2249 Depths of Despair  
Not long before that…  
Sid fell to the ground, blood pouring down the torn, bent metal of her breastplate. It was flowing out of her mouth, as well, but she was more concerned about the armor… the Memory was on its last breath, ready to collapse into a rain of sparks.  
It was a shame, too, because the charming enchanter, Master Sunless, had personally improved it for her. More importantly, she was wearing very little under the armor. Becoming one of the Queen's dead puppets would already be bad enough, but shambling around the battlefield both dead and while wearing nothing but her underwear seemed simply mortifying.  
'Ah… that'd be embarrassing…'  
She reached for her sword and looked up, knowing full well that she would not escape the Nightmare Creature that had thrown her to the ground.  
The towering beast loomed above her, foamy saliva flowing between its rotting fangs. Before it could bite down, however, a slender figure in a tattered red dress appeared between Sid and the abomination, stubbornly holding her ground. The wavy dagger in her hand seemed like a toy compared to the immense size of the appalling creature.  
'Felise, you fool…'  
Was she hellbent on dying together?  
Sid finally grasped the hilt of her sword, wondering if she would be able to stand up. The two of them were probably finished…  
They would make for a couple of lovely corpses, though. So… there was a bright side to anything.  
Using the sword as a cane, Sid groaned and rose to her feet.  
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Some distance away, Ray and Fleur were desperately trying to survive in the sea of abominations. They had lost Rani and Tamar in the chaos of the battle a while ago, and the Nightmare Creatures around them were not something a couple of Awakened could fight.  
Ray had thought about trying to escape by hiding himself, but he could not take Fleur with him… and he would not abandon her, either, so the two of them were barely staing alive.  
...Staying alive for now.  
At some point,they found themselves protecting the backs of two unfamiliar Masters — judging by their age and armor, the Masters seemed to be Legacies from the Sword Army side. Neither of the young knights was in good shape, but one of them seemed barely alive, bleeding profusely from a deep cut on his head, mumbling nonsense, and asking for mercy.  
"Hey, Mercy… you… you saw it, right?"  
The other Master grabbed his friend and pulled him back, saving the young man from the claws of a hideous abomination.  
"Saw what?!"  
The bleeding knight somehow managed to behead the Nightmare Creature and staggered upright.  
"That… that vulgar scoundrel! That profligate lecher, Master Sunless! He's... he's the Lord of Shadows! I knew it. I told you! He has been deceiving Lady Nephis this whole time, the sinister rake!"  
The other knight — Mercy — looked at him with concern.  
"Were you hit on the head, Tristan? Wait, don't answer that… you were. Anyway, there is no way…"  
Tristan shook his head, paying no attention to the blood streaming down his face.  
"No… no, I saw it clearly! He is!"  
At that moment, Fleur let out a scream and fell. Ray swayed, too, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. A terrifying, maddening presence enveloped their minds, and a new Nightmare Creature appeared in front of them — this one more dreadful than all the rest.  
A Great One.  
Mercy paled, and Tristan raised his sword weakly. Neither stood a chance in the battle against a Great abomination, especially not wounded and exhausted as they were. But what else could they do?  
Simply moving under the gaze of the terrifying being was a difficult task, while the being could obliterate the four of them in one move.  
All hope seemed lost…  
Until something massive suddenly fell from the sky, flattening the Great Nightmare Creature.  
It was…  
Ray blinked, doubting his eyes.  
...It was a quaint brick cottage with glass windows and a wooden porch.  
'Huh?'  
The bloodied nightmare creature stirred beneath the cottage,sharp pieces of bone protruding through its hide. Before it could escape, though, a terrifying maw opened in the middle of the brick wall, and the cottage bit down on the Great One, tearing its head off with countless sharp fangs.  
'...What?'  
Ray, Fleur, Mercy, and Tristan froze, staring at the terrifying cottage with stunned expressions. For a moment, they even forgot about the sea of abominations surrounding them.  
It was then that the door of the cottage opened, and a petite young woman appeared on the porch, floating a few centimeters above the wooden boards.  
She looked at them with a pale face, and then shouted:  
"What are you waiting for?! Get inside if you want to live, fools!"  
Ray stared at the petite floating beauty for a moment, then looked behind her and shuddered at the morbid scene. The spacious room on the other side of the door was littered with bodies, blood smeared across the floor. It was like the belly of an insatiаble, man-eating monster.  
He was terrified.  
'W—what a bizarre abomination…'  
Most chillingly of all, some bodies were still moving, suggesting that they had been swallowed whole.  
No, wait. Those weren't bodies… they were dozens of injured soldiers, slumped on the floor in exhaustion and treating their wounds!  
Ray lingered for a moment.  
Then, he grabbed Fleur into a princess carry and jumped onto the porch.  
'Ah, whatever! I don't care!'  
The two dazed Masters dawdled a little, then followed while muttering curses with shaky voices.  
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Somewhere else, Rain was fighting side by side with Tamar and the Feather Knight — whose name was Telle, apparently. Things were not going great for the two great armies, and they were not going great for the three of them, either.  
Especially for Rain, who felt suffocated by her inability to kill.  
And yet, and yet…  
She could sense it. The nameless feeling swelling in her chest, becoming clearer and clearer.  
It was her awakening Aspect.  
It felt as if a seal placed on her soul was slowly crumbling, ready to collapse entirely. The terror of the calamitous battle, the pain and indignation she felt while witnessing all this senseless destruction, the desperate desire to prevent all these lives from being wasted…  
Perhaps all she had to unseal her Aspect was find the name for the emotion she felt.  
But the correct words were not coming, as if they did not exist in human language.  
And the three of them were on the verge of being destroyed, themselves…  
A hulking monstrosity had just torn an Ascended knight apart, and was now barreling toward them, frenzy burning in its bloodshot eyes.  
Rain paled and raised her tachi, knowing that its blade would not even be able to cut the monster's hide.  
In the next moment, however, a fearsome figure of silvery black steel appeared from the darkness, its eyes blazing with infernal red flames. Four clawed hands reached for the charging abomination, piercing its body and raising the massive creature into the air. Then, with a revolting squelch, the Nightmare Creature was torn into four bleeding pieces.  
As blood flowed onto the four-armed fiend's dark carapace and evaporated, it turned its fiery gaze down and stared directly at Rain.  
The fiend's hellish maw opened… and a grating voice resounded from within.  
…Addressing her.  
"Protect… auntie…"  
Rain blinked.  
Huh?  
'A—auntie? Me?'  
She stared at the towering fiend, stunned.  
But… but she was barely twenty-one…