1614 Lord's Challenge

Sunny felt glad that his face was hidden behind Weaver's Mask and shrouded in impenetrable darkness. That was because he might not have controlled his expression very well in the last few minutes.

One of his other two avatars might have even stumbled out of nowhere, somewhere far away.

Those lazy guys...

Luckily, he regained his composure swiftly.

'Damn it, Neph...'

The echo of his last words was still traveling across the Nameless Temple when Nephis frowned slightly. Sunny had just accused her of trying to deceive him in a rather threatening tone... he even commanded Serpent to make a bit of noise to add some weight to his perceived displeasure.

What would her reaction be?

Unexpectedly, a subtle smile bloomed on Neph's face, and her eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"I see that you are better informed than I presumed, Lord Shadow. Good. That saves me a lot of trouble."

Sunny was stunned for a moment. That... was not the reaction he had expected.

'Shameless! She's completely shameless!'

Nephis, meanwhile, put her hand on the hilt of her sword and looked up a little.

"Since you already know that the war is inevitable, and that it will happen here in Godgrave, you must also realize that you can't escape it. One way or the other, you will be implicated in the clash between the two Domains. So... unless you want to abandon your Citadel and flee into the waking world, you might as well choose a side. In fact, I think that you already have."

Sunny scowled, staring at her with displeasure.

'How the hell does she know?'

Of course, he had intended to insinuate his way into a high position of

the Sword Domain's army from the very start. That was why he had established the Nameless Temple in Godgrave and waited for the emissaries of Valor to take the bait.

But Nephis had no way of guessing that.

Sunny shook his head in the darkness and asked, keeping his voice devoid of emotions:

"Have I?"

Nephis nodded.

"You must have. After all, you have already refused the emissary of Clan Song. Since you have shown no desire to join the other side, only one choice remains. It's us."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

Then, grabbing the armrests of his throne, he leaned forward and asked, his voice suffused with an insidious undertone:

"Says who?"

She stared into the darkness with a hint of confusion on her beautiful alabaster face.

"What?"

Sunny smiled.

"Who said that I refused the emissary of Clan Song? I did not."

Which was, of course, a lie. He could not say a word of truth while wearing Weaver's Mask, and this avatar of his almost never took it off. The Lord of Shadows was meant to attract the attention of those with great power, after all, all the while keeping Sunny's secrets safe.

This time, however, it had worked to his advantage.

Neph's expression remained the same, but he could feel the pressure she exerted growing sharper. Right now, she was probably considering whether the Nameless Temple was a death trap. With Saint and Fiend behind her, the path to escape was cut off. In front of her were Sunny and the Soul Serpent.

Nightmare and the shapeless guardian of the temple were close, as well.

Nevertheless, Nephis maintained her composure. Facing the wall of impenetrable darkness in front of her, she asked calmly:

"You didn't?"

Sunny sighed quietly and leaned back.

From here onward... he had to sell himself to Nephis while making her think that she was the one insisting on making the purchase. People did not value that which came into their possession too easily, after all. If Sunny wanted to be treated as a precious ally instead of a cheap tool, he had to make Clan Valor think that they had been extremely lucky to gain his support.

He remained silent for a moment.

"I did not refuse the generous offer of the illustrious Clan Song. However... perhaps I didn't accept it, either. Instead, I gave the emissary Ki Song sent a chance to win my allegiance. I despise the idea of fighting side by side with those weaker than me, you see."

Sunny smiled.

"So, I'll give you the same chance, Lady Changing Star. If any of you, emissaries of Valor, manage to leave a scratch on my armor, I'll accept your proposal. What do you say?"

Nephis did not answer immediately, contemplating his offer. Eventually, she asked:

"A duel? Which one of us do you want to fight?"

He chuckled.

"Any of you, all of you... it doesn't matter. I won't even use my Aspect. Instead, I'll crush you with pure skill."

A corner of Neph's mouth twisted upward.

"...Arrogant."

Sunny laughed, noticing the Fire Keepers tremble at the cold sound of his sinister laughter.

"Arrogant? Oh, on the contrary... I am being modest."

He was in a strangely good mood. The truth of the matter was... that Sunny missed the feeling of fighting against humans. He had very few opportunities to fight a proper duel in recent years.

The deadly reaches of the Dream Realm he had explored were full of all kinds of harrowing Nightmare Creatures. He had faced and killed countless abominations, coming very close to being killed by them instead on numerous occasions.

Those battles had been fierce, terrible, painful... and sometimes exhilarating.

But the exhilaration of facing a dreadful monster was different from the joy and delight of facing a skilled human opponent in battle. The artistry of combat was lost on most Nightmare Creatures.

The Fire Keepers, though... Sunny knew these people well. Each of them was a brilliant fighter. Even though they were mere Masters, if he held back a little, clashing with them promised to be very satisfying.

And then, of course... there was Nephis herself. A genius swordsman who had taken the legacy left behind by her legendary father, Broken Sword, and elevated it to new heights.

His former teacher, rival, and partner.

How could Sunny not feel excited at the thought of crossing swords with her again?

As he was thinking about that, Nephis stared into the darkness for a few moments, and then nodded decisively.

"...Alright. I accept."