1668 Hollow Bones

Sunny pushed his body through the last stretch of the narrow fissure and suddenly found himself in a vast open space. He took a step to the side, clinging to the porous surface of the ancient bone, and allowed Nephis to follow him onto a treacherous ledge.

She couldn't see because everything was still shrouded in impenetrable darkness, but below them... a whole hidden world was stretching as far as the eye could see, full of vibrant life.

They were currently inside the breastbone of the dead deity, which was comparable in size to a modest continent. Just like the rest of the bones, it was hollow, encompassing a realm of its own. The bone marrow that had once filled the vast expanse of the sternum's interior was long gone.

And in its place, a dreadful jungle had grown.

The humid air was filled with an indescribable mixture of strong scents. Below them, an impenetrable canopy of countless trees was swaying like a vermilion sea, most of them alien and monstrous, with vibrant red leaves. Primordial ferns towered like blooming towers, with vines and wild bushes rising between the craggy trunks like walls. Bloodred moss covered everything like a soft carpet.

Sunny could not really see colors in the darkness, but he knew enough to guess. Outside the Fragment of the Shadow Realm, the jungle shone with its own pale light, so he had seen its true appearance.

Here and there, colossal pillars of abominable flora rose to the dome of the sternum, attached to the cracks on its surface - those were the tendrils the jungle had extended to reach the sky. It used them to drink diffused sunlight when the clouds hid the sun, regrowing them every time they were incinerated.

...And, of course, there were all kinds of vile things dwelling under the canopy of the subterranean jungle.

Hordes of powerful abominations lived here Corrupted, Great, and even Cursed. Some of them were enormous and grotesque, some so small that it was hard to notice them with a naked eye. All had been baptized by the dire need to be born and grow on the surface, and only those lucky and vicious enough to reach maturity could descend into the Hollows and hope to survive here, away from the merciless gaze of the incinerating heavens.

The dark jungle was utterly deadly, and most deaths one could find here were utterly horrid.

That was the place where Sunny had brought Nephis after being apart from her for four long years,

'Not.., exactly romantic.’

He sighed secretly, then turned his head to look at her.

Nephis seemed unperturbed by the darkness, the scent of the jungle, and the indescribable choir of rustling noises that washed over them. There was a calm expression on her beautiful face, her slender body was relaxed, and the point of the sword he had given her was aimed at the ground.

The white flame dancing on her palm reflected in the depths of the calm grey eyes.

For a moment, Sunny thought that there was a shadow of some sharp emotion in those eyes, but then, it was gone, replaced by her usual reserved composure.

"How far are we from the ground?"

He hesitated for a moment.

"It's better to summon a Memory. There is a bit of a fall."

She nodded, and then, her alabaster skin ignited with a soft radiance for a short moment.

Sunny had expected Nephis to summon the familiar translucent cloak, but instead, a pair of beautiful white wings wove themselves from the light behind her. Nephis gripped the hilt of her sword and then took a step into the emptiness, gliding down with bewitching grace,

As she descended toward the jungle, the ball of flame burning in her hand was like a lonesome falling star,

He sighed, and then followed her down. As Sunny fell, his figure rippled and turned into a black crow, its feathers indistinguishable from the surrounding darkness.

Nephis descended into the Jungle like a spirit of light, Illuminating the twisting trunks of ancient trees and the red moss growing on them. Her wings fluttered once, sending a powerful gust of wind into the depths of the forest, and then disappeared with a soft rustle.

Sunny landed behind her, assumed her human form, and stared at her for a couple moments.

His thoughts were in disarray.

'Beautiful... too damn beautiful.’

He couldn't even imagine how that poor Sleeper must have felt, being rescued from the depths of despair, embraced, and healed by someone so breathtaking. A beautiful spirit of heavenly grace who had somehow found him in the depths of hell.

Well, it certainly beat being rescued by a sinister demon of darkness like Sunny.

'Lucky bastard.’

Making a mental note to keep Dreamer Ray away from the women in his life - gods knew Sunny had been burned for saving a Sleeper before! - Sunny walked forward and gestured for Nephis to follow.

She did, keeping silent for a while.

Eventually, though, Nephis asked:

"Should we be so careless?"

Sunny had not made any attempts to proceed with caution, walking forward with wide strides. It was a far cry from how someone should have been acting in a Death Zone, and especially one as vicious and vile as the great hollows inside the bones of the dead god. It was understandable that Nephis was confused by his attitude, strolling through the deadly jungle as if he owned the place.

But he did... in a sense.

Sunny shook his head.

"We are safe, for now."

As soon as his voice was swallowed by the noises of the jungle, though, they heard a different sound.

A deep, hoarse, heavy hiss of something giant breathing.

Nephis raised her sword, ready to strike.

But there was no need to.

A moment later, the trees in front of them parted, revealing a small clearing. On it, a hideous creature was laying on the carpet of moss and rotten leaves.

Its body was like a hill of scorched flesh, with terrifying muscles bulging under a rotting black hide. It was vaguely humanoid in shape, but the huge head of the Nightmare Creature resembled that of a jackal, the slightly parted jaws vast enough to swallow a whole building. The towering fangs glistened with a golden sheen, and behind them, a black tongue was hidden, covered in sores and scars.

A Great Monster.

Strangely enough, the abomination was not moving. Its giant eyes were closed, while its breathing was deep and sedate. There was no sign that it had sensed them.

Nephis stared at the monstrous being for a while, then glanced at Sunny. He was treated to a rare sight... there was a hint of doubt on her fair face.

"It's... asleep?"

He glanced at the Nightmare Creature, then nodded.

"Of course, it's asleep."

Not paying the Great Monster any attention, Sunny walked past it with cold indifference.

"...I'm the one who put it to sleep, after all.”