1862 Puppet Master

The nature of the war had changed overnight.

The Sword Domain had dominated the conflict from its very first day. Their army was stronger, their progress was faster. They suffered fewer casualties and gained more benefits. As time went on, their advantage seemed poised to inevitably snowball into an overwhelming superiority. Even though the two armies had not clashed directly yet, the warriors of Valor were already winning.

All it took was a single person to completely reverse the situation.

That person was Mordret, the firstborn of the King of Swords — who served the Queen of Worms now, ironically enough.

When Sunny first heard Naeve's proclamation, his eyes widened behind Weaver's Mask.

'The House of Night…'

After the Chain of Nightmares, the position of the third Great Clan was severely weakened. Without a Sovereign to rule it and a Dream Gate to bring countless settlers to their territory, the House of Night lost the ability to compete against Valor and Song. Its standing and resources were still immense, but nowhere near the power of the two burgeoning Domains.

Nevertheless, the House of Night had not given up without a fight. Instead, it seemed as though the threat of losing relevance had galvanized the leaders of the lesser of the three Great Clans. In recent years, they had been quite active. More than that, their actions were more decisive, daring, and successful than ever before.

In just the last two years, the House of Night had laid siege to and conquered seven new Citadels in the nebulous reaches of the Stormsea. Such a feat had been unheard of before, and did a lot to bolster their faltering renown.

Of course, now that Naeve had spoken, the true reason for these triumphs was revealed to be quite different from what people believed, and chillingly sinister.

It was not that the House of Night had become more daring or potent. It was just that Mordret had stolen the body of one of its leaders. And then, like a plague, he slowly spread through the ranks of the Nightwalkers, unseen and unnoticed.

Not only had the rest of the world been none the wiser — even the members of the House of Night itself had not suspected anything while their rulers were being replaced, one by one. Not even the families of those taken by the Prince of Nothing were able to discover that their parents, children, and siblings had been switched.

There had been moments of friction and conflict, of course. There had been tension and a feeling of unease, a subtle sense of alienation from those who had been closest before… an eerie feeling that something was not quite right.

But with how fast the world was changing, and how dire the situation of the Great Clan was, people simply assumed that these rare instances of incongruity were caused by the shifting demands of the turbulent times.

Mordret's deceit was too stellar.

Only a few had started to suspect that something terrible was happening inside the House of Night. That the people who looked, talked, and acted as their friends and family could have been… someone else. That there was something alien hiding behind the familiar faces.

Naeve had been one of the first to start harboring that harrowing suspicion. He did not describe what he had felt in those days, but Sunny could only imagine how eerie, chilling, and nightmarish such an experience would be. No, actually… he could not. His mind failed to imagine the appalling scenes of what his former friend must have gone through.

At first, Naeve suspected that the House of Night had been infiltrated by the Skinwalker. He made secret inquiries to make sure that there were no Nightmare Creatures among the leaders of his clan, and proved that theory wrong. His next steps were much more troublesome — he couldn't continue the investigation alone, and did not know whom to trust.

Anyone around him could have been the enemy.

He did discover a few trustworthy allies in the end, though. They tried to ascertain the scale and depths of the encroaching corruption… but it was already too late.

They had run out of time.

All that they had managed to do was prepare a path of escape for themselves and their families. That was how they ended up in front of the Valor compound in NQSC, asking for asylum.

Sunny sucked in a stifled breath.

'Curse him…'

It seemed that Mordret had fully inherited Soul Stealer's Transcendent Ability. He was able to split his soul — and that, in turn, allowed him to possess multiple vessels at the same time.

The vessels he had collected in the last four years, without ever being discovered, were the Saints and other key figures of the House of Night.

There seemed to be some limit to his Ability, at least — otherwise, he would have taken everyone, not just the most valued champions of the Great Clan. Awakened warriors and many Masters had been spared, as were the mundane members of their families. A few leaders of the clan had avoided becoming his vessels, as well, for one reason or another.

Finally, he had revealed himself and took control of the Stormsea once the Sword Army became entrenched in Godgrave, leading a pincer attack on his father's Domain from the south. That was what had caused the recent bloodshed — Mordret was cleaning house, eliminating those whom he had failed to possess.

Sunny was both appalled and impressed. He had suspected that Mordret was facilitating secret negotiations with the House of Night on behalf of Ki Song. What he had not expected was that Mordret would simply… become the House of Night.

Only three of the Night Saints, including Naeve, had escaped. A few more had been eliminated when Mordret openly attacked.

Despite that, at least thirteen of them had fallen into his hands. Which meant that the forces of Song had the power of more than sixty Saints on their side now, while Valor only had slightly more than forty.

Worse than that, now that the Sword Domain was being attacked, Anvil would have to split the forces of his army to prevent his son from conquering his kingdom. That would leave those who remained in Godgrave at a dire disadvantage.

But that was not all…

Mordret had not only taken the Saints of the House of Night, he had also taken all the Citadels that used to belong to the third Great Clan, adding them to the Domain of the Queen of Worms, thus breaking the balance vastly enhancing her power.

Among them was the Night Garden, meaning that Ki Song controlled two Great Citadels now.

More than that, Mordret was free to conquer the Citadels of the Sword Domain, denying their power to Anvil. Rivergate would probably fall in the matter of days… from there, the Prince of Nothing could easily reach Bastion, or assault other Citadels in the heartland of the Dream Realm.

The situation was dire.

However, before Naeve was even done speaking, Morgan cursed and dashed out of the chamber.

Before too long, the walls of the stronghold shook, and a cacophony of screams rose above the warcamp.