2025: A Bitter Triumph

On the other side of the scorched and ravaged battlefield, in the camp of the Sword Army, there was another tent. The three people inside were supposed to be in a much better mood than the Queen's daughters — they were the victors, after all — and yet, the atmosphere was just as somber.

Sunny was sitting on a wooden trunk, for once feeling burdened and suffocated by the weight of his armor and the cool touch of his mask. He wished he could dismiss it and feel the gentle touch of fresh air on his skin…

Or Neph's gentle touch.

Nephis herself was sitting quietly on her austere cot, wearing a pristine white tunic. She did not seem like someone who had just participated in a harrowing battle, but her gaze was cold and distant, devoid of human warmth.

Still, she made an effort to spare him a pale smile.

Cassie was sitting on the Shadow Chair, which Sunny had summoned for her. Out of the three of them, she had fared the worst in the battle — the Song Army had not sent more than one Saint to face her, but Cassie was not someone meant for the mayhem of the battlefield, either. She had won the duel, of course, but not without suffering several painful blows.

Or maybe she had simply endured them on purpose, not wishing to disclose the true extent of her lethality to those who considered her a relatively weak and helpless Saint. Even now, Sunny couldn't say for sure.

All three of them were silent.

The silence that surrounded them had a special quality, too, because of the runic enchantment Cassie had drawn on the floor — a complicated spell to ward off unwanted attention.

Sunny sighed, then turned into a shadow. A moment later, he manifested himself into a person again, this time wearing [Definitely Not Me] instead of Weaver's Mask.

After lingering for a moment, he said:

"Things went well, did they not?"

They had. A few unforeseen complications had emerged, just as expected, but the plan had worked better than they could have hoped.Nephis had greatly elevated her status, cementing herself as the only voice of reason and compassion in the dreadful crucible of this cruel, demented war. She had won the hearts of countless soldiers of the Sword Army… and of the Song Army, as well.

Better yet, she had saved countless lives that would have been lost in the senseless slaughter otherwise.

She had also established herself as a leader among the Saints, let them witness the will of the Sovereigns being defied with impunity, and shown the vast and awesome power of her pure flames…

That last part was especially important.

Personal valor still mattered most among the Legacy Clans, after all, whose claim to nobility rested on the laurels of martial excellence — with Saints serving as living embodiments of the fearless virtue the members of military aristocracy were meant to possess.

Nephis had not only demonstrated her willingness and ability to disobey the Sovereigns, but also proved that she had the right to.

…Not only because she was strong herself, but also because she was capable enough to ensure the loyalty of someone who was in no way weaker.

The Lord of Shadows.

Sunny's astounding performance was like a cherry on top of a delicious cake… or rather, a scoop of ice cream on top of a delectable waffle, in his case. With fresh strawberries on the side.

This aspect of their plan was just as important as the battle itself. After all, at the end of the day, it did not matter what the soldiers, the Legacies, and the Saints thought or felt. Nothing mattered, because in the world where strength reigned supreme, the reign of Supremes was absolute.

Since they were the strongest.

Their strength was so tyrannical, in fact, that even the most exalted warriors of humanity could not dare to dream of resisting their rule — otherwise, half of the warriors in both great armies would have stayed home instead of following the Sovereigns to Godgrave.

There were plenty of dissidents among the soldiers,and among the Saints, too — like Tyris and Roan of the White Feather clan. The longer the war continued and the more lives it claimed, the more the disillusionment within the great armies spread… like pressure building in a tank.

However, the Sovereigns were too strong, and could not be defied. There was no vent to release the pressure, and so, the pressure only grew.

Or rather, there had not been. Until today.

What Nephis, Sunny, and Cassie had done was more than simply change the nature of one battle. They had also shown people a... a glimpse of hope. A vision of the future where someone was, in fact, strong enough to challenge the Supremes. A possibility.

Granted…

It was all, of course, nothing but a lie — a treacherous bluff concocted to deceive the people. Because they still had no real way of defeating the Sovereigns, only a determination to find one.

Still, as far as grand acts of treachery and deceit went, this one had been performed quite wonderfully.

The plan had worked very well.

And that was exactly the problem.

Nephis looked at Sunny silently, but it was Cassie who spoke.

"It did go well. Too well, really."

So, it seemed that they had come to the same conclusion as him.

Sunny had anticipated that the Sword Army would win the battle — they were themselves warriors of the Sword Army, after all. However, the defeat of the enemy was too decisive, too crushing.

The losses of the Song Army were too dire when compared to the losses of the Sword Domain. That, he had not expected.

Everything seemed to have happened exactly how the King of Swords had wanted it to happen…

Which meant that the King had known what Nephis would do far in advance.

Did he also know why she had done it?

What was her true intention?

What was her goal?

Sunny could not help but feel ill at ease.

He looked at Nephis, lingered for a moment, and then asked:

"How much does he really trust you? How much does he distrust you? What has his demeanor been like in these past few years,when he interacted with you?"

It had been… more than five years — six for for Sunny because of the Tomb of Ariel — since Clan Valor adopted Nephis. Her status within the royal clan was honestly quite strange. On one hand, she had been kept at a distance and mistreated by the elders of Valor, who almost seemed keen on getting her killed.

On the other hand, Anvil himself had shown her quite a bit of grace, even making her the nominal commander of the Sword Army after sending Morgan away.

Their relationship was ambiguous, and since the man almost never showed human emotions, Sunny could not even guess what was happening in his head.

Under the iron crown.

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, staring at him evenly.

Then, she suddenly said:

"...It's unpleasant to talk to you when you are wearing a mask."

Sunny blinked.

What was that, all of a sudden?

Was she trying to say that she wanted to see his face?

Nephis seemed a little surprised by her response, as well. She frowned slightly, then shook her head.

"It is hard to tell. He keeps most people at a distance. His heart is a mystery… if he even has one. Still, with me, he was a bit different. Almost… sentimental? No, hardly. Maybe curious. I thought that the attention he was paying me was minimal, but Morgan seemed surprised. As if it was much more than what he paid to everyone else."

She hesitated for a bit, then added evenly:

"It is because of my mother, I think. He spoke of her a couple of times."

So… general weirdness, but nothing that alluded to distrust or suspicion. Quite the contrary, actually.

Of course, one had to remember that the Sovereigns had insistently tried to assassinate Nephis in the past, when she had no value.

Sunny sighed, unsure what to think.

He still felt uncomfortable speaking openly about their secrets, even with Cassie's enchantments protecting them from being spied on. So, he tried to remain as vague as possible.

In the end,he simply said:

"I think it is better if we assume the worst."