1611 Nameless Temple

Nephis and the Fire Keepers followed the onyx devil across the land of shadows. Their taciturn guide walked without looking back, her beautiful armor gleaming as it reflected the white light of their lanterns. The living statue's steps were neither slow nor hurried, her measured pace full of indifferent confidence.

It was as though she was not afraid of the creatures hiding in the dark at all.

Nephis would have expected the steps of such a heavy creature to resound like thunderclaps in the dead silence, but they were entirely noiseless. She stared at the back of the mysterious stone knight, white flames dancing in her eyes.

The Fire Keepers were tense and quiet, looking into the eerie darkness with wary expressions.

'What is going on?'

Nephis was not troubled, but she did feel somewhat curious. A vast expanse of inexplicable darkness, the fearsome creature that had been sent to meet them... it was all hard to explain, and she rarely encountered things that escaped explanation.

[Cassie?]

There were a few moments of silence, and then the familiar voice resounded in the darkness, answering the question she had not asked:

[It is... strange.]

Nephis glanced at the beautiful stone demon and waited. Cassie continued after a short pause:

[She is a Transcendent Devil. Her soul is an impossible fusion of shadow, darkness, and divine flame. Her powers are those of a sword saint... however, she is not a simple Echo. I... I don't know what she is.]

Nephis nodded calmly.

[That is alright. I do.]

Indeed, it would have been strange if she had not recognized that fearsome stonelike armor, that cold presence, and those jewel eyes.

The onyx devil was one of Nether's children, after all. They were what she looked up to in the depths of the Second Nightmare, drowning in despair as the darkness of the Underworld crushed and suffocated her. The prideful beings who ruled the great caverns of the Hollow Mountains while she struggled to survive far below, at the edge of the abyss.

In fact, the body she had inhabited was one of the countless flawed vessels that Nether had callously discarded before successfully creating the first of the Stone Saints.

So... in a sense, the onyx devil was a more perfect version of what Nephis used to be.

But what was she doing here? Had some of Nether's children succumbed to Corruption and survived until this day? Had the Lord of Shadows killed one of them?

Nephis tilted her head slightly.

The Stone Saints had been known to command true darkness, each inheriting a spark of divinity from their creator, as well. But why did this one possess an affinity to shadows? That was not in their nature.

Did it have something to do with the Aspect of the Lord of Shadows?

And this lightless expanse around them... had he somehow conjured it, as well?

Was it something that a mere Transcendent could do? Her curiosity grew a little.

Meanwhile, the beautiful onyx devil led them deeper and deeper into the darkness. Considering how difficult it must have been to chase away the deadly sunlight of Godgrave, Nephis had not expected for this shadowy region to be expansive. But to her surprise, the land of shadows stretched for many kilometers in all directions, without a hint of ending.

'Odd.'

The further they went, the more eerie their surroundings became. Because sunlight never reached here, there was nothing to incinerate the bones of slain Nightmare Creatures. Therefore, remains of powerful abominations appeared in sight from time to time, all devoid of flesh.

At first, there were few of them, but the deeper into the land of shadows the Fire Keepers ventured, the more and more skeletal remains they saw.

Some of the abominations had been slain by sharp steel, some shattered and broken by brute force, some killed by strange means that she couldn't even guess.

Eventually, it was as if they were walking across a terrible battlefield. The magnitude of slaughter that had transpired in this ominous place was nothing short of chilling. Even if all these powerful Nightmare Creatures had not been slain at the same time... what kind of person was capable of eviscerating this many dreadful abominations in the depths of a Death Zone?

It seemed that there was a seed of truth in the ominous rumors about the dire power of the Lord of Shadows.

In the end, it had taken almost half a day for the onyx devil to lead them to their destination. The signs of fierce battles that had transpired under the cover of darkness only grew more apparent.

'...Almost fifty kilometers to reach the heart of his territory.'

Out there, in front of Nephis, the breastbone plain abruptly ended, turning into a vast chasm. If she could pierce the darkness with her gaze, she would have seen the spine of the titanic skeleton far below. To her left and to her right, in the distance, its ribs must be rising like mountains.

Right ahead, though...

Illuminated by the light of their lanterns, a magnificent temple stood at the very edge of the abyss. Its colossal columns and walls were cut from black marble, with exquisite reliefs decorating the stygian pediment and broad frieze. Beautiful and awesome, it looked like the palace of a dark god.

In front of the palace, the ground was littered with countless bones.

Most of the ancient edifice was hidden by darkness, but Nephis felt oppressed by its solemn majesty nevertheless. She frowned slightly, feeling a shapeless presence gaze at her from behind the marble columns, and instinctively gripped the hilt of her sword.

"Is this... a Citadel?"

One of the Fire Keepers voiced her question in a tired and bewildered tone. Another answered warily:

"It must be. Who could have built a temple in this place?"

Nephis remained silent, observing the dark temple somberly.

She was not afraid of the Lord of Shadows, his onyx devil, and other secrets the mysterious Saint could have been hiding. However, should the negotiations go badly... fighting a powerful enemy within the walls of their Citadel was bound to be troublesome.

It would be a shame for the Citadel to be destroyed in the process, at least.

Glancing at their beautiful demonic guide, Nephis smiled slightly and nodded.

"Lead the way."

The living statue lingered for a moment, then started climbing the steps of the temple. Nephis and the Fire Keepers followed.

Soon, they passed between the towering black columns and reached a grandiose hall.

Its dark expanse was drowning in impenetrable shadows.