1813 Behind the Mask

The river was, Indeed, on fire.

It was quite a strange sight. A vast expanse of clear water was boiling, and more than that, a sea of white flames was spreading across its surface like burning oll. A wave of heat assaulted Sunny like a tide, bathing him in warmth.

Neph slowly turned her head and looked at the river, a calm and composed expression on her face. The flames fell and were extinguished under her impassive gaze.

Then, she cleared her throat.

"Ah, yes. There... there was a Nightmare Creature preparing to surface. I burned it."

Her tone was poised and confident.

Sunny kept the smile off his face.

"Oh, I see. Of course. Thank you for reacting promptly."

His shadow sense was still enveloping the entire area, so he knew perfectly well that there had been no abomination. However, he wasn't going to mention it.

Instead, he raised the steaming cup of tea with a trembling hand, gulped it down, and sighed.

His avatar silently turned back into a shadow.

"Well... yes. As I was saying. There is no Shadow Clan and no information network. Instead, there is just me. My Transformation Ability allows me to manifest my shadows as incarnations of myself,

Nephis stared at him with wide eyes, stili struggling to accept the revelation. Her volce turned a little subdued.

"Transformation Ability? So... you are a Saint? No, of course you are... because you are the... the Lord of Shadows..."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Then what about the other forms? The shadow colossus? The little crow? I was under the impression that the Lord of Shadows... that you... could assume these shapes due to your Transcendent Ability."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Those forms are made possible by a technique based on my Dormant, Awakened, and Ascended Abilities as well as my Aspect Legacy."

Nephis took a deep breath, then looked at him sharply.

After a few moments of silence, she asked with a hint of agitation in her voice:

"You..., you are really him? The Lord of Shadows?”

Sunny remained motionless for a bit then extended an arm forward. Soul Serpent slithered under his skin, flowing into his palm- then, the Intricate tattoo slowly disappeared, and the black odachi appeared in his hand.

He hesitated for a few moments, then gently placed the great sword on the sand.

"Yes. Although... It would be more appropriate to say that the Lord of Shadows is me."

Sunny looked at Nephis with a pale smile.

"I attained Transcendence four years ago, near the end of the Southern Campaign. After that... well, 1 was a little done with the world. So, I spent a few years wandering the Dream Realm aimlessly, having no desire to return. But eventually, I did. I sent most of my incarnations to Godgrave, where they battled the Nightmare Creatures and established a foothold in that damned place. And at the same time, I came to Bastion and opened my shop. That... is pretty much it."

She looked at him for a while without saying anything.

What was she thinking about?

Sunny was afraid to imagine.

Was she blaming him for fooling her? Feeling betrayed? Was she too stunned to understand the meaning of his words?

Or was she, perhaps, alright with it? He did not know.

Nephis, meanwhile, reached for the wine allently. The bottle, not the glass,

\*\*\*

Nephis was reeling.

She couldn't help but look at Master Sunless... no, Saint Sunless... no, was that even his real name?

She couldn't help but look at the charming enchanter and mentally compare him to the sinister, cold, overbearing Lord of Shadows.

Sunless was slender, beautiful, and nice. His features were very handsome, but not in a rugged kind of way. Instead, he was gallant and charming in a soft and charming manner. His onyx eyes were usually calm, with a hint of wry humor hidden in their dark depths. Sometimes, they were clouded by a veil of strange melancholy, and sometimes, they were glistening with sincere mirth.

He made Nephis feel at ease.

The Lord of Shadows, meanwhile... was fearsome and imposing. His face was always hidden behind a mask - sometimes, it was a featureless mask that made him look eerily unfathomable, and sometimes, it was the ferocious mask of a dark demon. His movements were sharp and powerful, full of ruthless intent. His sinister voice was cold and emotionless.

He made Nephis feel on edge.

If there was something in common between the two of them, it was that both of them seemed to be able to stir her emotions. But, still...

How could the two of them be the same person?

How could the gentle Master Sunless have cut down Great Nightmare Creatures without batting an eye?

How could the aloof Lord of the Shadows have worn a homely apron and caringly prepared delicious waffles for her, placing a scoop of ice cream and fresh strawberries on top?

She was failing to understand.

'Ah... my head hurts...'

Nephis asked a few questions to buy herself some time to process the impossible revelations. He answered them, but she barely heard the answers.

'No way! It can't be. I mean... yes, I made the connection between the two of them. And yes, Master Sunless... Saint Sunless... he warned me that he has a lot of secrets... but... but…’

Mostly, Nephis felt stunned.

There was a subtle hint of humiliation at being fooled, as well. Or rather, of being a fool.

But there was also something else.

Beneath the shock and rejection, she couldn't help but think...

Would it be so bad if the charming enchanter had turned out to be the Lord of Shadows?

Nephis remembered her first meeting with the mysterious Saint. She would have lied if she said that he had not fascinated her. His power, his beautiful swordsmanship, his cold arrogance... back then, she had felt wistful, thinking... that it would have been so nice, to have a steady partner like that,

Someone who could keep up with her... an equal.

Of course, she had often wondered what was hiding behind the mask of the Lord of Shadows. It was a bit exciting to Imagine. She was quite sure that he was young... but what did he look like? Was his face as cold and emotionless as his voice? Were his eyes as ruthless? Was he handsome? He had to be, as a Saint...

Was he even a human?

Nephis had only been distracted from that fascination after stumbling into an unexpected relationship with Master Sunless, the charming and gentle enchanter... first a fake one, then less and less so.

She mentally replaced the ferocious mask with the beautiful face of Master Sunless... Saint Sunless.

Or whatever his name truly was.

He would look so out of place in the heavy onyx armor, wielding the great blade of the dark odachi.

But also... it fit so well.

His raven-black hair, his porcelain skin, his dark eyes. She could imagine it easily, a beautiful man like him sitting on an obsidian throne in the Nameless Temple, clad in intricate onyx armor and surrounded by eternal darkness.

‘...How did I not realize it before!’

Nephis wanted to fall through the ground.

She feverishly went over every encounter with the Lord of Shadows, and then put them side by side with the time she had spent with Master Sunless.

The way he watched her practice swordsmanship...

The way he watched the lonesome tree in the courtyard of the dark temple...

The way he seemed to enjoy seeing people eat his food...

The way he seemed to prefer the solitude of the Nameless Temple despite surrounding himself with human-like shadows...

She swallowed some wine, not feeling its taste.

"Wait, wait... Sunless. Is that even your real name?”