1842 First Blood

As Sunny watched the sky, there was the sound of light steps behind him. Then, Nephis approached and stopped by his side, clad in a suit of lustrous steel armor.

She looked at him and smiled.

Despite the sinister clouds above and the vast army marching to a calamitous war below, he couldn't help but feel his heart race at the sight of that smile.

Sunny had read somewhere that people often described this feeling as having "butterflies in their stomach“. The image of a swarm of Dark Butterflies tearing at the walls of his stomach seemed more dreadful than romantic, so he really doubted the literary sense of those people... but, still.

Even though a month had passed since their first kiss, he still felt excitement every time he saw her.

It was odd and improper, to feel so blessed on the eve of a disastrous war. But he did.

Life was strange that way.

A smile appeared on his face, as well.

"Do you have enough spare time to visit a humble enchanter today, Lady Nephis?"

She lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"I might have a little time..."

With that, she turned her head and looked at the sky, as well.

"Are you worried about the sun?"

Sunny nodded slowly.

"I am indeed a little nervous. Do you think that the clouds will hold until we land?"

Nephis inhaled deeply.

"Someone will make sure that they do. In fact... she should be arriving any moment now, actually."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

Then, a subtle spark ignited in his eyes.

There was the sound of fluttering wings, and a vast shadow fell on the emerald grass.

A moment later, a woman was standing in front of them. She was tall and slender, with long hair that fell down like a cascade of pale gold. Her posture was perfectly straight, and her cold face was dazzlingly beautiful.

The woman was wearing a suit of light steel armor, with pauldrons and greaves decorated with stylized feathers. The gaze of her stern amber eyes was piercing and heavy, and a white cloak hung on her back, embroidered with silver thread.

Saint Tyris had not changed at all.

Sunny was glad to see her... of course, he hid his happiness behind a mask of respectful unfamiliarity.

Sky Tide bowed slightly.

"Lady Changing Star."

Nephis nodded.

"Saint Tyris."

The two weren't very close to each other, but they had a good relationship due to what had happened during the Battle of the Black Skull. In fact, there was probably no Saint among the vassals of Clan Valor with a deeper bond to Nephis than Sky Tide.

Her clan was also different from how it used to be.

Its status was still far from being favored by the king, but now that Roan had Transcendent, there were two Saints among the members of the clan.

There were few Legacy families who could boast the same, so that alone made it impossible to ignore or oppress White Feather.

Much more importantly, Sky Tide's status soared now that the war was imminent. Her power over winds and clouds made her one of the most valuable people in Godgrave. . which was a sword that cut both ways.

She was indispensable for the rulers of the Sword Domain, and therefore, they were forced to treat her nicely now.

On the other hand, she was one of the primary targets for the forces of the Song Domain. So, Sunny was more than a little bit worried about her.

Nephis, meanwhile, nodded curtly in his direction.

"This is Master Sunless. An enchanter employed by the Fire Keepers."

Saint Tyris looked at him expressionlessly, then frowned a little.

"Master Sunless... your name sounds familiar. Ah. Have my daughter commissioned a Memory from you?"

He bowed politely.

"Indeed, I had the privilege of fulfilling a request made by Awakened Telle once."

Sky Tide's expression did not change, but he could swear that her eyes turned a little warmer.

”I see. That Memory is serving my husband well. Your competence is worthy of praise, Master Sunless."

With that, she seemed to forget about his existence and looked at Nephis.

”The realm boundary is close. How long will it take the Ivory Island to reach the target area? ”

Nephis answered neutrally:

"Around an hour, at top speed. Will you be able to hold out for that long, if need be?"

Sky Tide glanced at the grey sky, lingered for a moment, then nodded.

"I will. I won't be able to assist with anything else, though. “

The immolating sky was not the only threat that waited for them in Godgrave. It was the most dire one, though, so everything else was beside the point.

Nephis gestured for Saint Tyris to follow her and headed for the Ivory Tower.

"We will handle the rest. Allow me to guide you..."

As they were walking away, she threw a poignant look at Sunny.

