1700 His Own Worst Enemy

"Gossiping about me, huh? How exciting!"

Pretending to be oblivious, Sunny looked at Nephis and Effie with a little bit of masterfully performed confusion.

Nephis spared him a short glance, then shrugged.

"The Lord of Shadows… he is just as the rumors say. Immensely strong, more than a little bit sinister, and highly eccentric."

Effie chuckled.

"Well, anyone who chooses to live in a Death Zone has to be a lunatic. Still, to be called immensely strong by you, Princess… I am at a loss for words. Is there really such a monster in the world?".

Sunny blinked.

"Hey!"

What did she mean, highly eccentric? He was the picture of perfect mental health!

Well… maybe not…

Still, Sunny was a little hurt.

Nephis, meanwhile, smiled faintly.

At the same time, he is nothing like what the rumors say. He is surprisingly considerate despite his tyrannical strength, kind despite wanting to appear sinister, and very shrewd despite his eccentricity.

Effie blinked, then briefly glanced at Sunny with a strange expression.

Princess… well… why are you smiling that way? In front of your… actually, never mind!

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

Oh? Was I smiling? I didn't mean to.

Sunny took a sip of wine.

No, no! Smile more!

Why was Effie raining on his parade? What an insufferable woman!

The insufferable woman in question, meanwhile, grinned.

That's fine and all. But what does he look like? Is he handsome? I bet that even if he is, he can't be as handsome as Master Sunless.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

Nephis shrugged again, seemingly uninterested in that topic.

"I don't know. The Lord of Shadows never shows his face. He is always either wearing a mask or a closed helmet… in fact, you can't even tell if there is a human body inside that armor, most of the time."

Effie seemed excited, for some reason.

"Really? Damn… what a pity. I guess he's horribly disfigured. Or just naturally ugly. Not that there's anything wrong with that… wait, what if he is bald? Or missing teeth? Did you say he never takes his armor off? He must really reek, then! Gods, what a slob. Master Sunless here is definitely way better. He smells very nice. Simply delicious... am I right, Master Sunless?"

Sunny stared at her wordlessly.

'Why is she dragging me into this? No, wait… what the hell does she mean, bald?! I'm not bald!'

But having feigned ignorance, he couldn't really defend his honor… the third avatar's honor.

No matter how much he wanted to.

Hiding his frustration, Sunny said weakly:

"I guess? I never really paid attention to how I smell…"

To his surprise, though, Nephis suddenly came to the Shadow Saint's defense:

"No, you're wrong. The Lord of Shadows, he… he is not disfigured or ugly. He is… well… he seems like a very outstanding young man, in all regards."

Sunny nodded unconsciously.

'You tell her, Neph!'

But then, he frowned.

'No… but why are you defending that bastard so much? I'm right here!'

Sunny was confused.

The Lord ofShadows was him. But Nephis didn't know that. So, was she praising some random guy in front of her supposed romantic partner? That was unacceptable!

But then, their relationship was fake. They had only really met each other a few days ago. So, technically, she knew the Lord of Shadows longer — and better. The two of them had even fought side by side against a harrowing Cursed abomination.

It was so confusing!

'What is this situation?'

How was he supposed to react?

While Sunny was questioning his life's choices, Effie scoffed.

"If he's such an outstanding man, why is he hiding his face behind a mask? What is he, an eighth-grader?"

Nephis frowned.

"Maybe it has something to do with his Flaw. Maybe he needs to hide his identity for an important reason. In any case, all I know is… that a man whose swordsmanship is so beautiful can't be unsightly."

Effie glared at her silently, as if wanting to say:

'Princess! Take a hint!'

What was the hint Nephis was supposed to take, Sunny did not know.

The huntress took a deep breath.

"Well, anyway, that guy seems to be hiding a lot. Unlike Master Sunless, who is like an open book. An honest and sincere man like Master Sunless doesn't need to hide behind a mask… not to mention that hiding that face behind a mask would be a crime…"

She seemed to get distracted for a moment, and then laughed.

"In any case, it seems that we are going to be arriving soon. Shall we change the topic?"

Nephis shrugged, seemingly confused by the whole conversation.

"You're the one who asked."

Effie smiled, then looked at Sunny apologetically.

"Oh, by the way… have you heard the news about the House of Night?"

It seemed that she really didn't want to talk about the Lord of Shadows anymore.

Sunny, who had been excited before, was now unsure how he felt about it. It was nice to hear Nephis praise him… but also made him angry, for some reason? What was going on with him today?

He spaced out for a few moments, listening to Nephis and Effie with one ear.

"...Have they conquered another Citadel?"

Effie nodded.

"Yes. It's the seventh one in two years — quite remarkable, actually. Their leadership has been making one miracle happen after another recently. I guess the descent of the Dream Gates really lit a fire under them. The House of Night has never been that active, that daring, or that successful before."

Nephs sighed.

"It still won't help them maintain their position. They are at too great a disadvantage without a Supreme. Not only in terms of raw power, but also in terms of relevance and population, both mundane and Awakened. I'm afraid that the House of Night is doomed to lose its status."

That was true… but although the third Great Clan was now miles behind the other two, without any hope of catching up, it was still vitally important. Both because of the role its ships played in the waking world, and because of how they could break the balance of power in the upcoming war.

An alliance with the House of Night could very well be the linchpin of the entire clash between the two Domains. Not even due to their Saints, but because the Twilight Sea bordered both the Sword Domain and the Song Domain in the south.

Song and Valor were only clamoring to conquer Godgrave because the House of Night was stubbornly maintaining neutrality. If either of the Great Clans managed to lure the Nightwalkers to their side, they would be able to launch swift attacks into the enemy territory while bypassing the barrier of the Death Zones separating their territories.

Effie grimaced.

"At least they are trying… and by the look of it, the House of Night is dead set on staying away from both Valor and Song. Well, I can understand why. Even if they join the winning side, there will be no future for them but to be absorbed and assimilated after the whole mess is over."

Sunny sighed quietly.

He wondered how Naeve was doing somewhere out there, in the Twilight Sea… the friendly Nightwalker must be having it hard, considering how swiftly the fortunes of his clan had changed.

Nephis, meanwhile, gave Effie a guarded look and then silently gestured to Sunny.

'You guys finally remembered that I'm not supposed to know anything about the war? Good for you!'

Effie blinked a couple of times, then shook her head.

"By the way, Master Sunless. Did you know that all the Legacy Clans are about to go to war?"

Neph's eyes widened.

"Effie!"

The huntress smiled with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"...A war for this beautiful, but dense princess right here! Now that she has shown interest in you, every Legacy Clan will probably scramble to get her hitched to one of their scions before it's too late. The elders of Clan Valor might put pressure on her, too. So, that talk about safety I gave you?"

Effie grinned.

"Forget everything I said! As a former soldier, you must know the value of a preemptive strike, so… aim well and get her pregnant as soon as possible! That will show them…"

The wine glass cracked in Neph's hand.

Sunny did not move, but somewhere far away, the Lord of Shadows gracelessly fell off his throne.

…The ferry docked at the Castle, the silence broken only by the bright sound of Effie laughing uncontrollably.