1857 Missing Invitation

Lightslayer was sitting at the head of the table. Bestmaster was to her right, while Lady Seishan was to her left. Since Rain and Tamar were escorting the latter, they were standing behind her chair.

The former, meanwhile, used enthralled Nightmare Creatures as her escorts. Two ethereal, ghostly figures were drifting in the air behind her, almost invisible in the pale light of the command pavilion — even knowing that they were subdued by one of the queen's daughters, Rain couldn't help but feel uneasy in their presence.

She was usually in the company of a sinister wraith of her own. Today, however, her teacher had left her alone — no doubt to avoid being sensed by the plethora of Saints gathered here.

…Dark Dancer Revel had come alone.

She gazed at the champions of the Song Army, remained silent for a while, and then spoke in her subtle, husky voice:

"Brothers and sisters, all of you should know the situation. Godgrave is a cruel place, and we have suffered from its cruelty. In the days and months to come, we will suffer more, and we will suffer greatly. There is no mercy to be found under this ruthless sky, and no salvation from the perils that besiege us."

Rain expected that Lightslayer would continue with a "but", but to her surprise, the princess made no attempt to lift the spirits of her comrades. Her rather bleak proclamation simply hung in the air, and the faces of the gathered Saints slowly turned somber.

Rain and Tamar were just close enough to see Revel sparing a short, almost imperceptible glance at Lady Seishan. After receiving a similarly subtle nod, she smiled coldly.

"What most of you might not know is how the enemy is faring on the other side of the Collarbone Plain. Let me inform you… the enemy is faring well. They have entered Godgrave and established a fortified encampment without suffering any significant losses. Their fortress is impregnable, and they have no shortage of supplies. They are already moving their forces to carve a path south, aiming to claim a second — or maybe even a third — Citadel."

She paused for a moment, and then added indifferently:

"The reason for the enviable progress of the Sword Army is rather simple. It is because they are protected by their Sovereign, while we are not. The tyrant, King of Swords, is already here in Godgrave. But my mother is still waiting for us to extend her an invitation."

Lightslayer gazed at the Saints and finished in an even tone:

"So, we will dedicate ourselves to conquering a Citadel of our own immediately."

There was a wave of whispers, followed by a tense silence. In that silence, a deep voice resounded, forcing Rain to look at the far end of the table.

"Forgive me for speaking out, my lady…"

The speaker was a man that looked relatively young, but nevertheless made quite an impression. He was tall and had an incredibly powerful build, with muscles so robust that they strained the fabric of his lavish pangolin coat. His skin had a darker hue, and he emanated a feeling of dire physical might.

Rain recognized him easily — the young Saint was rather famous these days, albeit not for a good reason.

He was Dar of the Maharana clan, who had just returned from conquering the Third Nightmare. As such, he was the youngest of all human Saints — or, at least, the most recent. A rejected demand to hand him over to Clan Valor was what had sparked this entire war.

Officially, at least.

Of course, the hypocritical justification the King of Swords had provided seemed quite flimsy even back then. Now that everyone knew that Dar of the Maharana clan had been in the depths of a Nightmare when the assassination attempt on Changing Star happened, it seemed even more preposterous.

The mighty Saint continued soberly:

"Our own situation is not entirely stable, yet. Secure supply chains have yet to be established, and our camp can barely be called a stronghold. The enemy is indeed ahead of us, but what will we achieve by rushing? Won't we just make our disadvantage more dire by plunging head first into a battle that we are not quite ready to fight?"

Rain noticed that the Saint of Sorrow looked at the younger Transcendent with a hint of curiosity… which was the first semblance of emotion that the somber man had shown thus far.

She glanced at Tamar and suppressed a smile.

It was too easy to see where the younger girl's mannerisms had all come from.

In any case, Saint Dar was making a lot of sense. Since he was, Rain almost expected that he would be accused of cowardice, but luckily, none of the people gathered in the command pavilion were fools. They kept quiet, either sharing his opinion or waiting for the daughters of the queen to react.

In the ensuing silence, it was Beastmaster who smiled and said in a beguiling tone:

"You don't have to worry about the enemy's progress. Leave those worries to your queen. Trust in my mother, like you have trusted her thus far, and she shall grant you victory. "

Although she was not a biological sister to the Dark Dancer, their voices were strangely alike.

Saint Dar frowned and wanted to say something, but at that moment, the fold covering the entrance to the pavilion moved, and a new figure entered.

A petite young woman walked in, wearing a dark robe. There was a hint of innocence on her lovely face, and a strange calmness in her large, glistening eyes.

In stark contrast to that innocence, however, were heavy drops of blood falling from her slick hands.

Rain tried not to stare.

'The missing princess.'

The last of the seven Transcendent daughters of Ki Song had finally arrived. She was Hel, the Death Singer — one of the most mysterious and revered Saints of the Song Domain.

Despite how ominous she looked, that with fresh blood smeared all across her hands, the young woman was not that sinister. She was a haruspex — or rather, a haruspicina — a diviner who received revelations by inspecting the entrails of sacrificial beasts.

The gathering grew quiet when the oracle appeared and slowly made her way to where Lightslayer, Beastmaster, and Lady Seishan were seated.

Rain frowned a little.

'Come to think of it… how come I don't know Saint Seishan's True Name?'

She had to have one. But, to Rain's knowledge, no one had ever spoken it aloud.

Death Singer, meanwhile, reached the head of the table, leaned down, and whispered something into her sister's ear.

Lightslayer smiled.

"Responding to your question, Saint Dar. There is indeed no much sense in rushing into battle. That is why we will split our forces and rush into two battles, instead…"