He smiled and nodded subtly, telling her not to worry about him. As Master Sunless, he was not supposed to participate in any battles — so, he could only observe today. It was a strange situation to be in, but he could not complain.

There would be plenty of battles for him to fight before too long, anyway... perhaps more than he could handle, even with his seven bodies.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Sunny turned to the edge of the island and looked down.

At some point, the door of the Marvelous Mimic opened, and Aiko walked out, yawning as she looked around with sleepy eyes.

Noticing him, the petite girl floated off the porch and flew around the cottage, eventually landing on the grass near the edge.

She looked down and made a face.

"Damn, boss. There are so many of them. So many potential clients!"

Sunny gave her a dark look.

”Cover your arms."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Aiko was wearing mundane clothes — and not even formal ones, at that. Her black t—shirt had some kind of Nightmare Creature printed on it with a band name written above in bold letters... which wasn't really a problem, except for the fact that the intricate tattoo of a snake that coiled around her right arm was almost fully revealed.

She grinned sheepishly and summoned a green Memory tunic.

Sunny hesitated, then said quietly:

"Are you sure you don't want me to bring you away, to the waking world?"

Aiko looked up at him and blinked a few times.

”And miss all the fun... I mean, miss such a historic event? No, thanks. Plus, I know these guys well. Don't worry, boss, they'll be fine — they have survived worse."

He stared at her for a few moments, wondering if she would change her mind after witnessing Godgrave.

In the end, he didn't say anything. Together, they watched as the shoulder of the colossal skeleton grew closer and closer.

The Ivory Island accelerated, leaving the ascending army far behind. Soon, the sky was entirely hidden by a veil of clouds, and the air grew warmer, the daylight changing subtly.

They were heading for the collarbone of the dead deity, where the base camp of the Sword Army was supposed to be established. And they — the Fire Keepers — were meant to be the vanguard of the human invasion into Godgrave.

Their task was not only to clear out the Nightmare Creatures populating the area and serve as a bulwark that protected the slow advance of the army from the arm of the titanic skeleton. What they had to do was much more important.

It was to bring the authority of the King of Swords, and the power of his Domain, to this cursed land.

Soon, the vast range of the ancient collarbone was beneath them.

The ground was white, but there was barely any of it visible under the thick carpet of scarlet growth.

Moss, grass, and grotesque towering plants were all red, as if bloody marrow had exploded from the cracks and fissures in the ancient bone.

Of course, the vermilion jungle was teeming with all kinds of abominable creatures, all moving and devouring each other in a mad rush to live and grow in the unknown, but inevitably fleeting amount of time before the veil of cloud broke, and the merciless sun burned them all to ash.

At such a late stage of infestation, the surface of the dead god's collarbone was not much safer than the dark expanse of the Hollows, where the true horrors dwelled. The strange Nightmare Creatures populating Godgrave would have had enough time to grow immensely strong, reaching the Corrupted or Great Rank en masse.

The strongest would have already retreated underground, to try and claim a place for themselves away from the annihilating heavens, but many still remained.

And now, all their undivided attention was turned to the beautiful island drifting below the clouds.

Usually, these abominations would have felt nothing but fear when looking at the terrible sky.

But today, perhaps for the first time in countless years, they felt something else.

A hunger so deep that it drove them into a state of frenzy.

Immediately, the scarlet jungle seemed to... boil.

Numerous abominations rushed in the direction of the descending island like a morbid tide. Most of them simply ran, slithered, or crawled, but there were those capable of soaring into the air, as well.

A vast swarm of Nightmare Creatures rose from the ground to meet the Ivory Island. It seemed inevitable that the flying Citadel would be swallowed by the cloud of them.

But then, an imperceptible change spread through the world.

Sunny's eyes narrowed when he recognized the familiar feeling.

Another Component of the Ivory Tower was unleashed, and suddenly, it was as if a wave of invisible force crashed into the rising abominations, throwing them down or outright obliterating their hideous bodies. Blood spilled from the sky like crimson rain.

The tyrannical Crushing had come Godgrave, reaping countless lives in the first culling of the great Domain War.