1621

Princes of the Universe

By then, the Fire Keepers had almost retreated to the entrance of the ancient temple. The darkness seethed and surged, disturbed by the fearsome clash of the two Transcendent champions.

Both Changing Star and the man who called himself Shadow were beyond powerful. A Saint was like a natural disaster, and even though neither of them had called upon the dreadful power of their Aspects, the devastating physical might of two Transcendent warriors was more than enough to obliterate their surroundings, reshape the landscape, and instill terror in the hearts of countless people.

Luckily, both their lady and the master of the ancient temple seemed to be holding back. Otherwise, the Citadel might have been severely damaged by their duel.

Lady Nephis was clad in a suit of knightly armor that had been forged from sublime white steel and adorned with golden accents. With her fair skin and silver hair, pure flames dancing in her eyes, she was like a spirit of light.

Lord of Shadows, meanwhile, was like a devil bor from pure darkness. His ominous onyx armor, demonic mask, and raven-black hair fused wit lightless void of the great hall, making it hard t discern where his figure ended and the shadows began.

The silence had long been torn apart by the melodic disharmony of clashing steel.

But... wasn't something very strange?

One of the Fire Keepers, Sid, looked at their leader and asked after hesitating for a few moments:

"Why... is he still standing?"

Her somber voice was hiding a note of bewilderment.

The seven of them had followed Lady Changing Star to storm the Crimson Spire, across the frozen hell of East Antarctica, and into countless battles after that. In the past four years, they had seen her turn hordes of abominations to ash, topple titans, and bring every Saint who dared challenge her to their knees. Only a few people could claim to be her equal, and even they did not dare to.

How was it that the Lord of Shadows had not only persisted for so long, but also seemed... to be holding his own in a duel against the last daughter of the Immortal Flame?

"Who the hell is he?"

Shim, the leader of the cohort, shook his head slightly without looking away from the barely perceptible whirlwind of the stunning clash.

"Watch carefully,"

Out there in front of them, the cadence of the duel finally changed.

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‘Now?’

Sunny delivered a lightning-fast strike, the air parting in front of the blade of his odachi with a wailing hiss. The strike was just a feint, turning into a thrust, turning into a downward slash.

Nephis ignored the feint, deflected the stab, and strangled the slash by binding their swords. She pushed him and shifted her body to gain an advantage in the follow-up attack. Sunny was forced to take a step back, which would have landed him in an awkward position and made it impossible to mount a stable defense... if he did not increase the weight of his armored boots while at the same time decreasing the weight of his breastplate.

With his center of gravity lowered, he had enough stability to block Neph's calm and vicious attack without staggering back.

But even though he blocked it, she unerringly struck the exact same spot where his odachi had already been weakened.

Finally, the shadow blade shattered, exploding into a rain of shards. Those shards almost instantly turned ethereal, dissolving back into an intangibl shadow.

The force behind Neph's strike was so terrible that her sword continued to fall down like an executioner's axe, Sunny, who had expected something like that to happen, was prepared and dodged the mirror blade just in time. It struck the black marble plate of the temple's floor, sending a net of cracks running through it.

Dust and pieces of stone flew into the air.

Without wasting a heartbeat, Nephis shifted into a low stance and delivered a rising diagonal slash.

However, Sunny was already moving by then.

Instead of retreating, he took a step forward and found himself almost face-to-face with her.

Silver clashed against stonelike metal with a thunderous clangor.

Both of them grew still.

...As the dust settled, the Fire Keepers saw a bewildering scene.

Sunny and Nephis were standing motionlessly, with almost no space between them. His right hand was gripping the hilt of her sword, which had been stopped a mere centimeter away from the onyx surface of his fearsome armor.

Her right hand, meanwhile, was gripping his left wrist. Held in his left hand was the hilt of the broken odachi, the jagged steel of its broken blade stopped several centimeters away from her neck.

Sunny remained still for a few moments, then looked down, at the cracked floor beneath them.

A somber sight escaped from his lips.

"...Let us stop here. Otherwise, my Citadel will sustain irreparable damage"

He allowed the broken odachi to dissolve into shadows, let go of Neph's hand, and took a step back, turning away with cold inference.

As Sunny was walking back to his unseen throne, Nephis called out to him:

"What about the duel? We have not determined the winner yet."

He stopped, facing away from her.

After a few moments of silence, Sunny spoke:

"I'm willing to admit defeat."

He lingered for a bit, then turned around and stared at her. His voice turned even colder:

"However... I have no interest in joining forces with the Great Clan Valor, Nephis of the Immortal Flame."

He tilted his head a little:

"I'm only joining forces with you. You personally, not your clan and not your kingdom"

These statements were technically both a truth and a lie. Sunny might have preferred to deal with Nephis, and Nephis alone, but doing so was tantamount to joining Anvil's side.

Still, it at least allowed him to get his point across despite the [Simple Trick].

'I feel like... wearing this mask around people w quickly grow annoying!

He suppressed a sigh,

Nephis looked at him with for a while, then said evenly;

"My personal wealth is not that vast, I can't promise you the same boons and riches that my clan can."

Sunny chuckled. Considering the kind of atmosphere he had created, his laughter sounded sinister even without him trying.

When he responded, his voice was as cold as fees

"I don't desire riches. Resources, assistance, powerful Memories and Echoes, soul shards... why should I want to get them from Clan Valor? I don't lack anything. If there's something I want, I can go and take it myself"

Nephis frowned slightly.

"So what is it that you want from me, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny turned away again.

"It's simple, really."

He took a step into the darkness and added indifferently:

"All I want is for you to owe me a favor, Changing Star. One day, when I come calling... help me out with what I ask."

It was an offer heavy with meaning. The concept of debt was somewhat sacred among the nobility of the Awakened society, especially to people who strived to follow quaint ideals like honor and virtue,

Being owed by someone like Nephis might have been more precious than a mountain of soul shards.

Especially because Sunny had not indicated what kind of help he might want to receive.

She studied his back for a few moments, and eventually nodded.

"That is acceptable."

Sunny entered the darkness and looked up at his marble throne.

Hidden from sight, he sighed deeply, then smiled.

"Then it concludes our deal."

And just like that, an tentative alliance between a mysterious Saint residing in Godgrave and a princess of the Sword Domain was forged.