1746 Just War

After Sunny was Introduced to the general shape of the plot, more technical details had to be discussed. The war was approaching swiftly, and at least three of the six conspirators would have to participate in the bloodshed directly.

The other three could be drawn into the deadly game between the two Sovereigns, as well. Both the government and the House of Night were desperately trying to maintain neutrality... but it was unknown if the Great Clans would cross the line in exerting pressure, thus making at least one of the neutral sides an accomplice in the Domain War.

Jet seemed a little troubled.

"Our position was more or less stable before. But now, with that damned assassination attempt... I don't know. The situation is unclear."

She glanced at Cassie and raised an eyebrow.

The blind seer seemed distracted for a moment, then said quietly:

"The news is spreading like wildfire, both in the waking world and in the Dream Realm. By now, it's all people are talking about. Everyone is outraged, of course... even the Legacy Clans are incensed. The situation is much more fiery in the Sword Domain - incendiary, even - but the Song Domain is reacting badly, too, Neph's influence transcends borders.”

Jet frowned.

"That was fast. Too fast, even"

Cassle nodded.

"Someone has been prepared. They are adding oil to the fire."

As everyone fell silent, Nephis said in an even tone:

"I wonder... who is responsible, this time."

Jet looked at her, lingered for a few moments, and smiled crookedly.

"It wasn't your own performance?"

Nephis frowned slightly, not exactly offended by her words, but seemingly displeased. Her answer was short:

"No."

Sunny listened with interest.

Actually, he had considered that the whole thing was staged by Cassie, as well. That would be in line with both her goal and her cunning. However, a few things didn't add up.

Nephis leaned back and sighed.

"My first thought was that it had been planned by Morgan. But it's not really her style... if Morgan was behind the assassination, there would have been countless victims among the government soldiers. She is always thorough, after all."

Jet crossed her arms, considering. Eventually, she simply shook her head and said with a hint of frustration in her volce:

"Then who the hell did it? It couldn't have really been Song, could it?"

Kai seemed troubled, as well. He remained silent for a while before saying cautiously;

"Actually, it could have been. Princess Morgan was right when she said that there aren't a lot of archers in the world who can pull off something like that. The two prime suspects, coincidentally, are from the Song Domain. One is Silent Stalker. The other is Dar of the Maharana clan."

Sunny smiled darkly behind the mask.

‘That guy.’

He had considered Dar of the Maharana clan, as well.

The man had an eerie ability to hit targets from a great distance, and was fond of using oversized arrows to boot. Sunny had brushed sides with him during the Dreamscape Tournament, almost catching a few of those arrows himself. Later, they crossed swords in the elimination rounds, where the Legacy scion was cut down by Mongrel.

He had not left a good impression. Maharana was one of the vassal clans of Song, too...

Effie scratched the back of her head.

"Dar of the Maharana clan? Last I heard of him, he was a Master. Where is he now?"

Cassie answered a moment later, effortlessly pulling the information out of her head:

"He is presumably still a Master. Although... no one has seen or heard of him in the last six months. He could have challenged the Third Nightmare and Transcended in secret. Or died trying."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then spoke in his usual aloof tone:

"I can tell you who is behind the assassination attempt."

He had not been certain before, but now, the pieces fit together too perfectly.

The rest of them looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

Sunny leaned forward a little.

"Your instinct was correct, Lady Nephis. It was indeed Morgan... well, or at least Clan Valor. Of course, they never really intended to kill you."

Nephis nodded.

"That much is clear. No one who would want to kill me is stupid enough to try so half-heartedly. But why are you pointing at Clan Valor?"

He grimaced behind the mask.

"The assailant had to know your schedule, They also had to know that the Nightmare Gate would lure you into the open. Of course, the sniper could have tried to hit you on a crowded street, or even through several walls... but that park was too convenient of a location for that kind of attack to be a coincidence. I am pretty sure that Morgan knew about the Gate in advance and chose the location of our meeting accordingly - 1 assumed that she wanted to gauge my power, but she simply wanted to deliver you to the Impact zone."

Sunny paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, actually, it is more likely that she wanted both. The Princess of War is very efficient, after all... her actions rarely pursue only one goal.”

Effie frowned.

"Why do it, though?"

He stared at her silently for a moment.

"As I've said, Morgan's actions tend to accomplish several goals at the same time. So, why stage an attempted assassination on her little sister? The first reason is quite obvious, since you and your fellow government representatives are suffering the outcome right now. It is to discredit the government and gain leverage against it. Soul Reaper mentioned that your position has been destabilized... by playing the indignation card and acting offended on behalf of their adopted daughter, the elders of Valor are now in a position to put pressure on you to join their side,"

Jet chuckled.

"Just that much leverage won't be enough. Well... most likely.”

