1682 Hasty Retreat

Nephis and the Lord of Shadow had slain the initial four Great Beasts. But by then, there were already more of the fearsome asuras that had risen from the ruins and reached them, surrounding the two like a fatal tide of ancient stone and sinister, evil will.

She... was coming closer and closer to the cusp of fatigue.

The Lord of Shadows, meanwhile, seemed to be holding back on using his teleportation Ability. He must have told the truth when saying that carrying the two Sleepers all the way to the Citadel and coming back would put a strain on his reserves of essence. It had to be conserved now.

Luckily, their goal was not to obliterate all the ancient wraiths. Their goal was simply to escape... granted, there was some bad luck involved, too.

The easiest route of retreat would have been to escape to the surface through the nearest crack in the dome of the colossal breastbone. But the veil of clouds was torn right now, and the surface was bathed in the light of the annihilating sun. That path was not an option.

Nevertheless, Nephis wasn't too concerned, She was still holding back the most destructive of her powers.

She had no doubt that the Lord of Shadows had a few tricks up his sleeve, as well.

And yet, and yet...

What was that cold, heavy weight pressing down on her heart?

"Move back"

His voice was just as cold as ever.

She didn't hesitate and pushed the grounds with her foot, leaving a scorched mark on it and flying more than a hundred meters back almost in an instant.

In the next second, a small lantern of black stone appeared in one of the shadow demon's four hands. His onyx armor shifted and retreated under his obsidian skin, revealing his powerful physique.

Left alone, the Lord of Shadow lingered for a moment, seemingly unable to evade the attacks of the abominable golems in time. Everything that followed happened in a split second.

Their diamond weapons landed on his muscular body, mangling it gruesomely.

A tide of darkness suddenly flowed out of the stone lantern and came alive, enveloping the advancing asuras with a thousand black chains. Even though the Great Beasts tore the chains apart with ease, they were still stalled for several precious moments.

In those moments, the broken, savaged body of the Lord of Shadows swayed slowly... and dissolved into nothingness.

Neph's radiant eyes flashed.

'He...'

But then, a familiar human figure stepped out of the shadows by her side, the onyx helmet closing to hide his face. Completely unharmed.

She let out a silent sigh of relief.

"I suggest we hurry and get away, Lady Nephis”

...Utter indifference.

Well, to be fair, her face was also motionless and impassive. Not that he could see her features in the torrent of brilliant light.

‘It's good... that he's alive.’

...Was it good, though? If the Lord of Shadows perished, his Citadel would be hers to take. Bringing such a precious gift to the King of Swords would further her goals greatly.

And yet, Nephis was happy that he was unharmed.

Using the momentary delay of the sinister asuras, the two of them made a hasty retreat. They ran through the ancient ruins, getting closer to the border. The golems gave chase and were gaining on them slowly - not as slowly as Nephis would have hoped, but enough so to give them a chance to escape into the jungle.

There were still a few of the ancient golems stalking the ruin, though. One of them barred their path, prompting Nephis and the Lord of Shadows to perform a flawless pincer attack without exchanging a single word.

His black odachi fell. Her radiant hand flew.

The ghastly Nightmare Creature crumbled to the ground.

[You have slain a Great Beast, Asura of Condemnation]

The rest of the abominations were right behind them, but the edge of the ruins was already close. Nephis could already see the remains of an ancient wall, overgrown with red moss and twisting vines.

But the cold feeling grasping her fiery heart only grew stronger.

She frowned.

A Saint's intuition was more than an unreliable gut feeling. Transcendent beings were greatly attuned to the world, and could sense subtle changes in it. The flow of spirit essence, the movements of the underlying laws, the changes in the fabric of reality...

Something was very wrong.

‘What... what is that?'

Both Nephis and the Lord of Shadows halted, realizing almost at the same time that the edge of the ancient ruins... was somehow getting further away. No matter how fast they ran, the distance between them and the overgrown wall did not diminish.

They glanced at each other somberly.

In the next moment, the entire world quaked violently, and something massive moved behind them.

Turning around, Nephis saw the ground at the heart of the ancient city moving, rising above the jungle like a mountain. Countless trees toppled and fell down, the sea of vines and bushes drowning in the rolling soil. The ancient structures were revealed from underneath the carpet of red moss, only to crumble moments later.

It was as though something colossal had been sleeping under the ancient jungle, and was now rising from below, its slumber disturbed by the incinerating heat of the white flames and the clamor of fierce battle.

She suddenly felt... horror.

Horror was not something Nephis felt often, and definitely not on her own accord. The only reason for that feeling was that her mind was being affected by an external force.

Neph's flames dimmed a little when a dire realization surfaced in her mind.

Her lips parted, and she whispered a single word:

"...Condemnation."

The Great Beasts they had been battling were called the asuras... the asuras of Condemnation.

She had thought that they were simply a swarm of Nightmare Creatures populating the ancient ruin, their name hinting at some forgotten mystery of the past.

But now, Nephis realized that it had a much more literal meaning.

As the mountain of raised soil started to split open, revealing the appearance of the being that had been buried underneath, she thought that her horror had been quite an appropriate reaction.

The asuras of Condemnation were not a natural swarm of Great Beasts bound to a single location.

Instead, they were here together for another, much more sinister reason... they were the minions of a much more powerful being.

Their name simply pointed at whom they belonged to.

Their master had to be of a higher Rank, after all.

The Cursed Tyrant... Condemnation.