1667 Disarmed

Following the Lord of Shadows, Nephis was descending into the depths of Godgrave. The fissure was narrow and twisting, permeated with the sweet smell of rotten leaves. At times, she had to sidestep to push forward, the polished metal of her breastplate scraping against the white bone.

Her taciturn guide was calm and indomitable, seemingly unconcerned about entering the Hollows. She was calm, as well - the part of her that would have been wary had been swallowed by the pain.

A ball of white flames was dancing on the palm of her gauntlet, illuminating the path ahead.

She was used to that pain.

Bathed in the white radiance but drowning in darkness, the Lord of Shadows seemed especially mysterious now that they were alone. Clad in the fearsome onyx armor, with his face hidden behind the visor of a black helmet, he looked more like a powerful Nightmare Creature than a human being...

Cassie had not been able to glean any information about the master of the dark temple. If not for the fact that the three powerful creatures serving him were Transcendent, and not Corrupted, Nephis would have entertained the thought that he was an abomination.

There were other reasons why she did not, as well.

None of them spoke for a long time. Eventually, though, the earthy smell grew stronger, and the Lord of Shadows halted.

A warm wind blew past them in the direction of the Citadel.

He remained motionless for a few moments, then turned to face her. The visor of his helmet was full of impenetrable darkness, and his even voice was aloof:

"I have a request, Lady Nephis."

She met his dark gaze and raised an eyebrow.

The darkness in the visor stirred slightly.

"Dismiss your weapon before we proceed."

Nephis was surprised. She tilted her head slightly, then asked in a calm tone:

"You want me to enter the Hollows without a sword?"

The onyx helmet moved slowly from side to side.

"You can have a sword. Just not this sword."

She hesitated for a few moments.

That strange request... was loaded with meaning. The sword Nephis used, Kinslayer, was a Transcendent Memory of the Seventh Tier. Much more importantly, it was a very special weapon. Not only was its durability equal to that of a Supreme Memory, but it had also been altered by the King of Swords himself.

Which made it connected to him... just like everyone who wielded the blades forged by Anvil were connected to him, and to each other - albeit in a different manner.

So, what the Lord of Shadows wanted was to be left truly alone with her, without the possibility of her adopted father sensing what they were doing.

Suddenly, Nephis felt a bit... embarrassed?

'That didn't sound quite right, did it?'

Her heart sped up a little.

Was it because of his mocking threats to kill her in the Hollows? Luring her into the darkness and asking her to disarm...

She stared at the Shadow Saint for several seconds, then unhurriedly dismissed both her sword and its sheath. Left unarmed, she continued to stare at him with a calm expression.

His hand rose and brushed against the darkness, slowly pulling a weapon out of it... just like he had done before their duel. This time, however, it was not an odachi. Instead, it was an elegant longsword, both its hilt and blade perfectly black.

Nephis received the longsword from the Lord of Shadows and weighed it briefly in her hand, then struck the flat of its blade lightly, watching it vibrate to determine the center of percussion. She was surprised once again - the sword was perfectly balanced and indistinguishable from one forged from real steel, sitting comfortably in her grip. As if made to suit her personal preferences to the smallest detail.

‘What a convenient Ability.’

It had to be an Aspect Ability. She studied the shadow sword for a few moments, then lowered it and summoned the Nameless Sun - a Memory she had received for killing the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore. The Nameless Sun was a weapon-type Memory, but of a unique kind. Instead of manifesting as a weapon, it imbued other weapons, enhancing them.

The sword handed to her by the Lord of Shadows was not a Memory, and therefore could not be augmented by the Crown of Dawn. The Nameless Sun, however, could.

Nephis nodded.

"We can continue."

Her guide turned away indifferently and continued walking into the depths of the narrow passage. She followed, contemplating...

‘What are his motives?’

The Lord of Shadows had let his disdain for the Great Clans be known. Now, he requested that she dismiss her sword, hinting that he wanted to keep something secret from the King.

Something moved in her heart, surprising her... a sweet, but distant longing.

'Can he be an..., ally?'

It would be so nice, to have someone to rely on.

In the past four years... no, for as long as Nephis could really remember, after her grandmother's passing, she had been on her own. Carrying a crushing burden without anyone there to lend her a hand. There were people who supported her, sure the Fire Keepers, Effle and Kal, and a few others.

But they were not as powerful as she was, and so could not really lessen her burden. The only exception was Cassie - without her quiet strength and friendship, Nephis might have collapsed a long time ago. But Cassie, too, was her subordinate. And, therefore, her responsibility.

Yes, that burden was something Nephis had chosen to carry herself. And yes, it was her own unreasonable ambition that was the cause of everything... most of it, at least. And yet, sometimes, she couldn't help but feel suffocated by the depth and intensity of her own desire, surrounded by enemies and laying awake at night, unable to sleep.

Nephis was a human, too. She felt weak sometimes, too... even if she tried her hardest not to show it, as well as many other things she felt.

So, if there was really someone out there who was as immensely strong as the Lord of Shadows seemed to be and shared her hatred toward the Sovereigns, someone she could rely on to stand side by side with her in the face of danger...

Ah, it was a thought as sweet as it was dangerous.

She wasn't even entirely sure that the Lord of Shadows was a human, let alone that he could be trusted. And yet, for some reason, unexplainably... she found herself really wanting to.

‘Why do I feel this way? It's not like me…’

If they could really become allies...

'Forget about it.'

Following the aloof Saint into the darkness, Nephis frowned slightly.

In this world, she could only really rely on herself. Everyone else would either betray her, abandon her, or stay by her side and perish as a result.

From her childhood and to this day, that had always been the truth.

And that was alright. She did not need anyone, because she alone was enough. Her will was enough, her strength was enough, and her scorching longing was enough.

It was plenty.

'It's strange.’

It would have been wonderful if she really had an ally... a partner, even. But she didn't, and had never.

And yet, and yet...

Strangely enough, the Lord of Shadows gave her a sense of unexplainable familiarity. Because of it, trusting him and in him was oddly easy,

Nephis was wary of that ease.

'Maybe that is one of his Aspect Abilities, too…’