1741 Best Policy

They left the Impact zone in a government transport. The ride was much less luxurious than Neph's destroyed PTV, but Sunny, who had crossed countless kilometers in shaky military vehicles, did not mind.

‘...I wonder how much that PTV cost.’

If Sunny had lost something that lavish and expensive, he would have been cursing the dead gods and drowning in bitterness. But Nephis did not seem to mind the loss too much.

Granted, her mood seemed a little strange.

As they drove past the burned remains of the PTV, she stared at it intently, a distant look in her eyes.

"Are you alright?"

Sunny wished that it was him who had asked that, but the Lord of Shadows was not that considerate. So, he had kept silent, and Kai spoke in his stead. Nephis lingered for a few moments, then looked away from the wreckage and sighed.

"Sure. It's just that... the situation is so familiar. But the outcome is entirely different. Times have changed."

It seemed that she was reminiscing about the past, just like Sunny. He had contemplated how different the dread of having to face a Nightmare Gate for the first time felt from today's battle, where he did not even have to lift a finger, Nephis, meanwhile, must have been comparing the powerlessness she had felt as a child to today's attempt on her life.

The difference had to be quite startling, considering that she was one of the most powerful Saints in the world now.

The transport moved along the streets of NQSC at a moderate speed. The news of what had happened, however, was spreading much faster.

Sunny did not even want to imagine what kind of storm would rise when people learned that Changing Star, humanity's darling, had almost died to a human assassin while defending innocent lives from a descending Nightmare Gate.

The people responsible for the government's propaganda would be losing their minds by now. They were great masters of both disseminating and suppressing information, but this time, the incident was too sensational, and the parties involved were too renowned. There was no stopping this story from spreading far and wide, so they could only try to control it the best they could.

The government... was in a tight spot.

It was a bit ingenious, actually. Nephis was so beloved and venerated largely because the government had once decided to make her into a shining symbol for the whole of humanity - she had worked very hard to build upon that foundation, of course, but the government was responsible for the initial push.

Now, however, someone had taken the fruit of their labor and used it against them. The public outrage caused by an attempt on Changing Star's life would be proportional to the amount of effort the government had put into turning her into someone who was revered and admired by all.

That reputation of hers had only grown more exalted in the last four years, reaching unimaginable heights.

...Was the assassin's real goal to undermine the government instead of killing Nephis?

Sunny continued to contemplate who was behind the attack while the transport rolled across the streets of NQSC, eventually reaching a remote district.

There, a modest manor stood apart from the bustling city, surrounded by a tall wall.

This was the manor of the Immortal Flame clan, which served as the base of operations for the Fire Keepers in the waking world.

The transport passed the security check and made its way to the underground vehicle stable. Kai sent the driver and the guards assigned to Nephis by the government away. Sid also bade them farewell and left, lamenting the state of her tattered clothes under her nose. The loss of the expensive ensemble seemed to bother her much more than the recent ambush.

"The Fire Keepers are certainly a strange bunch... Nephis led her two guests to a secure room in the depths of the manor.

Noticing how well-protected it was, both from modern means of surveillance and through extensive use of runic magic, Sunny realized that what she had planned wasn't really to catch up with Kal.

He had suspected as much.

He looked around with outward indifference, then pulled out a chair and sat down.

“...I am guessing this is not a simple reunion among friends."

Kai remained standing, leaning on a wall with one shoulder, while Nephis sat across from Sunny and nodded.

"Indeed."

He tilted his head a little.

"May I know what the purpose of this meeting is, then?"

Nephis smiled faintly, remained silent for a moment, then looked at Kai.

"Do you know what Saint Nightingale's Flaw is, Lord Shadow?"

'Ah'

Sunny leaned back, perfectly relaxed.

"He can sense lies, does he not?"

Kai's Flaw wasn't exactly advertised, but he had also never made a point of keeping it a secret. So, anyone who wished to know would have known.

Nephis nodded.

"Yes. I thought we'd have an honest conversation, you and I."

As a habitual liar, Sunny couldn't help but grow tense at these words. There were so many things he was deceiving the world about... had she learned one or two of his secrets? Which ones? How much trouble was he in?

Of course, that was not necessarily the case. Nephis could have simply wanted to discuss something that did not tolerate falsehoods.

In any case, none of Sunny's worries showed in his body language.

In fact, he smiled behind the mask. After maintaining silence for a couple seconds, Sunny shrugged.

"Why not? I am the most honest person in the world, after all. Two worlds, even."

Nephis stared at him for a moment, then glanced at Kai.

Kai studied Sunny with a very strange expression, hesitated for a bit, and gave her a short nod.

...She seemed perplexed.

Sunny suppressed a chuckle.

"So, what did you want to discuss with me, Lady Nephis?”

Nephis frowned slightly. However, her voice was even when she spoke:

"We've been dancing around the issue for a while now. You gave me plenty of hints, subtle or not... we are supposed to be allies, so what I want to discuss today will decide how far our alliance will go. If you don't mind, I will ask you a few questions. The nature of our partnership will depend on your answers."

He remained silent, voicing no objections.

She lingered for a while, then nodded and said:

"First and foremost... I am quite curious. You seem to be very keen on knowing how I would kill a Supreme, Lord Shadow. What exactly makes you think that I, a princess of the Sword Domain, am so interested in regicide?"

Sunny stared at her silently, cold darkness nestling in the eyes of his emotionless mask. His onyx armor glistened with a sinister luster in the dull lamplight.

Eventually, he spoke in an aloof tone:

"I can answer your question with three of my own."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

He nodded, then said evenly:

"Who attempted to kill you as a child? Why? And what would I do in your place after becoming a Saint?”

His voice turned even colder than usual.

"Imagine that a bunch of traitors killed my father, conspired to ruin my clan, and turned my life into living hell. The further into hell I fell, the higher these despicable ghouls rose. Ah... if something like that happened to me, I would have been positively peeved."

Sunny shrugged.

"In short, it's because I know enough about you, Lady Nephis."

She studied him for a while with a deadpan expression, then glanced at Kai. Receiving his confirmation, Nephis scowled.

Her voice sounded a little flat:

"I must say... my sister was right. You are indeed very well-informed for a recluse, Lord Shadow.”