1613 Decent Proposal

"I would not. But you can call me Shadow."

The voice of the man who called himself Shadow resounded in the lightless temple, making it seem as though the darkness itself had answered her question. That strangely elusive voice was cold and aloof, devoid of any emotion.

And yet, there was a hint of arrogance to it. Nephis frowned subtly.

Now that the introductions were out of the way, it was time to announce the purpose of her visit. However, she was at a disadvantage. The master of the dark temple seemed to know everything about her, and yet, she knew close to nothing about him.

Even Cassie, whose gaze could pierce countless mysteries, seemed to be entirely blind to the existence of the Lord of Shadows.

...Granted, Nephis had some idea about his true identity. The darkness spoke again, its voice remaining emotionless:

"To what do I owe the honor of being in the presence of Lady Changing Star? What do you want with me?"

Nephis hesitated for a moment, thinking.

She had been sent to persuade a powerful Saint to join the banner of the King of Swords. However, having reached his Citadel, Nephis had to reevaluate her opinion of the Lord of Shadows.

He was not merely powerful... no, he was one of those few like herself who were beyond the ordinary definitions of power.

Now that Nephis had seen the vast expanse of inexplicable darkness, the bones of dreadful abominations hidden in its tenebrous embrace, the solemn edifice of the dark temple, and the creatures that guarded it, she knew that the Lord of Shadows had not survived in Godgrave by luck, or by having an Aspect that was uniquely suited for living in this harrowing environment.

Rather, he had survived here through strength.

...Which only made him more desirable.

Of course, there were still many unknowns about the enigmatic Saint. Nephis could not be sure of what his powers truly were. The fierce creatures that served him were neither Echoes nor Nightmare Creatures... so, they could have been manifested by his Aspect, like the hideous Reflections of the Prince of Nothing were, or subjugated like those abominations that Beastmaster ruled.

It was unclear how strong the man himself was, or if his Aspect had any application in direct combat. It was also unknown where he had come from, and how he managed to become a Saint without leaving any traces of himself in either of the two worlds.

And yet, Nephis had a strong suspicion.

Awakened who possessed affinity to shadows were exceedingly rare, let alone those who were truly powerful. Meanwhile... five of the six divine lineages had already been reclaimed by humans.

Immortal Flame were the inheritors of Sun God, Valor were the inheritors of War God, Song were the inheritors of Beast God, Night were the inheritors of Storm God, and finally, Asterion was the sole inheritor of Heart God.

One last lineage remained unclaimed.

No one had been able to find and inherit the blood of Shadow God.

So... this man, a Saint of immense power that had come out of nowhere, wielding authority over shadows. Was he the proof that the last divine lineage had finally revealed itself?

If so... why now? What did it mean?

One thing was certain. Nephis had to change her approach, since her preconceived notions had been proven wrong. In this dark temple, her power and exalted status didn't mean much, because the man she wanted to persuade possessed the same power, and could claim the same status, should he wished to do so.

She had to treat the Lord of Shadows... as an equal. Nephis smiled slightly.

"Then, Lord Shadow. I won't be coy... you asked me what I want? It's simple."

She paused for a moment, then added in her usual impassive tone:

"I want you."

She could hear the Fire Keepers shift behind her. One of them even seemed to choke, coughing loudly in the dead silence of the dark temple. His coughing somewhat spoiled the solemn atmosphere of her serious proposal.

The Lord of Shadow did not respond immediately, either.

'Well, of course. He must be carefully considering the benefits and disadvantages of pledging his allegiance to the Sword Domain. I wouldn't expect anything else.'

However, the silence stretched for longer than she had expected.

'I see. He must be contemplating very deeply.'

Nephis was nothing if not patient. So, she waited patiently, giving the enigmatic Saint time to seriously consider his decision.

After a while, the Lord of Shadows spoke again, his elusive voice sounding a little flat:

"What, exactly... do you mean?"

Nephis was slightly taken aback, but masterfully hid her confusion. Had she not been clear?

"Allow me to clarify, then. I, Changing Star, invite you to join the alliance of Transcendent warriors and serve under the banner of the King of Swords, protecting and expanding the domain of humanity in the Dream Realm as one of his champions."

She lingered for a moment, and then added:

"I trust I do not need to list the benefits of pledging allegiance to one of those who have achieved Supremacy. These details can be discussed later, anyway. Resources, assistance, powerful Memories and Echoes, soul shards... nothing is out of the question. You won't be undervalued, Lord Shadow. No one survives in the Dream Realm alone, after all."

There were a few moments of silence, and then the cold voice resounded from the darkness once again:

"Ah. Thank you for the clarification."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

'What else did he think I meant?'

Had she said something odd again?

'No, it shouldn't be.'

Nephis frowned slightly.

She thought she had done rather well...

The problem was most likely that the emissary of Song must have offered all the same things to the Lord of Shadows, if not more. And yet, they had been refused.

While she was contemplating, a cold laughter resounded in the dark temple, traveling across the great hall like wind. The Fire Keepers shivered, gripping their weapons tighter.

A few moments later, Shadow's voice came from the darkness, finally showing a hint of emotion:

"Oh? So you want me to join forces with the Great Clan Valor for the benefit of humanity? I see... you must be sincere, then. Surely, it has nothing to do with the impending war between the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms. Surely, it is not because your side wants to use me as a weapon in that war. And, surely... you have no ambition to subjugate Godgrave with my help to gain control over the future battlefield."

The master of the dark temple chuckled again, and that said, his sinister voice growing even colder:

"You wouldn't be trying to deceive me, would you, Lady Changing Star?"

At the same time, the enormous creature hiding in the darkness shifted slightly, filling the great hall with the chilling sound of rustling scales.