1673 Entering the Ruins

The Lord of Shadows broke through the canopy and disappeared in the jungle, landing noiselessly in the ruins. Nephis folded her wings and fell toward the sea of red leaves to follow him.

A moment later, she landed in a small clearing. The vermilion moss softened her landing, but she could feel the solidness of stone under her feet. There were crumbling structures all around her, most swallowed entirely by the vines and creeper plants. Some of the plants glowed beautifully, dispelling the deep darkness - the ruin of the ancient city was suffused with light, shadows, and ethereal twilight.

The glowing plants emanated heat, as well, so the humid air under the impenetrable canopy of rust-red leaves was suffocating and sweltering. Nephis inhaled deeply, her alabaster skin glistening with moisture.

'It's hot...'

The ground shook as the great pillars of vines crashed into the jungle, wreathed in flame, and sent clouds of burning debris flying in all directions. Ash fell down like snow.

A few fiery meteors landed in the ruin, as well, starting small fires here and there.

Nephis dismissed her wings and closed her eyes for a moment, listening to the jungle, Far away, there was a cacophony of indescribable sounds - the Nightmare Creatures populating this vibrant hell were on the move, Incited to frenzy by the destruction of the sky bridges.

But here in the ruins, everything was relatively quiet. The Jungle rustled and whispered with a thousand voices, but its tone was no different from how it had been before.

Which was... bad.

It meant that Nightmare Creatures did not dare come here and challenge the masters of this place.

She opened her eyes and glanced at the Lord of Shadows, who seemed to possess an Attribute or an Ability that allowed him to sense many things from afar.

It was impossible to tell his expression, of course, because the mysterious man never revealed his face. His figure, however, was just as cold and aloof as ever. He didn't seem concerned, and, strangely enough, that calmed Nephis as well.

"How close are we to the Sleepers?"

His tone was indifferent, competing with her own as far as inexpressiveness went:

"A few kilometers."

She stared at him silently for a few moments.

'Do I.,, sound this way too, by chance?’

Emotionless, aloof, and deadpan. King of... haughty,

She coughed.

It was not that she did not have feelings. It was just that she had spent most of her formative years sheltered in solitude, so when other children learned how to use their voices and faces to express nuanced emotions in the company of their relatives and peers, she had not. Who was she supposed to express her feelings to if no one was around?

Communication was an acquired skill, as well... Nephis knew how to do all these things now, of course she had to, as a public figure. But her default state was still the same, reverting to how she had been in her childhood.

She frowned.

‘Well, anyway...'

"What about the Nightmare Creatures?"

The Lord of Shadows raised a hand, and a graceful odachi suddenly appeared in it, its serpentine still as dark as a moonless night. There were no swirling sparks that usually appeared when Memories were summoned, and almost no time passed before the black blade manifested itself into reality.

"Already moving in our direction."

Nephis nodded,

"No time to waste, then."

Using the longsword he had given her, she sliced a path through the vines and moved forward. The Lord of Shadows followed behind her, his steps not making any sound whatsoever. It was as if he was not there at all.

As they made their way deeper into the ruins, the jungle tried to kill them. There were plants that tried to entangle them and pull them into pits of viscous digestive fluid. Vile critters fell from above, aiming to slither under their armor. Glowing flowers swayed beautifully, sending clouds of flesh-eating pollen into the humid air...

Nephis had long summoned her helmet. When thick vines moved to imprison her, she cut them.

When revolting millipedes and grotesque ticks fell on her from the branches above, she sliced them apart. When clouds of pollen, spores, and poison tried to envelop them, she uttered the Name of the wind, destroying them.

'What a terrible place.’

The Lord of Shadow simply walked behind her, not doing anything. He seemed perfectly content to use her as a pathfinder, only giving directions when Nephis was getting off course.

"Aren't you... going to summon your Echoes?"

He answered succinctly:

"No. Do I need to?"

Nephis gritted her teeth.

Those powerful creatures under his command were protecting the Citadel. Was he worried that her Fire Keepers would come under harm without them, or that his Citadel would be harmed by the Fire Keepers without anyone keeping an eye out?

In any case. the Shadow Saint seemed to believe that just the two of them would be enough to escape these ruins alive. Nephis felt a little pleased by his vote of confidence, but also a little incensed.

For some reason.

'Morgan has a lot of Echoes, too…’

Morgan had become much stronger after Transcending. The defeat in Antarctica seemed to have tempered her character, too... and it was not as if Anvil coddled her - the opposite, in fact. And yet, there was a huge difference in how Clan Valor treated its true daughter and its adopted daughter.

Granted, Nephis suspected that the harsh treatment she received from the King of Swords was actually a sign of affection.

He had not given her any powerful Echoes, though. It was fine for Morgan to have better equipment than her... but the Lord of Shadows, too?

Just when she was considering making a remark against her better judgment - a soft voice resounded in her mind.

[Neph...]

She was already raising her sword.

[A Great Beast is approaching. Some kind of a construct, or maybe an undead. Very strong... be careful!]

A moment later, she sensed it. Not the creature itself, but the pressure of its passing - the very mundane change in air pressure caused by something moving with incredible speed.

The mound of red moss in front of her exploded, revealing the dark interior of an ancient ruin. From it, surrounded by flying pieces of moss and shards of ancient stone, an eerie creature appeared, wielding a strange weapon.

The creature was twice as tall as Nephis, but shriveled and hunched, like a mummy. It was vaguely human in appearance, with a body made of cracked stone. Red moss grew on it like a tattered robe, and below it...

Nephis felt a sense of distaste.

There was desiccated flesh under the stone carapace, as if a human had once been imprisoned inside the golem. The stone face of the creature was featureless, except for the eyes - inside the two round holes cut on its surface, two gaping wounds where human eyes should have been nestled with darkness, and from them, two beautiful blossoms grew on black stalks.

The mace the golem held seemed to be cut from diamond. He looked like a monk who had gained enlightenment and became one with the world... with the abominable world of spreading Corruption, filled with nothing but ancient evil and chilling malice,

It only took a split second for Nephis to see all these details,

Then, the creature was upon them…