2442 Self-Sufficient Cycle  
  
  
"...And so, I cleaved the Snow Tyrant's head clean off."  
  
He finished the description оf the battle with a thoughtful expression, looking at the stars burning in the cold black sky beyond the window.  
  
"I think that it was mostly lying through its teeth to confuse me — well, actually, I don't think that it had a mouth, so it was lying through whatever it had instead of teeth. Puppeteer was definitely not as immune to the madness of Corruption as it presented itself, at least. As for the rest…"  
  
He frowned.  
  
"...Maybe there was some truth to what it said, after all. Even if it twisted the meaning of it all entirely to sow seeds of doubt into my mind."  
  
Speaking of which, Sunny had felt a few of those still growing in his heart after returning from Ariel's Game — soon to give birth to larval Worm's of Doubt, certainly. He poisoned them with Death Will and obliterated them completely, shivering in fear and disgust, then asked Nephis to purify him with her radiant flames just in case. Kai underwent the same cleansing.  
  
That did the job, preventing the Puppeteer from infecting the world with its sinister malice from beyond the grave. Things could have gone differently if it had met a less paranoid — and well-informed — adversary.  
  
There was silence in the council chamber for a while.  
  
Then, Nephis said in a contemplative tone:  
  
"Actually, I'm inclined to believe at least one thing the moth told you."  
  
Sunny raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Oh? Which one?"  
  
She looked into the distance, a distant expression on her beautiful face.  
  
"What it said about the Flame waning. If you think about it… that is only natural, no?"  
  
Sunny studied her carefully.  
  
"I'm not sure. Natural? How so?"  
  
Nephis let out a light sigh.  
  
"Our world was created by the gods, who were born from the Flame of Desire. But a flame does indeed need fuel to burn — it cannot exist in a vacuum. So, what fuel was there for the Flame of Desire to burn, all those eons ago, before time even existed?"  
  
Sunny tilted his head a little, confused by her words.  
  
'What fuel...'  
  
Then, his eyes widened slightly.  
  
What else could there have been, in the eternity before time existed?  
  
He whispered:  
  
"The… Void?"  
  
Nephis nodded.  
  
"That would make sense. An everlasting, endless source of fuel for an immortal, inexhaustible flame."  
  
Her eyes flared with a promise of white flames, as well.  
  
"But there was also an irrevocable conflict between the ever-changing Void and the eternally constant Desire. So, the gods waged a war against the Void and eventually imprisoned it… separating the Flame from the Void by nothing. Now, the Flame burns in a vacuum, deprived of its fuel... of its source. So, the Flame is waning, and at the same time, the Flame is sustaining itself, by itself... from itself."  
  
Cassie spoke at that moment, her voice sounding soft in the silence of the council chamber:  
  
"But it does sustain itself. It's a closed, self-sufficient cycle. We are all a part of the Flame, and our own desires fuel it. The Puppeteer tried its hardest to paint that truth as something vilе and appalling, but I think it's the opposite. To me, it seems… it seems beautiful. A flame that ensures itself, burning brightly with human striving and longing..."  
  
She faced them and smiled hesitantly.  
  
"Don't you think so?"  
  
Nephis looked at the stars, while Sunny shrugged.  
  
"Well, we are indeed of the Flame — of this vast and strange existence the gods created. So the Puppeteer's whole argument was meaningless behind its sophistry, since he was trying to convince me that being destroyed and consumed by the Void is a better alternative to being alive… simply because being alive is not all sunshine and roses."  
  
He scoffed.  
  
"I don't know about you, but sunshine is overrated… I'd much rather relax in the shade. And as far as roses go, most of the flowers I encountered in my life had tried to either eat me, shred me to pieces with their thorns, or get their pollen into my body to use it as fertilizer — none of which is conducive to being alive, as it happens."  
  
Sunny smiled.  
  
Yes, life was cruel at times… life was a constant struggle, and for some people — people like him — it was more often bitter than sweet.  
  
…But it was, after all, sweet.  
  
