1963 Brightest Star

Of course, no matter how much fame the Lord of Shadows had earned, it could not be compared to the radiant renown of Changing Star, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan.

It was understandable. By their very nature, one was meant to shine brightly, while the other was meant to stay hidden and unnoticed. Additionally, the Lord of Shadow was still a stranger, while Nephis was the living idol for most of these people.

They had known and admired her family from decades ago, grew to care about Nephis after her incredible feat on the Forgotten Shore, cheered and celebrated when she returned from her long and lonesome journey across the Dream Realm as a Master, and learned to rely on her and her sword in the years that passed since the Chain of Nightmares.

Nephis had a bond with humanity that Sunny lacked.

So, it was natural that the entire camp of the Sword Army was excited to see her return.

Funnily enough... Sunny knew that she was quite popular in the camp of the Song Army, as well.

It was a bit strange, considering that Changing Star was an enemy to the warriors of Song, but also somewhat expected, since the same bond that existed between her and the soldiers of the Sword Army existed between her and the soldiers of the Song Army, too.

Plus, everyone in the Song camp knew that Nephis was the only one among the champions of Valor who had protested the King's decision to declare war on the Song Domain.

Cassie had probably made sure that they did.

As a result, the soldiers of the Song Army did not particularly hate Nephis. They showed anger and contempt when speaking about all the other Saints of the Sword Domain, and especially the King of Swords himself, but harbored no such feelings toward Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan.

Instead, when they spoke of her, there was just... melancholy, and a bit of regret.

It was especially so for Rain. She rarely mentioned Nephis and her companions, but Sunny knew that his sister felt a complicated mess of emotions in that regard — after all, she remembered knowing them, even if in her mind, it was because Effie had briefly lived in a neighboring house.

She remembered being taught by Nephis and Kai, being friendly with Effie, and meeting Cassie a few times. Knowing that they were her enemies now, and that she might meet them on a battlefield one day... was a difficult conflict to navigate.

Then again, that was how every soldier in Godgrave felt. Although the war between Anvil and Ki Song was positioned as a conflict between two independent Domains, it was in fact a bitter civil war at its core.

Everyone knew and valued someone in the other army. Friends had been forced to become reluctant enemies, and in some cases, even family members found themselves fighting on different sides.

That was the nature of being an Awakened — most of them had not chosen the region of the Dream Realm they called home. Instead, the Nightmare Spell had chosen for them, and relatively few were capable of traveling between distant Citadels, let alone crossing the Stormsea, employing the services of a Saint, or gaining access to a Dream Gate to reach the other Domain.

It was the same for Master Orum, whose clan had no choice but to become a vassal of Valor simply because their Citadel was situated in the East. If the Spell had sent him west of Godgrave, he would not have had to become a traitor and die in a dark cell — he would have simply supported Ki Song, his queen, openly and proudly.

So, there were a lot of rumblings in both of the great armies. Now that the initial chaos had settled and the day when humans would have to spill each other's blood was approaching, many felt resentment and trepidation about the entire situation.

But what could they do? The great Supremes had made a decision, and little people like them could not go against it even if they wished to.

Sunny believed that the discontent would only grow worse as the war went on and the wounds it dealt to soldiers mounted, leaving countless scars on their hearts... he was relying on that, actually. The war was an appalling affair, after all, and its horrors would only become more vile in the months to come.

The more disillusioned with the rule of the Sovereigns the valiant warriors of both Domains became, the more willing they would be to accept Neph's regicidal rebellion.

...Judging by how excited the soldiers were to see her return, things were progressing according to plan, at least for now.

The fame and esteem of the Lord of Shadows would help Nephis, as well. The more respected and feared he was, the more legitimate her claim to power would seem — after all, strength was the foundation of legitimacy in this violent world, and being able to lure someone that strong to her side would become the best proof of her personal power.

Sunny had abandoned the Ivory Island and came to the gates of the warcamp to watch Neph's party enter, mixing with the crowd. There were excited voices all around him...

"They're back!"

"Look, it's her! Lady Nephis!"

"Thank the gods, the Fire Keepers seemed to all be alive..."

"Lady Nephis! Lady Nephis! Here!"

"Glory! Glory!"

People were talking about Sunny, as well.

"Wait, where's the Lord of Shadows?"

"He's not coming back, idiot. He returned to his temple to command the western front."

"Temple? Why does that guy have a temple? What is he, a god?"

"Of course not! I mean... at least I don't think he is?"

"He might be..."

Sunny smiled crookedly, but then let out a wistful sigh.

It was as if none of them realized that what happened at Vanishing Lake, while important for spreading the Sword Domain across Godgrave, was really a Pyrrhic victory. Seven Saints of the Sword Army had perished, which was not only a painful loss for humanity, but also the reason why more of these soldiers would die in the future.

Of course, some people knew. The clans to which the fallen Saints had belonged were informed, and the news spread. Nobody had tried to keep it a secret, to begin with, at best trying to direct public attention somewhere else.

To the supposed triumph of Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows, for example, or to the perceived defeat of Dark Dancer Revel and her sisters.

But all of it were concerns for the future.

For now, Sunny simply wished to see Nephis after being separated from her for too many days.

Soon, his smile returned.

'There you are.'