2021 : End of the Battle

A similar situation was happening elsewhere on the battlefield.

There, a vast swath of the sun-bleached bone had been scorched by incinerating flames and turned black. It almost seemed as if it had been on the verge of igniting, angry red sparks and wisps of smoke still escaping from somewhere below.

The air was heavy with the smell of smoke, and white flames danced here and there on the charred remains of thralls and pilgrims.

This was where Nephis had fought Seishan, Death Singer, and the five Saints supporting them.

The battle had been fierce.

Seishan was powerful, and her power had only grown exponentially on a bloodsoaked battlefield. Death Singer seemed to possess some form of authority over blood, as well, both using it for offense and to boost her sister's already formidable prowess even further.

The five Saints that had come to join the Queen's daughters were not weak in any way, either.

However, it had all been for naught.

Once Nephis truly unleashed her flames and burned away the blood that had been spilled upon the ancient bone by the Awakened soldiers, Seishan and Death Singer found themselves at a disadvantage.

The Saints that had been supposed to slow Changing Star down did everything they were expected to do. Their Aspects worked well together, and they worked especially well against someone like her.

A carefully designed combination of powerful Memories enveloped the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan in a net of insidious enchantments.

The thralls and the pilgrims descended upon her like a plague.

And yet…

None of it worked.

Nephis broke free of the net, withstood the barrage of melee and ranged attacks unleashed by the five Saints, turned the thralls and the pilgrims into ash, and faced the two daughters of Ki Song like a radiant, harrowing spirit of flame.

Her skill, power, and absolute resolve were overwhelming.

The Saints of Song were shocked and dismayed.

Then, a hint of fear entered their hearts.

Even Death Singer seemed shaken by the ferocious might of Changing Star...

Only Seishan did not seem that surprised.

After all, she had witnessed who Nephis was, and what she could do, all the way back on the Forgotten Shore.

In fact, she understood clearly that Changing Star was holding back her most destructive powers.

The only thing she could not understand was…

Why?

Was it out of a sense of empty sentimentality?

No, the young woman she had come to know in the Dark City was not someone who could be swayed by such emotions.

So why, then?

A subtle frown twisted Seishan's exquisite brow.

In the end, the result of the clash between Changing Star and the seven Saints of Song was quite predictable.

By the time the Song Army sounded retreat, all seven of them were beaten and battered, in agony, and barely clinging to life...

And yet, they were alive.

The blinding light of the radiant figure dimmed, and in a whirlwind of sparks, a pristine white tunic covered her slender body. Changing Star, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame, looked at them with emotionless eyes.

The lovely young woman with beautiful silver hair wore no armor and wielded no weapons. Pure and untainted by the blood and soot of the battlefield, she looked like a heavenly being… breathtaking and completely out of place in this sweltering, dark hell.

Not at all like the unstoppable monster who had ruthlessly crushed, burned, and broken them all.

Only her striking grey eyes betrayed the inhuman coldness of the incandescent white void hiding in her soul.

Seishan suppressed a groan, staring at her own charred body.

It was time to retreat…

In shame and dishonor.

Not everyone knew how to retreat gracefully, though.

One of them — the young Saint of the Maharana clan — looked up at Changing Star and asked in a hoarse, trembling voice:

"...Why didn't you kill me?"

She looked down at him, no emotion visible in her cold grey eyes.

After a few moments of silence, Nephis simply shrugged.

"Because you are not my enemy."

With that, she turned around and left with light steps.

The young man seemed confused, failing to understand the meaning of her words.

Seishan's frown, however, deepened slightly.

Somewhere else on the battlefield…

Three bleeding corpses were laying on the ground, staring at Saint Jest with empty eye sockets. The old man wiped his bloody hands on the shirt of one of them, then clicked his tongue and crushed the head of the other when the corpse attempted to rise.

Looking at his once again bloodied hand with a squeamish expression, he shook his head with a wry smile.

"That girl… still playing house, at her age. Someone should really remind her that dolls are for children."

With that, he looked up with a wondering look.

"Oh… right. I should check on Little Mercy and see how he is doing. Today must have been tough on him…"

Humming a lively melody under his nose, Saint Jest straightened, stretched his back, then picked up his cane and walked away.

Someplace else…

A pile of scrap metal slowly unfurled itself and rose from the ground. Fiend was in a terrible shape, his steel body hideously shredded and torn apart so viciously that it resembled an abstract sculpture.

Fighting the Chain Wyrms had not been an easy fit for him, especially with some of his powers sealed by the shattering of space.

Raising one of his remaining hands, the ravenous Shadow used a sharp claw to fish a piece of melting glass from between his fangs and stared in the direction where the two remaining Reflections had gone with a hateful expression.

A few moments later, a sound that resembled the low roar of spreading flame resounded from his fiery maw:

"Wrrrretches…"

In that moment, Fiend made a decision.

He was going to tell on them… to Big Sister!

Not too far away, Saint retracted her darkness and watched indifferently as her one remaining enemy limped away.

Serpent, however, was surrounded only by silence.

Because all of its enemies were dead.

Just like that, the battle was over.

But its aftershocks were destined to spread far and wide, shaping many of the things that were to come.