1258 Last Light

Hidden in the darkness, Sunny flinched. The image of the piece of wet wood littered with demented runes suddenly appeared in his mind, as did the word repeating in the runes over and over again.

Wish... desire.

Be careful of what you wish for.

Be careful what you desire.

He frowned while Nephis continued somberly:

"All I had to do was instill a desire in the forsaken. A desire for a better life, longer life... safer life. A yearning for things that they had either never known or long forgotten — comfort, companionship, warmth. I had to give them hope. Because we couldn't survive alone, but we could survive together. Most of these creatures were solitary and numb, resigned to their dark existence. The weight of their hopelessness and despair was too great for me to pull them from it. But, by igniting a yearning in their hearts... I could make them push themselves forward with their own strength."

She grew silent once again, and remained so for a long time this time. When Nephis spoke again, her voice was almost a whisper.

"...We gathered together, and built a village. It had tall walls and stone houses. It even had a large hall for us to gather and enjoy each other's company. And, for a while, life was good. United, we could protect ourselves from the creatures of darkness, and hide from the abyssal visitors behind the tall walls. I thought... I thought that I was on the right track. There were old creatures in the village that taught me their knowledge and wisdom. There were those who had been warriors once. I learned from them, as well. I was the weakest one, but I was liked and valued. Because I could create light, which all of them had forgotten."

White sparks ignited in her eyes before trembling and disappearing. Neph's face grew motionless.

"But then, someone in the village vanished. And then, someone else. At first, I thought that they had left. But after the third one was gone, the fourth, the fifth... we all realized that something was wrong. They didn't leave. They were taken. After that, every night — what served as night in the Underworld — someone would disappear. We were under attack."

She paused.

"We tried everything in our power to find and confront the creature that was killing the villagers. We enhanced our defenses, increased our vigilance. We investigated, we explored the surrounding darkness for clues. We set traps, carved sorcerous runes into the stone, and placed lures. We even sent an envoy to plead for help from the children of Nether. But nothing worked."

Neph's voice was growing dull.

"No help came. Nothing we did managed to stop the disappearances. In fact, it only grew worse... at first, the forsaken were just vanishing, but later, their mutilated corpses started to appear around the village, strewn on stalagmites for us to see. As though the creature was leaving them there to mock us. It was then that I understood... that I... had not created a safe haven for us... and instead... simply set the table for the creature of darkness."

Her face was motionless, and her voice was even. However, Sunny could feel how fragile that mask was at the moment.

Neph took a deep breath.

"...Eventually, everything collapsed. Those who were still alive cursed me and abandoned the village... tried to. They didn't make it far. There were only two of us left inside the empty walls — myself, and another one of the broken statues. The first one who had become my companion, and followed me almost from the very start. We... we locked ourselves inside the village hall, not knowing what else to do, and barricaded the doors. However, the creature still came. I didn't see it enter, but I could feel that the darkness around us was suddenly alive."

Sunny looked at her carefully. "So... how did you defeat it?" Nephis slowly shook her head.

"I... did not. I had thought about giving one last, desperate fight. But as soon as I sensed it, I knew that there was no hope. That thing... it wasn't something I could fight. So I spoke to it. I tried to appease it. I tried to persuade it. I even knelt and begged it. I tried everything I could, and I could feel it watching me, listening to me. Surrounding me."

For a while, there was silence.

In that silence, Nephis shivered and let out a heavy sigh.

"...In the end, the creature took my companion, but spared me. I don't know why. All I know is that the darkness felt empty again, and I was suddenly alone in that darkness. I was the only one left in the village that we had built. Everyone else... all of them... were dead."

Her voice trembled a little.

"That... was the end of my Nightmare."

Sunny sighed and sat up, summoning the Endless Spring.

Nephis had talked for a while, after all. Her throat must have been parched.

Approaching her in the darkness, Sunny sat down and used his nail to clink against the glass bottle a couple of times, to let her know where it was. Nephis took the bottle and took a small sip, then looked at the ground.

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"The appraisal... do you remember how the Spell appraised your performance?" Nephis shook her head.

"I was... pretty out of it, there at the end. I remember standing in the middle of the empty hall. And the next thing I remember was you calling me by my True Name, at the Academy."

Sunny sighed, then leaned forward and lightly patted her on the shoulder. "Well, if it means anything... I think you did well. You did really well, Neph."

He felt her body tremble slightly, and then took the Endless Spring from her fingers. "Thank you for telling me. Now, let's sleep..."

He lingered for a moment, and then added lightly:

"...Please be careful with the sleeping bag, though. Don't rip it. It's really expensive!" She nodded, then smiled faintly and lay down, turning away.

Sunny looked at Neph's back for a few moments, then silently returned to his own sleeping spot and sprawled on the weathered rock.

He stared at the black sky for a few moments before closing his eyes. '...Would I have survived that Nightmare?'

Sunny really did not know. He could also tell that Nephis had brushed past many perilous fights and dire torments that she must have endured there... in the darkness...

All alone.

His heart was heavy, but before too long, the exhaustion won, sending him into the embrace of sleep.