1665 Alone in the Dark

As it turned out, there were two other Sleepers somewhere out there, hiding under the roots of a dead tree in the Hollows. They were well outside the Shadow Realm's Fragment and inside the bones of the colossal skeleton, which made the potential rescue... problematic.

In fact, it was miraculous that they had survived for so long.

Too miraculous, maybe.

While the Fire Keepers were calming the dirty teenager and giving him food, Sunny stared at him coldly. He had already studied the Sleeper's soul, making sure that he was indeed a Dormant human. But why were Nephis and her people so careless?

He glanced at her, then asked, his voice emotionless:

"How do you know that he's not one of Skinwalker's vessels?"

Nephis, who was standing a few steps away from the Sleeper, shrugged:

"If he was an abomination, my flames would have burned him, not healed him."

Sunny raised an eyebrow. It made sense... her soul was immune to Corruption, so the flames of her soul did not tolerate it. Granted, Nephis had not yet mastered that aspect of her powers to such a degree in the past.

‘Alright, he's not Skinwalker.’

That didn't mean that the sleeper was harmless, though. He could still be a body Mordret decided to wear... granted, that was very improbable. It would be exceedingly hard to find a Sleeper just a few days after the winter solstice, let alone drag one to Godgrave. And while Mordret was powerful, it would be harder still to traverse Godgrave in a Dormant body, even for him.

So why was this Sleeper so strange?

Sunny walked forward, and although he did not say anything, the Fire Keepers instinctively parted before him. The Sleeper looked up, his eyes suddenly widening in fear.

"Uh... m-my lord..."

Stopping in front of the teenager, Sunny looked down without saying a word.

'How strange.'

Even though he could see the dirty young man, he could not sense him. It was as though there was no one there - there was no scent, no presence, not even a shadow he could perceive.

Was that why he had not sensed what Saint was carrying until she was already in the temple?

The corner of his mouth twisted upward.

"Is that your Aspect?"

The Sleeper flinched, then looked down.

"Y-yes, my lord... I am not good at anything except for hiding. But hiding... I'm really good at it.”

Sunny tilted his head.

‘What a powerful Aspect.’

It wasn't easy for a Dormant Ability to fool the senses of a Saint. Perhaps it wasn't completely unreasonable for the Spell to send this poor child here...

In any case, that Aspect of his could somewhat explain how the Sleeper managed to survive a short trip across Godgrave.

"What is your name?"

The young man shivered.

"It's... it's Ray, my lord."

Sunny lingered for a bit, then nodded.

"Alright. I've decided not to kill you, Dreamer Ray"

Leaving the young man with his mouth hanging open, Sunny walked away. As he did, the Fire Keepers gave him a few dirty looks and returned to trying to calm the teenager down.

Their previous efforts had been utterly invalidated by a few words from the Lord of Shadows.

Nephis glanced at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Do you kill Sleepers often, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny contemplated for a few moments, trying to remember how many Sleepers he had killed, In the end, he answered evenly:

"Not often"

Then, he turned to face her and asked in the same emotionless tone:

"What about you, Lady Nephis?"

She did not answer, Instead changing the tople to the fate of young Ray's friends.

"You are better acquainted with Godgrave. The two of us and my warriors... can we rescue the other two Sleepers from the Hollows? That is not the mission entrusted to me by Clan Valor, but still. If it is possible, I would like to save them."

Sunny hesitated for a second.

"Can we? Sure, it's possible. But your people... skilled as they are, there is no guarantee that all of them or any of them - will survive in the Hollows. You and I can try it alone, though."

She nodded simply.

"Then that is what we'll do. If you are willing."

He stared at her silently, pretending to be surprised.

"Are you fond of risking your life for strangers, Lady Nephis? Braving a Death Zone for a couple of insignificant Sleepers... wouldn't it be a shame if someone as illustrious as you perished for no good reason? Why do it?"

She smiled faintly,

"Firstly... I'm not planning on dying here. Call me arrogant, if you wish. Secondly, aren't you being a little hypocritical, Lord Shadow? No one forced you to rescue the Sleepers last year, and yet you did. Not only that, but you even escorted them all the way to the territory of Clan Song. So, please forgive me... but I know that you are not as heartless as you want to appear behind that mask.”

‘Am i, really?’

Sunny frowned, deciding to act more tyrannical in the future.

She turned and looked at him, her smile widening a little.

"And most importantly... because I want to. That's the only reason I need."

Sunny let out a chuckle.

'Ah, there it is. She doesn't change.’

He shook his head:

"What if all of this is an ingenious plot to lure you into the Hollows, alone, where I'll have an easier time disposing of you? What if I've already struck a deal with Clan Song? Aren't you afraid of following me into the darkness, with no one to cover your back?"

Nephis remained silent for a bit, then shrugged nonchalantly.

"Shouldn't you be afraid of following me into the darkness instead? This Citadel of yours is very valuable, What if I already received orders from Clan Valor to eliminate you and make it my own?"

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then let out a cold laugh.

"Now that you mention it, I probably should be afraid. But, what a pity, I've been foolishly fearless as of late."

There was a sinister note in his tone, as if he was inviting her to try something.

Nephis smiled.

"Being enslaved by fear is more foolish."

With that, she threw one last glance at the Sleeper. Her expression changed subtly, switching from composed languidness to a state of cold focus.

"It might be for the better... I'll instruct my people to tend to your tree while we're gone. That said, time is of the essence. I suspect that these three Sleepers only lasted that long because of this young man's Aspect. He volunteered to venture out of their hiding spot thinking that he's the best person for the job, but the remaining two might be in danger without him. If they are still alive, we must find them as soon as possible."

Sunny nodded.

"Fair point. Go talk to your people and find out what else they've learned from the boy. We'll leave as soon as that is done."

While Nephis talked to the Fire Keepers, he lingered for a while, observing her.

His mood was rotten.

'Damn it.,, I didn't want to reveal what is hidden in the Hollows to her, so soon…’