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. But that is only because discrediting the government is merely a secondary goal of the entire affair."

Kal frowned, then asked him somberly:

"What is the primary goal, then?"

Sunny sighed behind the mask.

"You know, there are a lot of nasty rumors flying around the Song Domain about Clan Valor. How people from the Sword Domain are monopolizing resource shipments from the waking world to make their lives more miserable. How most of the elders of Valor, including the King of Swords himself, have been taken by the Skinwalker. How people there are suffering under the tyranny of corrupt Legacies, and cry out to the heavens for help."

He leaned back and shrugged.

"Of course, plenty of such rumors are spreading about Clan Song in the Sword Domain, as well. The Queen of Worms is a rotten fiend, she kills innocent people to enslave them into her undead army, the Song sisters feed on human blood stuff like that. All these rumors are false, naturally... well, except that last one. That one might actually be true. In any case, they are carefully prepared and spread by both sides, for a single purpose"

An expression of disgust appeared on Kal's face. He remained silent for a few moments, then uttered through gritted teeth:

“...Justification."

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. The Great Clans need to warm up the populace to the Idea of war. Not only the masses, but also the Awakened warriors who will be fighting on the frontlines. I am sure there is a version of it for the vassal clans, as well, not that those have a lot of choice when it comes to obeying the Sovereigns. So... for those of you who are fond of history... you must know what casus belli is."

The faces of several people in the room darkened. Effie coughed.

"Casus belli... sure. We all know it, of course. But to those of us who don't... can you explain? Please?"

Sunny was tempted to tell her to ask her husband

for an explanation, but held himself back. Instead, he said in an emotionless tone:

"Sure. There is not much to explain. Casus belli is just a fancy term for justification. An official reason given when starting a war. An assassination of a royal is more than enough reason to drown the world in blood. In fact, this exact scenario was used before to do just that."

He chuckled coldly,

"Honestly, I would have expected Valor to actually kill one of their Saints in order to have a more solid claim. But either someone among them is growing soft, or they can't allow themselves to lose even a single Transcendent before the war. In any case... someone attempts to kill Changing Star, humanity's favorite Saint, and both of the main suspects just happen to be from the Song Domain. One of them is even conveniently unavailable for questioning. This is more than enough ground to spin a pretty tale."

Sunny sighed.

"As for the fact that none of the government soldiers had died, which is unlike how ruthless Morgan usually acts... that is the result of a shrewd calculation, as well. If the purpose of the assassination attempt is to make Clan Valor look like the wronged party, then wouldn't it be counterproductive to make the government suffer more losses than Clan Valor did? Who would look like the true victim then? So, it was all part of the plan."

His cold voice echoes in the room, sounding more than a little bit sinister. As everyone was digesting his words silently, Sunny laughed.

"Well... at least that is how I would have done it. With more flair, of course."

Nephis looked at him somberly, not saying anything.

Eventually, though, she spoke in an even tone:

"So.., they had someone pretend to try and kill me while using the method that would point at someone serving Ki Song. This gives them the ammunition they need to both declare war and maintain the illusion of righteousness... eventually. And, as an added bonus, they even get a chance to pressure the government into making concessions, or even joining their side entirely."

He nodded.

"More or less."

Nephis sighed and looked away.

She remained silent for a while, then said quietly:

"Well... good. It plays into our hand, actually. If I become the catalyst for the start of the war, it would only be logical for me to be the one to end it."

At that moment, Cassie spoke, her voice a little grim:

"If they are already moving so openly, then it seems that we have even less time than we thought. I'm afraid... that some of our plans will have to be accelerated, or even abandoned entirely.

Sunny scowled behind the mask.

‘Yeah. Like me forging a sword for Nephis, I doubt I can make it in time... can I?'

Nephis gritted her teeth.

"It has been a long time coming. All we can do is prepare ourselves the best we can. When Song and Valor go to war.. the only side that shall win is us She looked at the people gathered at the room, her gaze settling on Sunny.”

Suddenly, a faint smile appeared on her face.

"Or, we'll die. Lord Shadow, that favor I owe you... you'd better call it in soon. You might not get the chance later."

He crossed his arms and stared back at her.

‘Who gave you permission to die?’

Sunny smiled slightly behind the mask, then said in a cold tone:

"...You are too weak right now. Become stronger first."

Nephis remained silent for a moment, then chuckled.

"Alright. If you insist that I become stronger... it seems that I have no other choice. I will."

Soon after that, the secret meeting ended. The members of the cohort left - some openly, some in secret. Sunny himself simply crossed the border between the realms, returning to the Nameless Temple. There was a lot for him to do.

Outside the manor of the Immortal Flame clan...

The engines of war were churning, and the world was moving on.