1686 Acts of Humanity

For Nephis, the world was still stark and sharp, devoid of subtlety. Her emotions were still subdued, and mostly missing. It had not been long since the battle with Condemnation - if their desperate escape could even be called a battle - and so, she had not recovered from the annihilating pain of burning her soul to ash yet.

She had been in Godgrave just yesterday. Back then, they had waited on the steps of the Nameless Temple for a long time for its master to come and take them back to the waking world. Nephis could have carried her warriors across the threshold of realms herself, but the tentative agreement with the Lord of Shadows was preventing her from placing a tether in the vicinity of his Citadel.

In the end, the mysterious Saint walked out of the darkness and silently brought the Fire Keepers, the three Sleepers, and herself away from the Dream Realm, one at a time. She suspected that he could carry more than one person across realms - Nephis herself could carry seven other Saints, or more than a hundred mundane people - but Shadow kept his secrets close to his chest, as always.

She had been idly curious where his tether in the waking world would be. Saints usually had an established base there, most within the well-guarded walls of their clan's compound.

Nephts herself, as well as the Fire Keepers, operated from the former manor of the Immortal Flame clan.

It was a bit of a contentious topic, actually, because the elders of Valor wanted them to reside within the great clan's stronghold in NQSC - officially, for safety reasons, but truthfully to control them better.

But the relationship between the Fire Keepers and the rest of Valor forces was generally a bit awkward, not the least because of the sixth month the survivors of the Forgotten Shore had spent hiding in the Dream Realm to avoid the fallout of Cassie's conflict with the great clan. It had only been resolved after Nephis returned and agreed to become Anvil's adopted daughter.

In any case... there were no independent Saints, really. Everyone either had a Legacy clan supporting them or worked for the government. So, Nephis was understandably curious about where the Lord of Shadows tethered himself in the waking world.

Was it a secret compound in NQSC? An unassuming residential building? A stronghold of a minor Legacy clan in one of the other Quadrants? The remains of an abandoned government facility, perhaps?

She had idly imagined all kinds of places, thinking that they might hint to his real background.

Curiously enough, though, the tether of the Lord of Shadows was carelessly placed in the middle of an empty street in the outskirts of NQSC. The outskirts were much more desolate now than they had been before, with many people having left for the Dream Realm. There were many abandoned areas like this one, where there was hardly any foot traffic.

While unconventional, the placement of the tether seemed to be dictated by nothing except for pure convenience, which had not told her anything at all.

Nephis had been the last one to be brought over. The Lord of Shadows did not waste any time on saying goodbyes, nodding at her curtly before dissolving into the darkness.

Just like that, her expedition to Godgrave was over.

There were a lot of things she had to do after that. Nephis said her goodbyes to the three Sleepers and sent them off to the Academy - since they had never managed to anchor themselves in the Dream Realm, they would have to request the help of a Saint, pass through one of the Dream Gates, or wait for the next winter solstice to complete their Awakening.

She would have offered her help, but considering Tamar's allegiance to the Song Domain, having her anchor in Bastion was not an option.

The Fire Keepers either returned to the Immortal Flame manor or went straight back to the Ivory Tower, They needed some rest.

As for Nephis herself…

She made her way to the compound of Clan Valor. Then, it was a whirlwind of briefings and reports, as well as a lot of waiting. Luckily, Cassle was there to help her manage the most tedious parts.

It was not until the morning of the next day that Nephis had a chance to rest and recover. She ate a late breakfast, took a long shower, and put on some mundane clothes. Going through the motions.

It was a bit annoying. Everything not having to do with furthering her goal was, in her current state.

Eventually, she ended up making an appointment with her therapist.

Nephis had been assigned a psychological counsellor after returning from her Second Nightmare, and was seeing one periodically to this day.

Of course, it was a bit of a farcical affair.

She believed that there was some benefit to receiving counselling - gods knew, her mental state was far from untroubled. It had been especially bad after the Second Nightmare, and would turn cold and emotionless every time she overused her Aspect. Nephis... was concerned about losing the sight of her humanity, which was the reason she had agreed to therapy.

However, it wasn't hard to guess that her assigned therapist was making regular reports about everything she said during their sessions, At first, the reports had gone to the government.

After Nephis Joined Clan Valor, her initial counsellor was suddenly unavailable, and referred her to a colleague. The new counsellor was unmistakably making detailed reports to the elders of the Great Clan.

So, it was a charade. Nephis pretended not to know and continued to visit the therapist to nurture the feeling of false control Clan Valor had regarding her.

That said, even a charade could be useful sometimes.

There were many useful things she had learned from the counsellors while they were learning falsehood from her.

For example... the act of wearing mundane clothes. Nephis would have been comfortable never dismissing her armor Memories, but it was these small acts of human behavior that tethered her to humanity.

She was also often encouraged to participate in mundane leisure activities and communicate with ordinary people more. There were other small things she had learned to do, as well. Nephis found these tasks a bit tedious, but beneficial to the state of her soul.

It was also good to her current endeavor of mastering the Knowledge of Passion. She tended to spend all her time in the company of a certain kind of people - Awakened warriors, and elite ones at that. Their passions burned bright, but were usually colored with similar hues.

Experiencing a wide range of human hopes and aspirations was bound to help her understand that elusive branch of her Aspect Legacy better.

And so... Nephis listened to her counsellor well.

Which was why she arrived at the quaint café in a remote part of Bastion feeling very uncomfortable in a light summer dress.