1257 In the Darkness

Nephis looked into the darkness as she spoke in an even voice:

"It happened after the Demon of Destiny had his falling out with the Goddess of the Black Skies... I think. But before Hope escaped her chains, and the daemons rose in rebellion against the gods. In the darkness... in the true darkness that fills the halls and caverns of the Underworld. Below the Hollow Mountains."

She sighed.

"When I opened my eyes, I was a woman made of stone. A crude, clumsy, and defective precursor of the Stone Saints. I was laying on a mountain of abandoned statues just like me, all of them broken, discarded, and forsaken. Everything around me was enveloped by cold darkness, with not a spark of light or hint of warmth anywhere. There was just me, my broken siblings, and the lonesome silence."

Sunny shifted slightly. "True darkness?"

Nephis slowly nodded.

"Yes... those mountains are called hollow, but in fact, they are full of darkness. Their hollows are like great reservoirs of it — it is where darkness lives, and where it comes from. True darkness is very much like this river, in fact. Legends say that a terrible creature was slain by the gods once, at the dawn of time, and that its blood seeped into the earth. This is what true darkness is — the dark creature's blood."

Sunny shivered. That dark creature... to be the source of all true darkness, of the entire element of darkness, it had to be something far greater than an Unholy Titan.

It must have been one of the unknown, then. A being of the Void...

Ignorant of what he was thinking about, Nephis continued after a short pause:

"The Hollow Mountains are a scar left by the death of that creature. And so, most of true darkness remains below them. This is the place that Nether made his home. However, it was not entirely empty... while he ruled the Underworld, there were many others living in the darkness."

She lingered for a moment.

"There were some who followed Nether, the remains of the army he had led to wage war on Storm God. They lived in the great hollows within the peaks. There were also his children, the Stone Saints, who lived below the mountains, in the heart of the Underworld. And there were also creatures who lived even lower, near the very bottom of the dark abyss. That is where the pile of discarded statues was."

Sunny frowned.

"Wait... Nether waged war on Storm God? On his own, before the rebellion?" A pale smile appeared on Neph's face.

"Yes... it was his own private affair. I don't know the details of his relationship with Storm God or why it ended in resentment. But he must have taken it to heart, enough so that he assembled an army and stormed the divine realm. Of course, he lost. Most of his army was decimated, and he secluded himself in the Underworld, becoming its ruler and losing himself in the obsession of trying to create the Stone Saints."

She paused for a moment.

"He must have been lonely and heartbroken, to create a whole race of living beings just to keep him company... or maybe it was his defiant, prideful way of challenging the gods. After all, only the gods could create living things. Despite that... somehow, Nether succeeded. But he failed many times before achieving success."

Nephis grew silent for a moment, and then said: "I... was one of these failures."

A quiet sigh escaped from her lips.

"There were many creatures in the darkness at the roots of the Underworld, all of them abandoned and discarded, just like me. Some of them were the results of Nether's failed attempts to create the Stone Saints. Some of them were outcasts and derelicts for whom there was no place in the world above anymore. All of them were pitiful and weak... and I was the weakest of them all."

Nephis stared silently into the darkness for a while. The expression on her face was sad and... remorseful?

Eventually, she spoke softly:

"I was just a Sleeper, after all. Even with the Echo I gained in the Nightmare Desert, out there in the darkness, my strength was pitiful. Ah, it was such a... blow. I never realized how much pride I took in being strong before that Nightmare. I had always relied on my strength... I had always told myself that I had to be strong. If only I was strong like my father... if only I was strong, stronger, the strongest... then I wouldn't break apart. And the people around me wouldn't need to suffer on my behalf, either."

Sunny remained silent, remembering Neph's nightmare that he had visited after she returned to the waking world. He also thought about his own desperate pursuit of strength.

Nephis smiled.

"But in the Nightmare, all my strength was worthless. All my pride was worthless, too. All I had was weakness, and so, I had to learn... that personal power was not something I should rely on, or could rely on. It had always seemed so important, but in the end, it turned out to be a deceitful mirage."

A slight frown appeared on her face.

"You see, there were not only the outcasts and discarded creatures like me in the darkness at the roots of the Underworld. There were other things, as well... terrifying things that were born from the darkness. These things hunted us. There were ancient horrors dwelling in the very depths of the abyss, as well. Sometimes, they would crawl from below to devour us. No one in the Underworld cared about what happened to us, if they even remembered our existence. The aloof Demon of Destiny, the first generation of the Stone Saints, and the remains of the Demon's soldiers... none would protect us. The forsaken had to fend for themselves. But we were weak, and pitiful. And, most of all, we were divided."

Her voice shook a little.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then asked carefully: "So, what did you do? How did you survive?"

Nephis took a deep breath.

"I... I had to accept my weakness, and learn how to survive despite being weak. The lesson was harsh, demeaning, and painful. But I had no choice but to learn it. So, I coaxed, persuaded, deceived, enticed, and cajoled the other forsaken creatures living in the darkness. But, most of all... I inspired them. You see, I realized that there was something much sharper than my wit, much more persuasive than my worlds, and much more compelling than my lies."

She paused for a moment. "That something... was desire."