1840 Bathed in Starlight

High in the sky above Bastion, a beautiful island was hovering, shrouded in the veil of clouds. Illuminated by pale starlight, a white pagoda stood upon it, piercing the heaven.

Nobody noticed when the flying island started to move.

Not only because it was dark, and most of the citizens were already asleep, but also because a perfect illusory copy of the island remained in its place when it did.

Due to the attempted assassination of Changing Star, Clan Valor gained leverage over the government. They used some of that leverage to summon Saint Thane, a government Transcendent who held power over dreams and illusions, to Bastion. His task was to hide the fact that the Ivow Island had left the sky above Mirror Lake.

In truth, it was heading for Godgrave.

Before that, however, the flying island made a stop.

Descending from the great heights, it reached the shore of the lake and landed on the water. A tall wave rose, flooding a few streets that were closest to the shore for a few moments.

Among them was a quiet street where a cozy brick cottage stood.

At that moment, something bizarre happened.

The cottage stirred, and then rose, revealing countless metal legs that were attached to its bottom. Turning around, it trotted to the shore and then nonchalantly dove into the water.

The cottage swam surprisingly well for a brick building.

Covering the distance to the island swiftly, then it climbed ashore, shook energetically, and then looked around in confusion... it was as if it was unsure where to plop down.

Eventually, the bizarre creature simply lowered itself to the ground where it stood.

As soon as it did, the island slowly rose from the water and moved north.

Soaring into the sky to hide behind the clouds, it flew above the sleeping city... and left it behind.

At that time, the door of the cottage opened, and a young man with alabaster skin and raven—black hair walked out of it.

Sunny stepped on the soft soil of the Ivory Island, inhaled deeply, and smiled.

"What a beautiful sight."

Nephis was standing a few steps away, looking at him calmly.

She responded to his smile with one of her own.

"Ivory Island is indeed beautiful at night. Welcome."

He looked at her silently for a while, then shook his head softly.

"I wasn't talking about the island."

Neph's eyes widened a little.

"Oh..."

She hesitated for a few moments, then looked away in embarrassment and gestured to the dark expanse of emerald grass.

"Would you like to take a walk?"

Sunny nodded with a smile.

"Sure."

He offered her his arm, and when she took it, asked quietly:

"Once we reach Godgrave, where do you want to go? I’m afraid there are no beaches there... but I can still prepare a picnic."

Nephis chuckled.

"We won’t reach it for a while. There’s plenty of time to decide."

They walked silently side by side, eventually reaching the edge of the island. Below, a sea of clouds was shining with reflected starlight. Above, a myriad of stars was burning in the distant sky.

Neph's eyes were like two radiant stars, as well.

But much more beautiful.

She studied the night sky for a while, then sighed.

“I... find myself in doubt, now that we are leaving for war. It happens sometimes, albeit rarely. And I can’t really reveal that side of myself to anyone, because my strength is their strength. But I am afraid sometimes, too. Can we really win? Can we really defeat the Sovereigns? Even if we do... what then?"

A fragile smile appeared on her lips.

"Of course, I always banish these doubts, since I can't afford them. You just... caught me before I could steel myself, tonight."

Sunny looked at her silently for a while.

Eventually, he smiled.

"Of course, we can win. Of course, we will defeat the Sovereigns. And everything that comes after them."

Nephis faced him, her ivory face bathed in starlight.

"Why are you so sure?"

Sunny chuckled.

When he spoke, his voice was calm and confident.

"Because that is our will. Who dares to stop us?"

She was standing so close that he could hear her heartbeat... and his own.

The stars were shining in the lightless sky, illuminating the world with soft radiance.

In that radiance, her lips looked even softer.

Only war awaited them ahead.

…Placing his hands on her shoulders, he gently pulled her in and leaned fonivard.

His heart was beating like a caged beast.

When their lips touched gently, it was as though the whole world was engulfed with heat.

And Sunny wasn’t satisfied with that gentle touch. He was hungry for more. Wrapping his hands around her, he pulled her closer, until their bodies were pressed tightly against each other, with no space for anything except passion between them.

Nephis slowly raised her hands and embraced him, as well, responding to his kiss.

At the same time, their kiss grew more passionate, as if both had been starving for each other's lips for a long, long time.

And, intoxicated by the taste of her...

Sunny finally felt complete.

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Somewhere else, a ruined fortress bathed in the light of a shattered moon. In the remnants of its main keep, a tall dais stood. There was no throne and no altar on the dais... instead, there was an iron anvil, and a man who stood in front of it, swinging a heavy hammer.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a lean, but mighty physique. Powerful muscles rolled under his glistening skin, and his sweat was evaporating in the unbearable heat of a crucible. His bare torso was painted in shades of vermilion by its angry light.

The man had dark hair and a thick, but dignified beard. The expression on his noble face was harsh and austere, and his grey eyes were as cold as tempered steel.

There was a sword taking shape under his hammer on the iron anvil. Eventually, the man put the hammer aside and quenched the incandescent blade in water. The reflection on its surface convulsed when it was pierced by the sharp tip, and was then obscured by rising steam.

A few moments later, the blacksmith pulled the sword out of the water and looked at it closely.

Then, the intensity of his gaze was replaced with contempt and disappointment. Gritting his teeth, the man tossed the beautiful blade aside.

It fell from the dais and flew down.

What waited below was a mountain of swords, each so masterfully crafted that many warriors would eagerly kill for the right to wield one.

The newborn blade landed on the top of the mountain and joined its countless siblings, laying there...

Abandoned, and forgotten.

Far away...

A vast hall cut in blue ice was drowning in darkness.

In the center of the hall, a tall throne stood, illuminated by the ghostly light of dancing flames.

A corpse of a breathtakingly beautiful woman was sitting on the throne, dressed in a regal red gown. Its hem spilled down the steps of the throne like a river of blood.

The woman's chest was pierced by a sword, which pinned her to the back of the throne.

Two dead youths stood on both sides of the throne, waiting in silence.

Then, the silence was broken.

Pieces of ice fell to the floor and shattered as the dead woman’s hand slowly rose. Her pale, long fingers wrapped themselves around the blade of the sword. Soon, there was the sound of metal breaking.

In the next moment, the ice hall — and the entire mountain encompassing it — shuddered.

And someplace else...

A gaunt man was sitting in the dust, wearing a tattered spacesuit. The Visor of his helmet was cracked, and the oxygen in the tank attached to his back had long run out.

Nevertheless, the gaunt man was somehow still alive.

He had been motionless for a while, but now, he finally moved.

Rising his head, he looked at a beautiful blue disk floating in the great darkness above him.

His cracked lips twisted into a smile.

"How curious."

That was what he wanted to say...

But, of course, no sound escaped from his lips, since there was no air to transmit it.

The man tried to sigh, but failed for the same reason.

He shook his head in dejection and moved his lips again.

If someone was there to read them, they would have read:

"... It’s starting.”

The war for the throne of humanity had begun.

[End of Volume Eight: Lord of Shadows]