1256 Reaching for the Stars

Sunny and Nephis climbed back into the familiar fissure only after the seven suns plunged into the waters of the Great River. They hungrily consumed the last few ration packs from the Covetous Coffer, and then settled on the weathered rock to sleep.

Saint was standing guard above the fissure, and Nightmare was near to protect their dreams. So, they decided not to alternate and let themselves rest through the whole night.

The world was swiftly enveloped in darkness. The nocturnal glow of the Great River did not reach the depths of the fissure, and there were no stars or the moon in the sky. The world was entirely black, as if they had plunged into an endless void.

Listening to the soft sounds of Neph's breath, Sunny let the sense of fatigue overwhelm him.

He was tired. However, it was not the cruel, chilling exhaustion he had suffered often in the past months... instead, this fatigue was of a satisfying and pleasurable kind. Something he had not felt in a while.

Sunny had learned a lot during their training today. They had practiced together until the sunset, and in the process, both had done their best to make the opponent sweat. He had not held back much, and neither had Nephis.

In the end, Sunny found himself lacking. Even after all this time, she was still like a distant star... one he could see, but never touch. At least in terms of swordsmanship and mastery of battle.

It should have been disheartening, but he found it strangely encouraging instead. Sunny felt as though he had been shown a new horizon... something to strive for, as well as a clear direction to reach for the stars.

He also realized that there were still flaws in his mastery of Shadow Dance. That was a valuable revelation in and of itself... armed with it, he could refine and perfect his formless style, bringing it closer to the next step.

That said... Sunny felt very strange right now.

It was because he had realized that, currently, he was more powerful than Nephis.

Yes, she was a better fighter than him. However, Sunny had so many tools at his disposal. He also had two Transcendent Devils and an Awakened Terror on his side. If the two of them were to battle seriously... he wasn't entirely sure who would be left standing at the end, but he knew that his odds were much higher than hers.

It was a... vast, tumultuous, and deeply unsettling emotion.

What surprised him the most, however, was how weak of a reaction it aroused in him. There had been a time when becoming more powerful than Nephis was all he ever thought about. But now... he felt almost indifferent.

It was what it was. There was no point in racing to the finish line, anyway. That line would not change.

It did not matter which one of them became a Terror first, because sooner or later, both of them would end up as Titans. It did not matter that Sunny was ahead for the first time — her Ascended Ability was not of a kind that added to one's power, that was all.

They were in the same boat, anyway.

Perhaps he could allow himself to feel that way because he was more secure about the Shadow Bond, and the power she held over him. Nephis had proven that she had no intention of ever using it... and he had grown more confident in his ability to make one or both of them die even if she did.

'How romantic...'

He sighed, feeling calm and cozy in the darkness that enveloped them. After a while, Sunny asked:

"Hey, Neph... are you asleep yet?"

There were few moments of silence before she answered.

"No."

Hidden in the darkness, he grinned.

"...How is the sleeping bag? Is it warm?"

There had been only two sleeping bags in the Covetous Coffer — one that Sunny used in the wilderness, and a spare one. Sadly, he had ripped through one of them when the azure serpent first made the dark island quake, so now, there was only one.

Sunny had chosen to sleep on the weathered rock, relying on the unique qualities of the Marble Shell to keep him comfortable. Luckily, the Great River seemed to have a mild climate, so he was not particularly cold. The fissure protected them from the wind, as well.

So, he had no problem letting Nephis use the only remaining sleeping bag. However... that didn't mean that he wouldn't tease her about it...

A calm answer came from the darkness.

"Yes, I am warm. It is of high quality."

As the grin froze on Sunny's face, he sighed.

'She's really... too thick to be teased. Damn'

A few moments later, Neph asked:

"Oh... do you want me to hand it over? It is your sleeping bag... it would only be right for the owner to use it..."

Sunny flinched.

"No, no! Keep it. That's not what I wanted at all."

'Gods, she's hopeless...'

There was a long pause. Then, Neph's voice came from the darkness again:

"Ah! I see. You want to use it together?"

Hearing that, Sunny's entire body shuddered.

"What? No! That's not what I meant at all! Who do you take me for? I was just teasing

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you!

Suddenly, he heard a soft chuckle. Turning his head, Sunny saw Neph covering her mouth with a hand. She was suppressing a laugh...

His eyes widened.

'Wait... a reverse tease? I've been played!' His heart ached. How embarrassing...

He stared at Nephis incredulously for a few moments, then laid down and looked back at the jagged line of the distant black sky. A moment or two later, he suddenly laughed, too.

"This is... this is just too ridiculous..."

Nephis lowered her hand, then asked in an amused tone: "What is?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I mean... we are sailing a river of an Unholy Titan's blood on the corpse of a Great Monster. Moving back in time. And giggling like children..."

She remained silent for a while before saying in her usual calm tone: "Yes. It does sound a little ridiculous."

Then, there was a comfortable silence between them.

Sunny looked at the black sky for a while. Soon, a sigh escaped from his lips. He lingered for a long time, then turned his head to look at her again. "Neph? Can I ask you something?"

She turned her head to face him, as well, even though she couldn't see anything in the dark.

"Sure."

Sunny hesitated.

But, eventually, he still asked:

"Can you tell me what happened to you in the Second Nightmare?"

A hint of amusement slowly disappeared from her eyes. Her faint smile was erased, as well.

Nephis remained silent for a long time, her expression turning bleak and distant. Then, she sighed.

"...Okay. I'll tell you."

Her voice sounded strangely forlorn.

Turning away, Nephis looked into the darkness and said:

"In my Second Nightmare, I was a woman made of stone. Like your Shadow, but also different... defective..."