1662 Bridge Builders

Sunny opened his eyes and summoned the helmet of the Onyx Mantle, hiding his face. Its visor was not as ferocious and eerle as Weaver's Mask, but it was also fearsome. Deep shadows dwelled in the crack of the visor, hiding his eyes, and the black plume of the onyx helmet moved slightly in the wind.

A moment later, the darkness of the courtyard was dispelled by soft light.

Sunny did not move, waiting for Nephis to approach. Of course, he was observing her through the shadows.

A dull pain suddenly pressed on his heart.

‘...She has changed.’

The source of light was Nephis herself, a ball of white flame dancing on her palm. He remembered that she had used a few Memories to produce fire and light in the past, after returning from her Second Nightmare... to spare herself the pain of calling upon her Aspect. But now, it seemed, that was not the case.

She reached him and remained silent for a few moments, looking at the frail tree with a slight frown, Soon enough, her gaze grew a little confused, and then cleared.

"Is that.,,, a mundane tree?"

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. I'm... afraid it is not doing well here, in the Dream Realm. Away from warmth and light

He had tried many ways to substitute both through sorcery, of course, with little success.

Nephis remained silent for a moment.

"The Aspect of one of my people, Shakti, has to do with nurturing plants. I can ask her to take a look.”

He turned his head slightly, staring at her with his own pair of eyes.

"That would be appreciated."

She smiled faintly and looked at the wilting leaves.

"I must admit, though, I never imagined someone like you would feel sentimental about a tree, Lord Shadow."

Sunny tilted his head.

"Someone like me?"

Nephis nodded.

"Someone who chooses to live alone in the middle of a lifeless Death Zone, battling hungry abominations."

He stared at her for a few moments, then shrugged.

"This is the only tree in this lifeless Death Zone that has never tried to eat me. Of course, I am sentimental."

With that, he rose to his feet and asked in a cold tone:

"You are ready, then?”

Now that the two of them had reached initial agreement, she had to go back to Bastion and report it to the elders of Clan Valor. However, Nephis and the Fire Keepers were not going to repeat the long and perilous journey across Godgrave - Instead, it was much more convenient for them to place their anchors in the Nameless Temple.

Once they returned to their tethered location in the waking world, another Saint would bring them to Bastion. And once they were done in Bastion, Nephis would bring them back to the waking world. From there, all of them could return to their anchors in the Nameless Temple.

The process was somewhat unwieldy, but effective...

If Sunny allowed them to anchor themselves in the Nameless Temple, of course.

But he had not.

The Fire Keepers believed that it was because he didn't trust them yet. Nephis most likely suspected that he didn't want another Saint, and anyone sworn to a Domain, to contaminate his Citadel with Anvil's authority.

The truth of the matter was that he simply didn't want to give Valor easy access to his temple. The harder it was for them to reach it, the less they would bother him.

So, instead of allowing the Fire Keepers to place their anchors here, he would play the role of the ferryman himself. He would deliver them to the waking world, and then meet them there at an agreed-upon time to carry them back.

This way, Sunny would be the only one who controlled access to his Citadel - and, therefore, Godgrave.

Before Nephis and the Fire Keepers left, however, they wanted to discuss the general points of their alliance with him. The better they knew what to expect, the more detailed the offer they would be able to bring back from Bastion.

"Let's go."

Soon, the two of them entered the main hall of the temple from one of the side passages. The Fire Keepers were already there, along with their annoying lanterns.

Sunny sighed behind the visor of his helmet.

'Ah... it was so dark and peaceful here before...'

Apart from those brief few days last year when a handful of scared Sleepers resided in the Nameless Temple, his life here was rather peaceful.

It wasn't going to be peaceful much longer.

Sunny moved a hand, and the shadows rose from the floor, forming a detailed terrain map of the known part of the Dream Realm. The Fire Keepers stared at it for a few moments, then coughed and put the paper map they had brought away.

Sunny approached the dark map and stared at it for a few moments,

The Hollow mountains rose like sharp fangs from the marble floor. Far to the south, a black castle stood in the middle of a black lake. A great bridge connected a tall peak to a formidable volcano, with a beautiful black palace perched at one of its ends. Below it all, a black ship drifted in a sea of darkness. Many lesser Citadels were scattered here and there.

He was looking at something else, though. A black skeleton with its head resting on the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains.

Nephis studied the map, as well, then let out a barely audible sigh.

Finally, she said in an even tone:

"The war between the Sword Domain and the Song Domain is inevitable. There is no connection between the two over land, and the House of Night is clinging to its neutrality despite the desperate attempts by both Great Clans to forge an alliance with them. Which means... that a land bridge must be created, and will be created."

She pointed to the black skeleton.

"That land bridge is Godgrave. The Great Clan that conquers it first will have the ability to launch an invasion into the territory of the enemy. Even if a full invasion is impossible due to how well-fortified the enemy is, the side controlling Godgrave can harass the adversary, disrupt supply chains, conquer weaker Citadels, and strengthen their Domain while weakening the other."

Nephis looked at Sunny.

"So, Lord Shadow... you must understand what it means."

He remained silent for a few moments, then said with cold indifference:

"It means that neither side can allow the enemy to take Godgrave. So, this Death Zone will not be a land bridge to start the war, but instead the battlefield where the war will be fought."

And therefore... his peaceful life was as good as over.