Nephis blinked.  
  
'Huh?'  
  
"Wait... what? Cassie's death?"  
  
He coughed.  
  
"Oh... right. Actually, there's also the third kind of news. The weird news..."