1669 Questions in the Light

Sunny walked deeper into the jungle, allowing his shadow sense to permeate the rustling darkness. Originally, this place was like a nearly impenetrable barrier, with thick vines and dense undergrowth barring one's path. Not only was the flora plentiful and terribly dense, but it was also predatory and lethally dangerous — even for a Saint.

But now, the abominable plants were still and docile. There were paths cut through the jungle, as well, even if no one except for Sunny himself would have noticed them. As such, he managed to maintain considerable speed, getting further away from the Nameless Temple with each minute. They had to hurry to maximize the chances of finding the two Sleepers alive.

As the two of them traversed the jungle, they encountered more sleeping Nightmare Creatures. There were hundreds of them, if not thousands, many of the Great Rank. Walking among the slumbering horde of abominations must have been a tense experience for Nephis, considering that the power sleeping under the Nameless Temple was truly dreadful. Perhaps even a Sovereign would have been given pause after witnessing it.

Sunny was calm, though.

All of these Nightmare Creatures were in the thrall of the Dream Curse, lost in Nightmare's lesser dream domain. Their souls were locked in a maze of nightmares, unable to escape… for the most part.

Exceptions happened, albeit rarely.

The Dream Curse was silent and insidious. It had slowly infected every abomination in a wide area around the Nameless Temple, and because of how subtle the spreading plague was, very few of them had noticed anything amiss before it was too late. Lulled to sleep, they became trapped in nightmares..

Those who had been able to resist the Dream Curse were disposed of by Sunny, a Great Demon being the last of the abominations he hunted down. The rest were now at Nightmare's mercy. If they died in his domain, their souls would feed the Shadow, pushing the tenebrous stallion closer to Supremacy. But if they continued to live, their dreams would strengthen his legion of horrors.

Of course, there was a possibility that an especially ferocious abomination could destroy all of his nightmares, like Sunny had done in the Kingdom of Hope… but the chances of something like that happening were low.

Not only were Nightmare Creatures less resolute than Sunny had been, but the current Nightmare was also much more powerful than he had been all that time ago. The weaker of his horrors were being destroyed, but the stronger ones slowly took their place.

As for the dark destrier himself, he was currently busy with a very important and sensitive task.

After a while, Nephis suddenly spoke:

Would you mind sharing how you put all these abominations to sleep?

Sunny smiled behind the visor of his helmet, suddenly remembering their first meeting on the Forgotten Shore.

He kept silent for a few moment, then answered neutrally:

I would not, if you shared something as well.

Nephis simply nodded.

That seems fair.

Sunny contemplated the answer, then spoke simply:

There is another Transcendent Terror serving me. His powers have to do with dreams… and nightmares. It took a long time to lull the inhabitants of this corner of the jungle to slumber, but it couldn't be helped. My Citadel would have never been safe if there was a constant source of danger underneath it. Now, I only have to worry about the enemies coming from outside my territory.

Nephis let out a sigh.

I must admit. I am… a bit envious. My luck with Echoes has never been great.

It seemed that way, but actually, if she stopped giving all the Echoesshe had earned to her companions and followers, the situation would have been different.

Of course, Sunny possessed a unique advantage — unlike Echoes, his Shadows could grow and evolve to higher Ranks. Otherwise, his retinue would not have been anywhere near as powerful as it was now.

He lingered for a few moments, then said, his voice even:

"My turn to ask, then."

Sunny considered his words carefully.

"I've heard that you are an enlightened master of combat, Lady Nephis. A warrior who understands battle better than anyone else. So, as a master… if you had no other choice, how would you fight a Supreme?"

Nephis smiled faintly.

"I'll assume that it is a hypothetical question."

She lingered for a while, then answered casually:

"There are numerous ways to fight against a superior enemy, of course. Deception, manipulation, misdirection — all the usual tricks apply. Leveraging your advantages while making sure that the adversary is at a disadvantage. But, honestly… I wouldn't trust in complicated schemes and ingenious strategies when facing a Supreme."

Nephis fell silent for a moment and said, he voice devoid of any particular emotion:

"At the end of the day, the best way to fight a Sovereign… is to be a Sovereign."

Sunny chuckled.

'Interesting…'

It wasn't exactly what he had expected to hear. Nephis was currently in the middle of a grandiose and risky scheme, after all — infiltrating a Great Clan to take down its ruler. And yet, she was disparaging such an approach, saying that the best way to kill a Supreme was to first become a Supreme.

Was she having doubts about her plan?

Or preparing to execute a different one altogether? No, that was impossible… she would never be allowed to challenge the Fourth Nightmare, let alone return from it and live.

The jungle swallowed his quiet laughter, and in the ensuing silence, Nephis asked:

"What about you, Lord Shadow? How would you fight a Supreme?"

He thought for a bit, then shrugged nonchalantly.

"Me? Simple, really… I would probably wait until the two of them clashed, watch one die and the other become weakened, and then stab the one who survived in the back."

Nephis tilted her head slightly. When she spoke, her voice sounded a little amused:

"Are you very confident in your backstabbing skill, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny smiled behind the onyx visor.

"Pretty confident, I guess. None of those I stabbed in the back ever complained."

Well, because they were dead.

The corner of her lips curled upward.

The two of them remained silent for a while.

Eventually, Sunny said:

"I have another question."

He guided them to a barely noticeable path. The white radiance of Neph's flames was stark as it chased the darkness away… the darkness retreated, but not far, revealing the vibrant vermilion moss and the red vines growing on the twisted trunks of ancient trees. As soon as the two of them passed, the darkness returned, swallowing everything anew.

Sunny sighed.

"Do you know the legend of Odysseus?"

Nephis seemed surprised by his question.

"Sure. Why?"

He spoke without turning his head, his cold voice remaining emotionless and even:

"Odysseus has been gone from his home for twenty years. Everyone thought him dead, and many suitors arrived to propose marriage to his widow. She refused them for a while, but they insisted that she must make a choice. One of them was meant for the throne of Ithaca."

Sunny paused for a moment, then continued:

"Eventually, Odysseus came back and infiltrated the gathering of the suitors disguised as a beggar. Bringing himself into the very home where his enemies dwelled. None of them recognized him, assuming that he was weak and posed no threat. They were wrong."

The jungle rustled around them as his voice turned a little sinister:

"Odysseus then ruthlessly massacred the suitors, not sparing a single one. Not only that, but he even viciously killed the maids who had been deemed disloyal. A river of blood was spilled on that day, and scores of people lost their lives, their bodies sliced and mutilated. So, my question is…"

He stopped and turned, facing Nephis and her pure white flames.

"...Isn't Odysseus too cruel?"

She looked at him for a while, her beautiful grey eyes filled with dancing flames.

Eventually, Nephis said in her usual calm tone:

"You've never hated anyone, have you, Lord Shadow? It seems to me… that you are a very kind man."

He laughed.

"That is a first. I've been called many things before, but kind… I don't think I've ever heard this one."

He turned away and continued walking deeper into the jungle.

"You are wrong, by the way. I know hatred, too. I am a very hateful person, in fact…"

Granted, his hatred was probably not as scorching as hers.

One chapter today, three tomorrow.