1905 Pyrhhic Victory

As it turned out, the Citadel had several spacious underground levels. That only made sense, considering that the lake surrounding it was transient — it swelled when the Hollows were flooded and drained once the water flowed through the ribs of the dead deity into its titanic spine.

So, those levels were only situated below the ground level when the lake was full. Most of the time, they would actually be above the water, and so, there was another grand entrance situated lower than the vast hall where the ambush had taken place.

Sunny found the Gateway beneath a crystal dome situated not far from that entrance.

He remained still for a few moments, bewildered by what he saw and felt there.

There was a small grove growing behind the transparent walls of the dome. They was enveloped by scarlet vines from outside —however, there were perfectly normal plants growing inside.

Emerald grass, ancient oaks, soft moss, and beautiful flowers blooming on the meadow hidden

at the heart of the grove, where a small pond of pristine water stood still in the tranquil darkness.

These were the first plants that had not been twisted by Corruption that Sunny found in Godgrave — in all of Dream Realm, perhaps, apart from those brought here by the inhabitants of the waking world.

More than that, he sensed something as he entered the crystal dome. A pure and

unmistakable feeling of sacredness permeated the air here, as if the taint consuming the rest of this cursed region had never managed to find its way inside the crystal dome.

The pond is the Gateway.'

Sunny glanced at the calm water, realizing that he could not determine how deep it was. Then, he turned away with a shrug and stepped through the shadows back to where he had left Nephis and the other Saints.

Soon, all of them sought refuge in the grove.

The Citadel above them was burning and falling apart. Its walls were resilient enough to repel the incinerating flames summoned by Nephis... at least for a while. However, the castle had become overgrown by the scarlet infestation over the ages — the vines and trees piercing its structure were like kindling, helping the fire spread and destroy the ancient walls.

It would reach these lower levels soon, as well. However, Nephis could protect at least one floor from being consumed by flames.

The bloodied Saints sat silently on the grass, too tired and rattled to talk. Only Sir Jest seemed to be in a pleasant mood, but even he was keeping his mouth shut, concentrating on cleaning the cane he had picked up from the floor before leaving the ground level.

One of them had to erase Revel's imprint on the Citadel and replace it with their own. However, six of the seven surviving Saints already controlled a Citadel of their own — doing so would relinquish their authority over it. The person most suited for the job was the Saint who had been wounded in the ambush, but he was currently unconscious.

There were a few things they could do, but after discussing it shortly, the Saints of the Sword Army had decided to simply wait for a while.

...Of course, Sunny could have taken the Citadel too. After all, he had seven incarnations and could place seven tethers instead of one — but that was not something he wanted the King of Swords to know. So, he just sat down and stared into the

distance.

There was a lot for him to think about.

The battle... technically, they had won it. They had repelled the ambush and conquered the Citadel —the Gateway, at least — thus fulfilling the goal of the expedition force. Soon, the authority of the King of Swords would spread to central Godgrave, and his Domain would stretch all the way from the Clavicle Plain to the Breastbone Reach.

Even if Seishan and her Seventh Legion managed to take the Citadel in the west, the Song Domain would still possess fewer Citadels, control less territory, and be pressed to reach deeper into the Hollows from their remote stronghold.

The Sword Army had achieved a victory today. However... it was a Pyrrhic victory.

Sunny sighed.

Revel might have chosen to retreat, but that was in part due to the fact that withdrawing was still a good outcome for the forces of Song. Yes, they had lost the Citadel — but in the process, their enemy had suffered a debilitating loss, as well.

Seven Saints of the Sword Domain were dead.

Silent Stalker had reaped more lives than anyone else, killing three Transcendent champions of the Sword Army. Lonesome Howl and her Reflections were just behind her, with two kills between the three of them. Moonveil had killed one, and the last fallen Saint was brought down by the risen dead... Revel did not kill anyone herself, but she had orchestrated the entire battle.

In exchange, the Song Army only lost three of Mordret's Reflections. Their destruction was not an insignificant loss, but it was not comparable to the casualties suffered by Neph's team.

The Sword Army had already been at a disadvantage due to having fewer Saints in its ranks. With the loss of these seven champions, the gap in the number of Transcendents between Valor and Song was bound to become a dire influence on all future battles.

So, none of the factual victors was in a good mood.

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny threw a secretive glance at Nephis.

She had already finished healing Sir Jest. His own wounds had been tended to, as well. Now, she was sitting on the shore of the pond, looking at the water with her usual detached expression.

She was in a tough situation.

As the commander of the expedition, Nephis was

responsible for the deaths of her people — each and every loss must have weighed heavy on her soul. Sunny knew all too well the agony of failing those who had entrusted their lives to you... many soldiers had perished to help them reach the Citadel, and now, seven Saints were dead — each a singular talent and a trusted comrade.

Nephis had more experience of being a leader than he had, and she had ordered much more people to their deaths. However, one never grew accustomed to such things... well, actually, maybe that statement was wrong. Anvil and Ki Song seemed to have built quite a tolerance to sacrificing human lives for their goals, and there should have been plenty of others like them.

But Nephis had not. So, she was most likely hurting right now.

On the other hand... while she was leading these warriors, she was also plotting against their king. In a sense, she was an outsider among them — a traitor, even. She only cared about who ended up in control of the Citadel as far as needing the two Sovereigns to weaken each other was concerned.

It must have been a difficult situation to navigate, both morally and emotionally.

Added to that was the fact that her capacity for emotions and morality — for humanity itself —

was currently somewhat washed away by the immolating flames of her Aspect.

Sunny wanted to talk to her, but they could hardly exchange an honest word while surrounded by the rest of the Saints.

After a while, the members of the conquest party regained some level of composure, or maybe simply grew bored with silence. They started to talk, sharing the information about the battle with each other.

Sunny listened for a while, learning about what Moonveil and Lonesome Howl were capable of. He briefly shared his own experience fighting Revel, as well, which earned him a heavy look from Nephis.

After that, he couldn't wait anymore. The fire was already spreading to this floor, and the world had quaked terribly some time ago, signifying that the upper levels of the Citadel collapsed. Since Nephis was going to be busy preventing the flames from damaging the crystal dome, Sunny announced that he would check the situation above and dissolved into shadows.

He was going to check on Saint.