2136 Ritual  
  
"...And that was when I said goodbye to Eurys and rushed back to where I had entered the Shadow Realm, to return here. For what it's worth… I think that scoundrel was happy to know that you are alright. Despite the colorful words he used to describe you."  
  
Nephis remained silent for a while, looking at Sunny with wonder. She had asked him a few questions here and there during his tale, but mostly kept quiet and listenеd intently.  
  
A few moments later, she slowly shook her head.  
  
"He is from the time before the Nightmare Spell ruled the world. He would not know what Nightmares are and how they function. So, he would not be able to guess that I received the Attribute of [Nephilim] after conquering the First Nightmare… he would simply think that I was born as one. Nephilim were children of an unholy union between the divine and the profane, so for people of that era, they would be more abominable than even those who had been corrupted by the Void."  
  
She shrugged.  
  
"So, don't hold it against him."  
  
A moment later, a rare smile illuminated her face.  
  
"Still. I am glad that he fulfilled his wish and reached the Shadow Realm. Our time together was brief, but I enjoyed his company."  
  
Sunny looked at her with curiosity.  
  
"Does it matter, though? Whether he is swallowed by the mist of the Underworld or destroyed by the Shadow Realm, the result is more or less the same. More than that… I think he was lying to me, from the start. Didn't he tell you once that there was not much time for him left after being taken off that tree? So, it might be that he simρly invented the whole story about being cursed by Shadow God."  
  
Nephis contemplated his words, then shook her head slowly.  
  
"I think… what he meant was that he would become mindless like the rest of the restless dead in the Nightmare Desert eventually, separated from the tree. And it does matter — it matters for him, at least. Think about it as a body being left for the elements or receiving a proper burial.FOr the ancient people, it was proper for the shadows of the dead to find peace in the Shadow Realm, so even if Eurys was denied death, he would still want his final resting place to be in the Realm of Shadow God."  
  
She looked at Sunny and smiled slightly.  
  
"It is better than the alternatives, in any case."  
  
Then, Nephis chuckled quietly.  
  
"But isn't it strange, to be talking about the Shadow Realm as the mystical nature of death so matter-of-factly, as if they were not supposed to be myths?"  
  
Sunny shrugged.  
  
"I guess? Is it strangeг than fighting a war on the rib cage of a continent-sized skeleton, though? Or sailing through time inside a pyramid that remains far away no matter how long you travel in its direction? Let's be honest… our lives are not and have never been quite normal."  
  
Nephis nodded, then looked at him seriously.  
  
"So, the Shadow Realm… are you the only one who can enter it? Or can you take others with you?"  
  
Sunny hesitated for a few moments.  
  
"I am not sure if I can take someone with me into the Gate of Shadow. However, I used my seventh incarnation to leave a tether — as far away from the heartland as I could, since I fear the beings who dwell there. So, I can bring someone to the Shadow Realm from the waking world. That said… I wouldn't recommend going. It is too dangerous, and it is only useful for someone like me. Even then, I am not planning on returning there any time soon."  
  
Nephis sighed and noddеd again.  
  
"That is probably wise."  
  
After that, her expression turned contemplative.  
  
Eventually, she said quietly:  
  
"And act of defiance…"  
  
Sunny remained silent, thinking about what Eurys had said again.  
  
After some time, Nephis frowned.  
  
"It makes sense, somehow. The essence of Supremacy is not simply to have enough power to rule the world, but more so to have conviction powerful enough to make the world submit to your strength. To will it. And it seems that one has to prove the power of their conviction through an exceptional act… a ritual, of sorts,or a sаcrifice."  
  
Sunny chuckled, amused by her words.  
  
"Conviction… funny you would use that word…"  
  
But he understood what she was trying to say. It was not that attaining Supremacy demanded a particular ritual to be performed — it was that any act that resulted in attaining Supremacy would be a ritual bydefinition.  
  
He had never thought of thinking about it as a sacrifice, though. That was also an unusual choice of words.  
  
Had Azarax, the Plague of Steel, sacrificed his father to take his place?  
  
In that case, what was Sunny supposed to sacrifice to complete the ritual?  
  
Suddenly, he remembered an old story that Nephis had told him once… the story about a great hero named Heracles whose divine self had become a god, while his mortal self had become a forlorn shadow wandering aimlessly in the darkness of the Underworld… the mythical version of the Underworld, not the real world.  
  
He shivered, suddenly uncomfortable.  
  
Eventually, Sunny sighed.  
  
"In any case… we are running out of time."  
  
Nephis looked at him somberly, then nodded with a sigh.  
  
Sunny really did not want to say what he was going to say next, but there was little choice.  
  
He took a deep breath.  
  
"Anvil has already cleaved a path through the Hollow of the First Rib. Once the Sword Army emerges from below and the Lesser Crossing Stronghold falls, Ki Song would have no choice but to retreat. And when the base camp of the Song Army is surrounded… it would be only a matter of days before the Sovereigns clash. That is our deadline. Do you think we will attain Supremacy by then?"  
  
Nephis hesitated for a while, then said evenly:  
  
"I can't be sure of that."  
  
Sunny nodded.  
  
"Which means that we have to start asking ourselves a few difficult questions. And no matter what our answers are… I think that we need to change the plan a little."  
  
He sighed.  
  
'For better or worse...'