2435 Full Moon  
  
Remembering something he already knew was a peculiar experience, but Sunny was more rattled by learning all over again what Aiko had done at the gates of Bastion.  
  
He gritted his teeth.  
  
'Aiko. taught Little Ling a curse word?!'  
  
What was she thinking about?  
  
Granted, she had also uncovered a dire truth about the Skinwalker, plunged the entire Human Domain into the jaws of martial law for a couple of weeks, and prevented multiple cities from either sustaining awful losses or falling entirely. But that was beside the point!  
  
'He's only six, for Spell's sake! What kind of vulgar good - for - nothings is she hanging around with, to use strong language in front of a child?!'  
  
He seethed for a few seconds, then took a deep breath and shook his head.  
  
'No, it doesn't matter. I'll deal with Aiko later - there are more urgent matters I must attend to at the moment.'  
  
Grimacing, Sunny nodded with determination and continued on his way.  
  
He only took a few steps, though, when another memory came to the surface of his mind.  
  
Sunny froze.  
  
"Nephis did wh. actually, never mind. That is exactly what Nephis would do. Why am I even surprised?"  
  
Letting out a hollow chuckle, Sunny glanced up and then resumed walking.  
  
"So, she went fishing in the lake without me, huh? How heartless."  
  
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Several weeks earlier, Nephis was sitting at the edge of the Ivory Island, watching a sea of stars shimmer in the dark sky above Bastion. Tonight, just like the previous night, parts of the city were illuminated by the glow of electric street lights.  
  
She was glad to see her people taking another step toward prosperity here in the Dream Realm. But because of it, the stars seemed dimmer than they had been before. That filled her with a faint sense of regret.  
  
The stars might have become more distant, but the pale disc of the full moon slowly traveling across the surface of the tranquil lake looked closer than it had ever been before.  
  
Tonight was the third and last night when the full moon would rise above Bastion this month. For these three nights, sailing on the lake was forbidden, and people were kept away from its shore.  
  
That was because when the full moon rose, the boundary between reality and illusion grew thin here in Bastion, and the horror imprisoned in the ruins of the true castle strained to exert its dreadful influence from beyond the reflections. So, Nephis had to stay in the city during the full moon to guard it. Strangely enough, for her, these three dangerous nights were usually a time of rest and recuperation. She spent most of her time on the battlefield, leading the forces of humanity against the tide of nightmares threatening to swallow them all.  
  
Despite the hidden presence of a Cursed Demon, the sight of a full moon promised peace and serenity. Granted. she wasn't used to spending these moonlit nights alone.  
  
Sunny was usually with her, either by her side or hiding in her shadow. Nephis had grown used to his presence without even knowing it - now that he was gone, his absence felt strangely unnatural.  
  
She was surprised to find herself missing him, even if he had only been gone for a day.  
  
'Who would have thought I'd find myself feeling these emotions one day?'  
  
It was peculiar, indeed. Not at all like her.  
  
But it wasn't an unwelcome feeling. In fact, the sweet pain of missing someone made her feel hopeful. It made her believe that there was some life left, still, in her scorched and arid heart. So, she tried to enjoy the unfamiliar sense of faint melancholy.  
  
Sunny had been forced to leave because of unforeseen - albeit not entirely unexpected - complications in Ravenheart. The incarnation he had sent there, as well as Kai, was now missing. More than that, a Cursed Tyrant and two Beasts had escaped a prison made for them by the Demon of Dread. only to end up in another seconds later, thanks to Seishan's quick thinking.  
  
Nobody knew what would escape the eerie jade board next, though, so the Sovereigns had to make their way to the Jade Palace. Sunny had gone first, taking Cassie with him. Nephis herself was going to join them once the full moon was over.  
  
'Tomorrow.'  
  
Tomorrow, she would see him again.  
  
Looking at the reflection of the moon shining on the surface of the lake, Nephis wondered if she would feel something then.  
  
Would she be happy? Or simply pleased?  
  
Would she feel nothing at all?  
  
Would the peculiar sorrow in her heart go away?  
  
At that moment, the waters below rippled. The pale disc suddenly seemed distorted and eerie, gazing at her from below like a round eye plaguеd by a white cataract.  
  
The lake stirred, and a series of waves rolled outward, climbing higher and higher up the shore.  
  
Nephis tilted her head, watching it all transpire somberly.  
  
'So, it chose tonight to show its hand.'  
  
What an unfortunate coincidence it was. So unfortunate, in fact, that Nephis was inclined to believe that it was no coincidence at all. Had the Cursed Demon waited until only one of the Sovereigns was left in the city to try and escape?  
  
In any case, the timing could not have been worse.  
  
Humanity was drowning in calamities, surrounded by peril and enemies on all sides.  
  
In the waking world, more and more Gates were opening each month, and the population centers were barely holding on against the flood of Nightmare Creatures.  
  
The Eastern Quadrant was balancing on the verge of an utter disaster. The war against the Skinwalker was not going well - the infection was spreading, and humans had to retreat further and further, abandoning their land, settlements, and entire cities.  
  
In the Dream Realm, the hunt for new Citadels was proving to be less fruitful than she had hoped. Legions of Awakened were clearing the interior of the two vast enclaves from abominations while simultaneously exploring the far reaches to the east, the frozen hells to the west, and the dreadful waters of the misty ocean to the south. while in the north, a legion of shadows was doing the same in the scorched tangle of a burned forest.  
  
Mordret's location was still unknown. Asterion still remained a worrisome mystery.  
  
And now, this.  
  
All of this was pressing down on Nephis, pushing her to the ground. The weight of the entire world. two worlds, even. was resting on her shoulders, making her struggle to keep herself from falling to her knees.  
  
And then there were the quiet whispers of the many souls burning like stars in the vast expanse of her Domain. Their longing washed over her day and night, its pressure even more overwhelming. unbearable, at times.  
  
Nephis pursed her lips.  
  
Sunny was not by her side. Neither was Cassie. Kai was missing, and Effie had gone to the Western Quadrant to deal with the Category Four Gate crisis there.  
  
There was no one Nephis could trust to have her back in a battle against a Cursed Demon here in Bastion. not tonight, at least.  
  
So.  
  
She would have to face it alone. She would have to carry the weight and keep walking forward, one arduous step at a time.  
  
Letting out a quiet sigh, Nephis slowly stood up and glanced at the dark lake with white flames dancing in her eyes.  
  
Two breathtaking white wings manifested behind her, chasing away the darkness of the night.  
  
".It is just a Cursed Demon."  
  
What was there to worry about?  
  
An aloof, distant smile twisted her lips.  
  
Summoning the Blessing, she took a step forward and plunged into the darkness.'