Life was also beautiful, joyful, and exciting, full of precious things like affection, contentment, accomplishment, fun… it contained friendship, camaraderie, love, passion; there was beauty, intellectual pursuits, challenge, and thrill…  
  
Even though Sunny's life had not been an easy one, it had also been a life full of great pleasure and joy. One side of his life could not have existed without the other, and the struggles he had overcome to be where he was gave meaning to it all, making each triumph feel so much more satisfying.  
  
That too was the Flame…  
  
And that was what he had to protect from being consumed by Corruption, from becoming swallowed by the alien malice of the primordial Void.  
  
He sighed and looked at Nephis. "You had a run-in with a Cursed One yourself, didn't you? What do you think?"  
  
Sunny had killed four Cursed Nightmare Creatures in Ariel's Game — Abundance, the Wolf, the Rat King, and the Puppeteer. The Brass Giant had perished as a result of his actions, as well, while three more fallen deities had died in a mysterious way.  
  
It was a breathtaking achievement, no doubt… and yet, Sunny did not feel a lot of confidence at the moment.  
  
In fact, he was left properly shaken by his experiences in the Death Game.  
  
In truth, while Sunny had been at a great disadvantage in the dreadful world of Ariel's creation, its laws had also worked in his favor. The Cursed Ones had been restrained in how they could move and what they could do, for one. The nature of the Ash Domain made the battle for the Shrine of Truth easier, while the Shrine itself had empowered his companions tremendously…  
  
And even then, he had just barely survived.  
  
If Sunny had met the same Cursed Ones in the wild reaches of the Dream Realm, who knew how things would have turned out?  
  
Nephis remained silent for a while, then said in a somber tone:  
  
"It was… much more dangerous than I had imagined. In truth, I am lucky to be alive."  
  
Her expression darkened.  
  
"That single Cursed Demon could have wiped out all of humanity. I defeated it, yes — but my victory was not assured. The battle was a close one, in fact, no different from a gamble."  
  
She pursed her lips.  
  
"In short, the Cursed Ones are too dangerous. Every single one of them is an extinction-level threat, despite how powerful you and I have become. And there are more than a few of them out there, as well. There are five just here in the Jade Palace at the moment… gods only кnow how many remain in Godgrave, both in the Hollows and in the Sea of Ash."  
  
Nephis scowled.  
  
"There are also the Death Zones south of Godgrave, the frozen wastelands west of Ravenheart, the Hollow Mountains and the Underworld, the Burned Forest, the Abyss and the Shadow Realm, the unexplored reaches… and depths… of the Stormsea, and other regions of the Dream Realm we have not even discovered yet."  
  
Finally, she looked at Suny and let out a tired sigh.  
  
"If all of them — or even only some of them — suddenly converge on the Human Domain, we will stand no chance. And that… that is not even mentioning the Unholy Ones. Considering how vast the gap between the Great and Cursed Nightmare Creatures is already, I'm afraid that both of us combined won't be strong enough to face even a single one."  
  
Sunny remained silent, a grim expression on his face. It was not that he did not have anything to say… it was just that he agreed with Nephis. The two of them were the strongest warriors of humanity — by far — and they were barely powerful enough to contend against isolated Cursed abominations.  
  
What would happen if an Unholy Nightmare Creature revealed itself, instead?  
  
He shivered.  
  
Nephis, meanwhile, shook her head.  
  
"...Which is to say that our reasoning was correct. Being Supreme is not at all enough to achieve our goals. We must become more powerful… much more powerful. And we must gain that power as fast as we can."  
  
She looked at him, hesitated for a moment, and then added in a lower tone:  
  
"Or… at least one of us must. If they are willing."  
  
Sunny remained silent for a while, leaning on the backrest of the Shadow Chair. Many thoughts wandered around his mind aimlessly, but he still could not come up with thе answer.  
  
In the end, he said:  
  
"There is something else about my experience in Ariel's Game that I must tell you. Something… quite important. Maybe even more important than anything we have known until now."  
  
He inhaled deeply, and then looked at Nephis and Cassie.  
  
"It concerns a group of people who called themselves the Nine, Weaver, and the Nightmare Spell…"