1864 Sibling Rivarly

After Morgan was dismissed, taking Naeve with her, the king had a few words to say to the rest of them.

The theater of war had changed dramatically, so there were a lot of adjustments that had to be made. The King of Swords himself would remain in Godgrave, and so would all the Saints of the Sword Army — with the exception of his daughter.

It did not seem like having one less Transcendent would change a lot of things, but Morgan's loss could not be measured in terms of raw power. She was the principal strategist of the army and the field commander of its expedition force — the vacuum her departure left had to be filled by someone.

Anvil took over the strategy matters himself, and gave Nephis free rein of the expedition force. Her task was simple, but imperative — to invade the Breastbone Reach and conquer the Citadel hidden in the Hollow below it.

Sunny's raiding party was dissolved before even leaving the Nameless Temple. Instead, he was to join the main body of the army and help Nephis take the Citadel.

After receiving these orders, they were dismissed. Only Jest of Dagonet stayed behind to counsel his old comrade's son on something none of them were privy to. Anvil would summon the rest of the Saints and inform them of the situation after that.

Cassie told Rivalen of Aegis Rose to wait for the king's summons on the way out.

Leaving the Valor Keep, all three of them — Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie — felt rattled. The shift caused by Mordret's devastation of the House of Night was too tectonic to be fathomed swiftly.

Sunny glanced at his two companions, and then said quietly:

"I won't see you soon."

With that, he turned around and walked away. There was a residence assigned to him in the camp, so that was where he went.

Not long after that, he met Nephis and Cassie on the edge of the Ivory Island as Master Sunless.

Nephis smiled at him faintly and gestured to the great pagoda.

"Let's talk inside."

The Sword Army would be shaken once the news spread… and so would the entire world. Nephis had to leave the camp and take command of the expedition force in a few hours. Sunny would follow her, but Cassie had to stay back. So, they did not have a lot of time to talk face-to-face.

As they ascended the stairs, Sunny couldn't help but think about Naeve and the remnants of the House of Night.

Mordret's culling had been chillingly thorough when it came to the leadership and champions of the now-fallen Great Clan. Only three of its Saints remained — the rest were either taken as vessels by the Prince of Nothing or had been killed.

The situation among the Masters — the core of the clan's power — was a little different. Naeve did not have the exact numbers, but more than two-thirds of them were either taken or lost their lives. Those who remained were here in Godgrave now, with a few stragglers still lost somewhere in the waking world.

The mundane dependents — family members and loyal servants of the clan — were also in the waking world, temporarily sheltered in the complex built around the Dream Gate. Mordret had not targeted them consciously, and although some had become collateral damage in his bloody coup, most were still alive. Just… displaced, traumatized, and scared.

The envoys of the royal clan would have to make sure that none of them was a hidden vessel of the banished prince. However, that would have to wait, because Valor had to deal with a more pressing issue first.

It was the fate of the Awakened warriors of the House of Night, who were in the most precarious situation.

By now, every Citadel in the Stormsea was under Mordret's control. Saints and Masters were relatively safe, because there was no timer for when they would have to return to their anchors. The Awakened, however, would be transported back to the Dream Realm the moment they fell asleep or lost consciousness.

When that happened, they would either become Mordret's hostages or his victims.

There were two ways to avoid that end. The first way was to be brought to a new Citadel by a Saint and anchor themselves at its Gateway. The second way was to pass through a Dream Gate and enter the Dream Realm physically.

The problem was that each of them had to be tested before being allowed in Valor territory, so that another hidden vessel of the Prince of Nothing did not infiltrate Godgrave. The process was not fast, so it was not clear if all of them would be able to stave off sleep before that happened.

Remembering his own attempts to stay awake after returning from the Forgotten Shore, Sunny did not envy them.

In any case, their fates were in the hands of Morgan now. Anvil had given her carte blanche to deal with the remnants of the House of Night as she saw fit — and while the Awakened warriors would have to come to Godgrave, she would without a doubt try to bring at least the strongest of the remnants to the newly created southern front.

They had no choice but to obey her. More than that… Sunny was not sure that they had a reason to refuse. Each of the remaining members of the House of Night was, without a doubt, full of desire to avenge their fallen kin. Morgan would offer them a chance to fight against Mordret, and probably sweeten the deal by promising to take care of the mundane members of their families.

Why would they say no? They did not have to be coerced.

The strongest chains were often those people put on themselves.

…Sunny would know.

Finally, they reached Neph's living quarters at the highest level of the tower. Cassie summoned several Memories to prevent anyone from listening in on their conversation.

That precaution was actually meant to be broken. This close to a living Sovereign and his strongest servants, they had to be extremely cautious about sharing vital information. Therefore, they always assumed that the first layer of protection would be dismantled.

Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie played their roles and spoke about the task facing the expedition force.

At the same time, they were having another, entirely silent conversation. It was a bit awkward because Cassie had to relay what Sunny and Nephis said, but they had grown used to communicating that way in the recent weeks.

[Why is he only sending Morgan?]

Sunny was still confused by Anvil's decision.

Nephis shook her head subtly.

[Actually, that makes sense. Every Saint she brings will just become a potential vessel for Mordret… Valor has methods to protect a soul from his Aspect, but no method is absolute. That Master you told me about, Welthe, is proof.]

He considered the situation soberly, then took a deep breath.

[Why did he not take all of House of Night? Why was there only one hidden vessel among those whom Naeve brought to Godgrave? Soul Stealer had been able to take millions of bodies for himself. But something is stopping Mordret from doing the same.]

Granted, Soul Stealer had been in a rather bad shape when they saw him.

Sunny contemplated for a while. Eventually, his eyes narrowed.

[There is also the issue of Saints. Mordret is in a unique position — much like myself — in that he can control many Citadels at once. In my case, the number is limited by the number of shadows I possess. In his case, it should be limited by the number of Transcendent bodies he controls. Therefore…]

Cassie shifted to face him and finished his thought:

[...Unless he takes more Saints, he can only control fourteen Citadels. He can't go on a rampage across the Sword Domain, demolishing Anvil's base of power, without releasing his hold on the Stormsea. And there are no Saints left in the Sword Domain.]

Nephis nodded slowly.

[That is why he only sent Morgan. He does not want to give Mordret fuel to burn his kingdom down… no, rather, it is inconsequential to him how much the kingdom suffers. As long as the Domain itself is not severely diminished, Anvil will continue prioritizing Godgrave. At most, what he wants is to protect Bastion.]

And so, Morgan and Mordret were destined to clash again — this time on the shores of the Mirror Lake, not in the frigid reaches of Antarctica.

Sunny did not have a lot of hope for Morgan. But then again… laying siege to a daemon's stronghold was a daunting task, especially if someone like her was defending it.

His thoughts turned to all the people he had left behind in Bastion.

How were they going to fare in the middle of a clash between the two Transcendent siblings?

For now, at least, that was out of his control.

Sunny sighed, then looked at his companions.

[So… what does all of this mean for us?]