1259 Pristine Soul

In the morning, the island shook again. Sunny opened his eyes and reached through the shadow sense, checking in on Saint. Since the taciturn knight was standing calmly above the fissure, he relaxed and yawned with great satisfaction.

He felt incredibly refreshed.

The dark island was in one piece, and nothing was pouncing to kill them. Life was great.

He sat up, leaned on the slope of the fissure, then rubbed his eyes and looked around. Nephis was already up, doing light stretches a few meters away. Sunny watched her for a few moments, then forced himself to avert his gaze.

The sound of her even, yet fragile voice resounding from the darkness still echoed in his ears.

Neph's Second Nightmare... was different from his own, just like her First Nightmare had been. She had not battled immortal Saints to free an imprisoned daemon from divine chains. Instead, she had tried to save a small group of pitiful and forlorn creatures, only to watch them all die.

Nephis had been the last one standing on the Forgotten Shore, and after traveling alone through the purgatory of the Nightmare Desert, she built a tiny community amidst the cold darkness, only to watch it be destroyed.

She had been so strong, but the Nightmare made her weak. She had been so proud, but the Nightmare made her beg for mercy on her knees. He wasn't sure he could imagine how painful it was for her, to sacrifice the two things that were at the core of her sense of self.

Yes, Neph had not slain impossibly powerful enemies with her radiant sword in the Nightmare... but, for her, wielding a sword against an overwhelming foe was not something to be feared.

Maybe that was why the Spell always tried to break her in some other, more cruel way. Sunny looked down at the weathered surface of the black rock.

'The Spell... I wonder...'

How had the Spell appraised Neph's performance in the Second Nightmare?

Sunny was not sure, but he had an inkling that the appraisal was exceedingly high. If his theory was right, that was, and the appraisal depended on how much the challenger had changed the flow of fate. In that regard...

He suspected that what Nephis had done was miraculous. She had wanted to change the fates of the forsaken creatures living in the darkness at the bottom of the Underwold.

In that task, she failed.

...However, she had succeeded in changing something else.

She changed the harrowing creature that had come from the darkness.

Had the creature been compelled by her words? By her pleas?

Or... had it been infected by the same yearning that Neph had ignited in the hearts of the forsaken? Had the creature of darkness been poisoned by a hint of an indescribable longing? Had it learned to long for light?

If the heart of an abyssal being powerful enough to be a horror in the Underworld had been changed, even ever so slightly, then Sunny could not really imagine what ripples that change could cause in the great tapestry of fate.

So, the Spell could have appraised Neph's performance as glorious. But that... that was not important.

Because Nephis herself did not see it that way. The Spell and its carriers had different criteria for success, after all. The Spell might be satisfied with Neph's performance, but Neph obviously saw it as a bitter, irredeemable failure. The tone of her voice yesterday had said it all.

Continuing to stare at the ground, Sunny sighed.

After returning to the waking world, Nephis seemed much more... mellow than before. But her resolve to kill the Sovereigns and destroy the Spell also seemed much more stalwart than before.

Now that he knew the truth... many things about her past words and actions made sense.

'Gods... just what am I going to do with her?'

Sunny glanced at Nephis, who was oblivious to his thoughts, with a complicated expression.

There was one more thing he had to consider. The description of Neph's Aspect, Light Bringer...

[You are a creature of light that was banished and doomed to exist in the darkness. You bring radiance and warmth to wherever you go, but with it comes indescribable longing.]

Wasn't it very similar to the trial the Spell had presented her with in the Second Nightmare?

The Ascended Ability she had unlocked as a result was called [Longing], too. Longing, yearning, desire... wish...

Was the inexhaustible longing to destroy the Spell that burned like fire in Neph's heart so powerful that it made her soul incorruptible?

He had pondered about this Ability of hers before, but now, Sunny saw it in a new light. It had seemed like a rather useless power to have, outside of very rare circumstances... like facing the Skinwalker.

However...

If that Ability made Nephis immune to the Corruption, then wasn't it actually the most broken and unbelievably preposterous Ability he had ever heard about?

After all, even Weaver had to sever their arm when it got infected with the Corruption. Not only was the great and terrible Demon of Fate not immune to Corruption, he or she was even powerless in front of it.

...Just what was Nephis, exactly?

And, more importantly, what was she to him?

The subject of his thoughts, meanwhile, finished her stretching exercises, pulled the fastened strap of her white tunic back to her pale shoulder, and looked around.

Nephis smiled.

"You're up?"

Sunny smiled back.

"Yeah. How are you feeling?"

It seemed as though she had recovered from opening the old wounds to tell him about her Second Nightmare yesterday.

However, a moment later, Neph's smiling face darkened a little. She sighed. "I wanted to make breakfast. But... we have no food left."

Sunny tilted his head, then looked down.

They were literally sitting on a mountain of meat. But with the Azure Serpent circling the carcass of the Black Turtle, diving into the river to procure even a little bit of it was an utterly lethal task.

He shook his head with resignation.

"We'll solve that problem when the time comes."

Nephis nodded, lingered for a moment, then pointed to the sleeping bag. "See? I didn't rip it."

Sunny stared at her, trying to determine whether she was being serious or playing a joke on him. These days, it was getting hard to tell...

'Which bastard is being such a bad influence on my straight-laced and awkward Neph? I'm going to bash their teeth in!'

He remained silent for a few moments, then grinned.

"Good. Because, you know... you still owe me for that projector..."