2003: Morning Star

When Changing Star appeared, Rain let out a heavy sigh of relief. All tension left her body, and she slumped on the ground, kneeling in the middle of the battlefield with her back bent.

It was a strange reaction to have, really… by all logic, she should have been terrified. After all, an enemy Saint had arrived at the battlefield — and one of the most powerful Saints in the world, at that.

If not in the most powerful.

Sure, Rain knew Nephis, and they shared a distant connection. The last daughter of the Immortal Flame could even spare her out of sentiment if they were to face each other on the battlefield... however, that would require Nephis to remember and recognize Rain first.

Considering that Awakened soldiers were no more than ants in front of Changing Star, she was unlikely to study the faces of each and every one of them before burning the entire anthill to the ground.

…And yet, against all logic, Rain still felt a profound sense of relief at the sight of the beautiful Saint.

Somehow, she believed that her not-quite-sister-in-law would solve everything.

'Right… she's his girlfriend, as well…'

Finally able to think, Rain belatedly remembered about the existence of her teacher.

She hesitated for a moment.

[Brother?]

His reassuring voice soon resounded in her mind, soothing it.

[Relax. It's all going to be alright now.]

There was a short pause, and then he added in a more casual tone:

[Get ready to move, though. You'll have to escape fast once the real mess begins.]

It was only then that Rain tore her gaze from the sacred visage of Nephis of the Immortal Flame and looked around.

Tamar was still laying on the ground, heavily wounded and moving weakly.

The Feather Knight was still just a couple of steps away, tightly grasping her sword…

Luckily, the golden-haired girl did not seem in the mood to attack Rain at the moment. She was also looking at Changing Star with wide eyes.

…Everyone was, really.

Her shocking arrival had magically made the entire battle stop — on a vast span of the battlefield, at least. Soldiers were still clashing on the distant flanks of the battlefront, but in the center, nobody was moving.

It was as if her pure radiance possessed the same power as the dreadful white abyss hiding above the clouds — the power to make entire armies halt.

Rain turned back to Nephis just in time to see the soft light emanating from her skin grow brighter and more intense, almost blinding. Her wings dissolved into a stream of light, and in the next moment…

Everything around was suddenly enveloped by white flames.

The battlefield burned.

…But, strangely enough, no one was hurt by the ocean of radiant fire.

Rain watched in a trance as the bodies of the warriors of the Sword Army were swallowed by it, washed over by it… and restored by it.

The blood stopped flowing. The groans of agony fell silent. The terrible wounds closed, not leaving even a scar.

Thousands of warriors were miraculously brought back from the jaws of death, right in front of Rain's eyes. Cleansed by the Immortal Flame, they rose shakily to their feet, picked up their weapons…

And cast their gazes on the pilgrims of the Raven Queen, who looked like a mockery of all that was holy and of life itself in that moment.

However, Rain noticed something strange, as well.

She witnessed the wounds of the young Feather Knight being healed by the white flame — the gaping wound in her thigh disappearing, the bruises on her face fading, the pain draining from her beautiful eyes, replaced instead by awe and wonder…

But, oddly enough, the very same thing had happened to Tamar. The white flame embraced her, as well, washing away her terrible burns. When the radiance of the fire dimmed, her supple tan skin was smooth and pristine, unblemished.

In fact, there were quite a few warriors of the Song Army who had been saved by Changing Star's grace — not nearly as many as the Sword Army soldiers, but still a significant number.

It was… a bittersweet blessing.

Because there were so many people — on both sides — who had never received the chance to be saved.

The sun-bleached bone was awash in blood, and countless mangled bodies littered its crimson expanse.

More of them were standing motionlessly and watching Changing Star with hollow eyes, their bloodied faces devoid of any emotion.

She did not cower under the gazes of the dead.

Instead, she turned her head, and then walked calmly toward a figure kneeling on the ground a dozen or so meters away.

It was close enough for Rain to see that the figure was a woman with dirty-blonde hair — an Ascended champion of the Sword Army — who was holding a dying Blood Sister in her arms, still gripping the dagger that had delivered the a fatal wound in a bloody hand.

From the distance, it almost seemed like there were tears streaming down her face, mixing with blood and dirt.

As the beautiful Saint approached, the Ascended looked up at her with a pitiful face.

