1677 Spark of Longing

A towering golem made from crumbling stone, its cracked body overgrown with red moss, raised a hand. There was a corpse entombed within it. The soldier of an annihilated civilization had perished thousands of years ago, but their sorcerous armor still lived, infected by an abhorrent corruption.

The creature, an Asura of Condemnation, was holding a diamond cleaver in its hand. When the cleaver rose, the world seemed to tremble in fear. When the cleaver fell, reality itself seemed to split apart.

A giant tree, its adamantine bark hard enough to resist the end of days, was cut down in one slash and toppled slowly. The wind raised by its fall fanned the flames that had been spreading through the jungle, and bitter smoke permeated the air.

The tree had been dead for countless years, and its heart had long rotted away. There was a cave-like hollow between its roots, which was now revealed.

Two terrified Sleepers had been hiding in that hollow, and were now hugging each other as they looked at the sinister abominations in horror.

The diamond cleaver rose again, spelling their doom.

…Before it could fall down to reap their lives, however, an equally menacing fiend appeared from the darkness, crashing into the great golem with a ferocious growl. It had sharp claws, twisting horns, and a long tale, its bestial body encased in a fearsome onyx carapace. The darkness itself moved, shrouding it like a mantle..

And a moment later…

The eyes of the two Sleepers widened.

A beautiful young woman wearing a fluttering white tunic fell from above, surrounded by pure light. Her skin was fair and flawless, like polished alabaster, and her silver hair shone brilliantly in the dim twilight of the jungle. Her figure was slender and graceful, and her beauty… was breathtaking.

She held an incandescent sword in her hands.

Landing on the shoulder of the ghastly golem, she delivered a terrible blow and severed its damaged neck.

The headless abomination continued to resist furiously even after being decapitated, but the strange pair — the fearsome demon of darkness and the beautiful spirit of light — cooperated seamlessly, swiftly bringing it down.

The diamond cleaver shattered and fell apart. The stone carapace crumbled. The mummified corpse that had been entombed within it turned to ash.

The creature was dead before the falling tree collapsed to the ground, making the ancient ruin quake.

Nephis jumped off its corpse and inhaled slowly.

The Lord of Shadows had been wounded in that last clash, but his towering body was already repairing itself. She was unscathed… for now.

Most importantly, they made it to the two Sleepers in time.

Turning around, she walked to the remains of the giant tree and looked into the hollow space between its roots, where two ashen-faced teenagers were staring up at her with wide eyes.

Both were girls, their faces smeared with ash and dirt. One of them seemed to maintain a shred of composure, holding the other tightly. The other girl… didn't look too good, and seemed to be slowly falling unconscious.

The first Sleeper opened her mouth and said, stuttering:

"You're… y—you're… Changing Star?"

Nephis smiled in an effort to calm the girl. That calming smile was not natural to her, but she had practiced her communication skills diligently. After all, she was both a leader and a public figure now… knowing how to make the right impression was one of the skills she had to master, and had mastered despite not having an innate talent for it.

"Yes. I am Saint Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan. This is Saint Shadow… of no clan. We are here to bring you two to safety."

The young girl lingered for a few moments, looking at her with a complicated expression.

That expression was not what Nephis had expected.

'Is she… wary of me?'

Eventually, the girl nodded and said in a tone that was meant to be steady, but betrayed a slight tremor:

"I am… Tamar of the Sorrow clan."

'Ah…'

Nephis lingered for a moment.

Sorrow was a vassal clan of Song. So… this girl was technically her enemy.

It was indeed a bit awkward.

The Lord of Shadows stared at her, as if curious to see what she would do. His demonic shell had almost entirely repaired itself, already.

Nephis jumped down into the shallow pit, put her sword down, and looked at the second teenager. Then, she turned back to young Tamar.

"What is wrong with your friend?"

The girl glanced at her black sword, then gripped the other Sleeper tighter.

"Some… kind of infection. She scraped her hand on a vine…"

Then, her eyes trembled slightly.

"Wait, did… did Ray find you, my lady? Is he alive?"

Nephis nodded and kneeled near the unconscious Sleeper, looking at her with concern.

"He is safe and sound. You don't have to worry."

The three must have bonded during their harrowing time in Godgrave. Before that, they had probably spent a lot of time together at the Academy. It wasn't strange for them to care about each other… in fact, Nephis was the strange one, having formed no bonds at the Academy.

There had been a reason for that, of course. She did not know which of the fellow Sleepers had been sent to kill her, at the time… Cassie had had her circumstances, too. Still, these girls reminded her of the two of them.

Granted, there had been no third member to their small cohort on the Forgotten Shore… there had been no…

A moment later, Nephis shook her head lightly, having lost her train of thought.

Concerned for the unconscious girl, she gently placed her hand on her gaunt body and frowned. The girl's skin was as hot as a furnace, and her pulse was weak… she wasn't just infected. She was dying.

Nephis lingered for a moment, and then glanced at Tamar. She forced herself to smile again.

"...You are safe now. The worst part is almost over. Fear not, for we are here. And we will get you and your friend out, no matter what."

The young girl stared at Nephis for a few moments, then took a trembling breath and nodded. Then, she suddenly slumped, as if finally allowing her exhausted body to collapse. Her eyes glistened with moisture, but she gritted her teeth and held the tears back.

"Thank you… thank you. Lady Changing Star."

Nephis nodded and turned away, secretly gritting her teeth.

Then, she activated her Dormant Ability and endured the blinding pain, sending a wave of healing flame into the second Sleeper's body.

The infection was persistent, and had spread to the girl's heart. Nevertheless, it was burned away by the purity of soul flame, leaving no trace behind. It just took a little longer than Nephis had expected. She healed most of the damage dealt to the body of the unfortunate Sleeper, as well.

The shadows around her stirred, betraying her companion's restlessness.

The Lord of Shadows spoke from above:

"They're drawing close."

At the sound of her voice, Tamar flinched and looked at Nephis, trying to hide her fear:

"This is… this is Godgrave, isn't it? Can we really escape?"

Nephis dismissed her flames and took a deep breath.

"Of course. I promised, didn't I?"

The young girl stared at her for a few moments, then nodded gravely.

"I'll… trust in you, Lady Changing Star. I'll strive to survive, no matter what."

Her voice sounded resolute.

Neph's smile faltered for a moment.

"...Good. Strive well."

While saying that, she could already feel it…

A spark of longing igniting in the soul of young Tamar, and then turning into a gentle flame.

Connecting the two of them together, and making her a tentative part of Neph's nascent, unrealized, almost non-existent Domain.