1850 War Council

The camp of the Sword Army resembled a fortified city that was like a dark stain on the sun-bleached surface of white bone, adorned by a sea of scarlet banners. The vicious jungle had been pushed back and incinerated some days ago, and was only now spreading tentatively from the fissures of the titanic collarbone.

Tendrils of red moss could be seen here and there, looking like patches of rust on the vast expanse of the bone plain. The sky above was grey and cloudy, yet suffused with blinding light.

Tall walls surrounded the sprawling avenues of the basecamp, and protected by their impregnable barrier, countless barracks and tents crowded the relatively limited space. The camp was a cauldron of activity, with thousands of soldiers going about their business in a tense atmosphere.

When one looked at the fortress of the Sword Army, they could hardly imagine that it had not existed just a week ago. However, it was true — the entire city had been built in a matter of days, not decades or centuries.

That was what hundreds of thousands of Awakened were capable of when brought together by a common goal.

There were many among them who possessed potent utility Aspects, and many more who could lend their physical strength and unique Abilities to hasten the construction. So, the city had risen from the ground with a speed that was in no way inferior to how fast the scarlet jungle grew and propagated after being reduced to ash.

There were two towering landmarks in the sprawling fortress. One was the Ivory Island, which hovered a few meters above the ground, anchored to it by seven colossal chains to remain completely still. The beautiful white pagoda standing on its soil was like a beacon of hope for the soldiers of the Sword Army, raising their spirits every time they saw it.

The other was the dark rift of the Dream Gate, which tore the fabric of reality apart some distance away. The King of Swords had moved it from Bastion to Godgrave, announcing to the world the gravity of his intent to see the rulers of the Song Domain pay for their transgressions.

Currently, fresh supplies were arriving at the camp from the waking world.

Sunny looked at the flurry of activity with a frown. It was tremendously convenient, of course, to have a direct logistical connection to the waking world here in Godgrave. The Song Army lacked that advantage, still, which was why they had to scavenge provisions in the jungle or wait for heavily guarded convoys to deliver them across the Moonriver Plain and up the left arm of the dead deity.

The road Rain had helped build drastically shortened the time needed for each convoy to arrive, true, but it was still a point of vulnerability… one that he personally would be exploiting in the near future, perhaps, by launching raids to break the supply chains established by the Song Army. That was one of the duties the Lord of Shadows had agreed to, after all.

Nevertheless, he did not like the presence of the Dream Gate here in Godgrave. Not because it was particularly unnerving, but simply because it was a point of vulnerability, as well — it was just that the vulnerability lay in the waking world, not in the Dream Realm.

The servants of the Queen could not cross the vast collarbone of the dead god, lay siege to the King's fortress, and destroy the supplies arriving through the Dream Gate. However, they could easily stage a devastating attack on Valor's distribution facilities in the waking world, not caring about the collateral damage and widespread destruction such an assault would entail.

There was actually a mutual agreement between the two warring sides to keep the bloodshed contained to the Dream Realm. No one wanted for their soldiers to be afraid that their physical bodies would be destroyed while they were fighting the war. No one wanted for their families to be put in danger while they were on the battlefield, either.

The government was supposed to ensure that neither side broke the agreement.

However…

Sunny wasn't sure how long that agreement would last. He was even more doubtful that the government would be able to do anything if the mayhem of the Domain War spilled into the waking world.

If anything, such an eventuality seemed all but inevitable.

Shaking his head, he looked away from the Dream Gate and hurried his steps. No matter his opinion, he could not be late today.

'This… is not going to be strange at all.'

Wearing the vermilion cloak of a Valor Knight, he was following Nephis and Cassie to the center of the camp. A few Fire Keepers were there, as well, clad in their armor. Everyone they passed greeted them with admiration and reverence.

At the same time, Sunny was heading in the same direction from the outskirts of the camp, his body encased in the stonelike metal of the Onyx Mantle, his face hidden behind the fearsome visage of Weaver's Mask. Saint was walking behind him, indifferent crimson flames burning behind the visor of her helmet.

The glances thrown at them were full of fear and apprehension.

Today, Sunny was meant to attend a war council where the next actions of the Sword Army would be decided.

…In two different incarnations, now less.

The prospect sent his mind for a spin.

The Lord of Shadows was a natural choice to participate in such a meeting, of course. Both his power and status were more than great enough to earn him a spot at the table. But Master Sunless ended up being invited to the council by pure happenstance.

It was simply because his status as a Knight Commander, no matter how bogus, was still technically a real one. Therefore, he had been incredibly surprised to receive orders to attend the strategy meeting along other notable officers of the Sword Army.

It was both funny and concerning.

At this rate, he might actually end up leading the warriors of Valor into battle. The probability was infinitely small, but not entirely impossible.

'Let's hope something like that won't happen. I really don't want to end up as a hero of the Sword Domain because of some ridiculous misunderstanding…'

Just then, they finally reached the stone stronghold that stood at the heart of the camp, towering above every structure except for the Ivory Tower and the Dream Gate and resembling a castle. That stronghold was where Anvil of Valor, the King of Swords, held court.

One would have expected that he would stay in the comfort of the only Citadel the Sword Domain possessed in Godgrave, and Nephis had even been prepared to surrender her living quarters at the top of the Ivory Tower to her adopted father. But Anvil chose to reside in a simple tent while the camp was being constructed, and then moved to this stone keep.

Sunny could not complain.

It would have been quite weird to have Neph's father — albeit a fake one — live under one roof with them, especially when they were often getting busy with…

His thoughts were interrupted when his other avatar arrived in front of the stronghold.

Sunny stared at the enigmatic and unmistakably sinister figure clad in an onyx armor, the very air around it suffused with coldness and arrogance.

At the same time, Sunny stared at a delicate young man wearing a vermilion cloak on top of an elegant black mantle, his handsome face practically screaming of softness and lack of strength.

He remained motionless for a few seconds, and then thought:

'... Edgy idiot.'

'Pampered fool...'