Her hoarse, strained voice was like a whisper.

"Lady Nephis…"

Changing Star smiled softly.

"It's alright."

With that, she kneeled in front of them and gently placed her hands on the Blood Sister's abdomen. Her radiance spread outward, flowing into the deep wound of the enemy champion.

A few moments later, the wound began to close.

Rain was so confused...

It did not make any sense.

Why would she heal her enemies?

The soldiers around her all seemed stunned, as well.

The white radiance reflected in their eyes, filling them with wondrous light.

Finally, the Blood Sister stirred weakly, moving her hands to rest them where the fatal cut had been just a few moments ago. Letting out a sigh, Changing Star lingered for several seconds, then rose to her feet and looked down at the kneeling Ascended of the Sword Army.

Raising her brow, she asked:

"What are you waiting for? Fall back."

Then, looking around, she raised her voice and gave the order to every soldier of the Sword Army that was still alive.

"All of you, fall back! Leave the rest to me."

Rain just stared in disbelief.

The battle was over... would be over, just like that?

She shifted her gaze and glanced at the Feather Knight, who had been listening to Nephis was rapt attention.

Now, relief was written on the young woman's face, as well.

The golden-haired girl exhaled slowly, then strained to rise to her feet. Turning around, she took the first unsteady step away.

Their gazes met for a moment.

The Feather Knight lingered, looking at Rain somberly.

Then, she nodded slightly, placed the blade of her sword on her shoulder, and continued walking.

All around, the Sword Army was receding like a sea.

Leaving only Changing Star behind.

Dazed and struggling to contain her excitement, Rain crawled to where Tamar was still laying on the ground and helped the young Legacy sit.

Making sure that Tamar was okay, she looked around once more.

The soldiers of the Sword Army were leaving, but her fellow warriors of Song still remained motionless, looking at Nephis with an array of different expressions.

Some seemed grateful. Some were amazed.

Most, however, were shaking and slowly backing off in terror.

Because now that the initial amazement was gone, they realized that they were left face-to-face with a wrathful demigod… alone.

Or so it seemed.

Rain did not notice when it happened, but at some point, the rows of soldiers parted, and a graceful figure appeared from behind them.

It was Princess Seishan, walking across the blood-soaked battlefield with light steps.

Suddenly, the air grew heavy, as if two enormous wills were clashing all around them, unseen by human eyes.

'Crap…'

Rain gripped Tamar's shoulders tighter, unsure what to do.

The Lost Princess, meanwhile, reached Nephis and stopped a dozen meters away from her, an enchanting smile playing on her crimson lips.

"Lady Nephis... what a pleasure. I did not expect to meet you today."

Her gaze shifted downward, falling on the Blood Sister laying at Changing Star's feet.

Princess Seishan's gaze changed subtly, for a moment, betraying a deep emotion. However, she managed to contain it swiftly, preventing anything from reflecting on her face.

She lingered a little, and then continued:

"...Still, I must express my gratitude. Thank you for saving one of my Handmaidens. It was… gracious of you, to show my soldier mercy."

Nephis simply looked at her, white flames dancing in her eyes.

After a few moments of silence, she said:

"She was my soldier once, too."

Seishan smiled.

"Indeed. However, Lady Nephis, please satiate my curiosity. I can't help but wonder… why are you here?"

Changing Star stared at her coldly for a bit.

Then, a corner of her mouth lifted slightly, and she answered with a hint of bittersweet amusement in her tone:

"...Because I want to."

Seishan seemed quite surprised by the answer — enough so that a melodious chuckle escaped from her lips.

Nephis inhaled deeply, then looked the princess of Song right in the eyes.

"Let us decide the outcome of this battle with our own hands. You and I… and all the other Saints, if they dare. Why should our soldiers continue to die in our place?"

Seishan tilted her head lightly and remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she said in a calm tone:

"That does sound like an attractive proposition, I admit. However, Lady Nephis… both you and I are forbidden from participating in this battle, are we not?"

Changing Star studied the Lost Princess of Song for a while, then smiled faintly.

"We are not allowed to enter battle, that is true. But I do decide to enter it…"

She raised her head slightly, and her incandescent eyes suddenly flashed with dancing white flames.

"...Who will stop me?"