2097 Checklist   
  
Nephis remained silent for a while, studying him calmly. Then, she raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Leave?"  
  
Sunny leaned back and sighed.  
  
After collecting his thoughts, he spoke in a neutral tone:  
  
"What happened in the Hollows… really put things in perspective, for me. Not only how fearsome the King of Swords is, but also how great the gap between the higher Ranks is. So, for the first time in a long while, I am craving power once again."  
  
Nephis frowned, seemingly reluctant to let him go. Sunny did not know if that reluctance was merely his imagination, but he felt strangely uplifted by the idea that she was displeased at the idea of parting with him, even if it was for a short time.  
  
"There are a couple of flaws in your reasoning. Firstly, it doesn't matter how great the distance between the Ranks is, because we… I… will confront the Sovereigns after attaining Supremacy myself. Secondly, you and I are different from the King of Swords, the Queen of Worms, and the other one. Because we are divine."  
  
She meant their Divine Aspects, of course. Sunny had not made it secret that he, too, possessed one of those — in fact, he had not really needed to reveal it to Nephis. She had more or less figured it out on her own.  
  
The Divine Aspects bestowed far greater potential on an Awakened, and both Sunny and Nephis had undergone countless ordeals and tribulations to realize that potential. They were also no mere Beasts, while Anvil, despite being a Supreme, still only possessed one soul core — that as well had contributed to the disparity between him and Condemnation.  
  
There was some truth to her words.  
  
Sunny smiled faintly.  
  
"Plans go awry all the time, so there is no guarantee that our desire to attain Supremacy will be fulfilled in time. As for our divine powers… when has raw power ever been the deciding factor in anything? Both of us had made our living from slaying beings stronger than ourselves. I am reluctant to find myself on the opposite side of this equation."  
  
Nephis suddenly chuckled.  
  
"And, therefore, you want… to search for more power?"  
  
He raised his hands and shrugged.  
  
"What can I say, I'm a complicated man. At least I will be able to tell myself that I've done everything I could when I die."  
  
She remained silent for a few moments, then nodded.  
  
"So, where are you going to search for power?"  
  
Sunny looked around the spacious, sunlit expanse of her chamber and lingered with the answer.  
  
Eventually, he said simply:  
  
"The Shadow Realm."  
  
Nephis seemed startled for a moment.  
  
"The… the realm of Shadow God?"  
  
He smiled.  
  
"Yes. Where else would a shadow like me go to find something like that?"  
  
Then, Sunny sighed.  
  
"To be honest, now that the final chapter of the war is approaching, I can't help but feel… incomplete. Because I've never managed to form my Titan Core. It is not that significant, in the greater scheme of things, true. But I am compelled to try."  
  
He did not mention that it would be extremely dangerous… there was no need to. Danger was a given.  
  
Nephis studied him for a while, then asked with a hint of hesitation in her voice:  
  
"Why you? This you, I mean. You've… never used Master Sunless for such tasks."  
  
Sunny smiled bitterly.  
  
If he could, he would have allowed the humble shopkeeper… who had somehow managed to become a widely renowned Knight Commander of the Sword Army in the meantime… to stay away from anything having to do with combat and bloodshed. But he had little choice.  
  
"What else can I do? The Lord of Shadow is in the Hollows, being watched closely by a Sovereign. I don't dare pull any of my incarnations away from there. The incarnation in the camp of the Song Army can't leave its post. I, however, am both available and known for locking myself in the basement for days on end. So, this is the best choice."  
  
Nephis looked down, displeased.  
  
Eventually,though, she sighed.  
  
"Makes sense."  
  
A few moments later, she looked at him again and asked:  
  
"When are you leaving, then?"  
  
Time was of the essence,so Sunny saw no reason to waste it.  
  
He shrugged.  
  
"Now."  
  
She studied him silently for a while.  
  
Then, Nephis leaned forward and smiled a little.  
  
"How about leaving after breakfast?"  
  
Sunny frowned.  
  
"But we just had dinner."  
  
Then, his expression changed.  
  
"Oh."  
  
And then changed some more.  
  
"Sure. That's a great idea, as well…"  
  
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In the morning, Sunny gave a few instructions to Aiko and retreated into the basement of the Brilliant Emporium.  
  
Once there, he made a few last preparations and steeled himself for battle.  
  
The memory of having his chest pierced by an arrow soured his expression, but he still resolutely dismissed the Nebulous Mantle, manifesting the Onyx Mantle instead.  
  
…It felt strange, to wear the fearsome black armor on his original body once again. Master Sunless had only existed briefly, but Sunny had grown used to his leisurely life. That persona of his was as much of a safe harbor for him as it, hopefully, was for Nephis.  
  
But that time had come to an end. Even if he did not delve into the Shadow Realm now, Sunny was not sure how much longer Master Sunless could continue to exist. The resolution of the war, whatever it would be, was going to change a lot of things, so his fate — or lack thereof — was unpredictable.  
  
After gathering his thoughts for a while, he manifested the gloomy shadow into an avatar and looked at him for a few moments.  
  
"This… is going to hurt a lot, isn't it?"  
  
His other self grinned darkly and answered in the same voice:  
  
"Of course. Have you forgotten the last time?"  
  
No, he had not forgotten. The Shadow Realm was a perilous place, and especially so for Sunny.  
  
Out there, shadows were being disassembled into streams of essence by the Realm itself. Being a creature of flesh and bone slowed the process, somewhat, but it did not stop it.  
  
Which meant that Sunny would be on a timer the moment he entered the Shadow Lantern. Worse than that, many of his powers would be too dangerous to use. He would not be able to use Shadow Step,build truly effective Shells, send his shadows to scout ahead, or even augment himself — or his Memories — with their power.  
  
Ironically enough, the Shadow Realm — which was supposed to be his natural environment — put more restrictions on Sunny than the Dream Realm did.  
  
And then there was the mysterious archer, as well.  
  
Sunny smiled.  
  
"Still. I can't help but feel strangely excited. We are finally going to explore a new place."  
  
The second Sunny rolled his eyes.  
  
"Curiosity killed the cat, you know."  
  
Sunny nodded.  
  
Then, he frowned.  
  
"...What the hell is a cat?"  
  
His other self laughed.  
  
Perhaps it was a bit self-absorbed, to be laughing at his own jokes, but Sunny was nevertheless pleased with himself.  
  
Raising a hand, he summoned the Shadow Lantern.