1675 Uncovered

The jungle, which had been like a rustling ocean, was suddenly absolutely quiet. The dead silence that enveloped them was so utter and unnatural that, for a moment, Nephis felt a chill travel across her back despite the sweltering heat.

The horrors of the forgotten ruin were drawing closer.

She frowned slightly, and then dismissed most of her armor. A whirlwind of sparks wreathed her slender figure for a few fleeting moments, and then dissipated without a trace, leaving only a thin white tunic behind.

Free of the suffocating weight of her armor, Nephis inhaled deeply and noticed that the Lord of Shadows was staring at her intently. At least... she thought he was? The darkness nestling in the crack of his visor was just as cold and nebulous as always.

"What... are you doing?"

His voice was emotionless, but she thought she recognized a hint of emotion in it. Confusion, maybe?

Yes, he was probably confused.

She shrugged, enjoying the feeling of her skin breathing, unobstructed by the weight of metal.

"My armor won't withstand a hit from a Great Beast. I'd rather have all the speed and agility I can get, considering the circumstances. That way, I stand the chance of not being hit at all."

That was true. Her armor was a Supreme Memory of the Second Tier, but after the battle with this... asura... she had judged that it would not protect her from a blow delivered by one of the ancient golems. She could heal her body if it was damaged, but not her armor and once the armor was wrecked and bent out of shape, it would constrict her movements even further.

Now that the presence of the true masters of the ruined city had scared off all the pests populating the jungle, it was better to be fast and nimble.

The other reason Nephis had dismissed her armor was necessity. She was pretty sure that she would be forced to use her Transformation Ability in the upcoming battle... so, she didn't want to burn the Supreme Memory.

That armor of hers was pretty decent. It would be a shame if it melted into a puddle of molten steel, like so many previous ones...

Cassie had also told her once that it suited her well.

Not that it mattered, of course!

'What am I even thinking about?’

Nephis looked away, hiding her embarrassment at the inappropriate thought, and summoned two charms the [Dire Warning] and the [Testament of Malice]. One possessed an enchantment that scared off creatures of a lesser Rank than her, the other added an element of insidious decay to her attacks not too powerful, but cumulative.

Finally, she activated the enchantment of her tunic - the remaining underlayer of the dismissed Supreme armor and sensed the air grow cool and soft around her, caressing her slightly damp skin like fine silk. That invisible barrier would not do much against sharp weapons, but it could lessen the impact of blunt ones, like the diamond mace the mindless asura had wielded.

Each Memory was enhanced by the Crown of Dawn, making the enchantments much more potent.

There were many more tools in her soul arsenal, but using them was a matter of resource allocation. Relying on Memories too much would drain her essence, which could be better spent on her Aspect and sorcery. She couldn't summon the [Altar of Denial] to lessen the essence consumption, either, since that Memory could only be used in a static position.

Nephs had earned a truly astonishing number of Memories in the past four years, but most of them had not been worth her essence. Some had gone to the Fire Keepers, and some were sold off to fund them... even with the nominal support of Clan Valor, maintaining a Citadel and a private army of Masters was not cheap.

The more clandestine affairs, which were handled by Cassie, also demanded a lot of funding - and the Great Clan could not be allowed to learn about them.

As a result, Nephis kept only a few tried-and-tested Memories, most of them useful in different kinds of situations. She summoned as few as she could in any given battle, relying on her skill and strength instead, as much as she could.

The Lord of Shadows also did not seem like someone who relied on Memories a lot, although she wasn't sure if his reasons were the same as hers. In fact, Nephis had not seen him sumfnon a single Memory apart from his serpentine odachi and his onyx armor... if those were even Memories.

At this point, she wasn't sure.

His Abilities were truly versatile...

That manifested sword she had given her was holding up pretty well. With an Ability like that and sublime swordsmanship, who needed Memories?

She wondered what other tricks he had in store.

Just at that moment, the shadows stirred and drowned the mysterious Saint like a dark tide. She remembered the scene of a black giant rising above the bone plain and was ready to take a step back, but the scale of it seemed much smaller.

Indeed, a few moments later, a different kind of creature rose from the darkness. It was entirely black and demonic in appearance, with four mighty arms and a long tail, towering above her at at least three meters of height - just as tall as the ancient golem had been.

Its muscular body radiated a sense of chilling, ferocious physical strength and bestial potency. The stonelike armor of the Lord of Shadows shifted, covering the four-armed demon like an onyx carapace, and at the same time, his great odachi rippled like liquid, growing even longer to match the demon's towering height.

‘...What a fearsome sword.’

Nephis stared at the dark demon in front of her, wondering for a moment...

Was that, perhaps, the true appearance of the Lord of Shadows, while the human form he wore was no more than a disguise?

The human, the dark colossus, the swift crow, and this shadow devil... was that the result of his Transformation Ability? If so, it was much more versatile than Nephis had assumed, and any Saint she knew possessed.

Then again, shadows were formless and shapeless by nature, so maybe such versatility made sense.

The form of a shadow demon... was very much like the enchanted armor suits the defenders of the ancient city had once worn, in a sense. Was his body encased in a shell of shadows, like theirs had been in sorcerous stone? If so, it was an ingenious applications of one's Aspect.

But it couldn't be just that. The Lord of Shadows could cover his human body in the shell of the four-armed devil and the shadow colossus. But what about the crow? It was much smaller than a human. So, the fundamental principle of his Transformation had to be different.

As she was contemplating the nuances of his Aspect, the Lord of Shadows spoke, his voice still cold and indifferent:

"We must hurry."

His voice was still the same...

Which was a little funny. A voice like that suited a young man of noble bearing very well, but coming from the chest of such a huge and ferocious creature, it sounded a little comical.

Absurdly enough, Nephis found herself wanting to laugh.

...Of course, she did not, maintaining her usual calm expression. However, two sparks ignited in her eyes.

"Yes... right. Let us hurry."

Turning away to hide her face, she gripped the hilt of her black sword and dashed into the jungle.