1851 Talking to Myself

There was a bit of an eerie pause as Sunny stared at himself from behind the mask.

The Lord of Shadows stared. Master Sunless — or rather, Sir Sunless — paled under his menacing gaze.

…Nephis looked at the two of them with a strange expression.

Eventually, it was Cassie who broke the silence.

"Greetings, Lord Shadow. I don't think we had an opportunity to meet in the last few days… please allow me to express gratitude on behalf of Lady Nephis and the Fire Keepers. Your help in the recent battle, while unexpected, was deeply appreciated."

Sunny turned his cold gaze to her.

He remained silent for a few moments, then said evenly:

"There is no reason to thank me... I was just attracted by the smell of slaughter. Who can resist the beautiful fragrance of bloodshed?"

The Fire Keepers seemed more than a little troubled by his strange words. Sunny spared them a glance, then lowered his head slightly.

"Greetings to you as well, Lady Nephis, Lady Cassia."

Then, he looked at himself coldly.

Was now a good time to establish a distinction between the Lord of Shadows and Master Sunless?

It wouldn't hurt...

He asked evenly:

"And who might this be?"

Nephis blinked a couple of times.

She seemed a little puzzled by the situation. Not only did her suitor possess several incarnations, but two of them were even having a conversation right in front of her. More than that... the conversation did not seem especially friendly!

Sunny himself was a bit confused about the nature of his peculiar existence, so Nephis must have been positively perplexed.

Her attempts to hide her puzzlement was behind the usual impassive expression... were quite cute.

He smiled behind the mask.

"Oh… this is Master Sunless, an enchanter employed by the Fire Keepers. Sir Sunless, this is Saint Shadow. A Transcendent warrior of great renown, one of the champions of the Sword Army."

Sunny stared at himself some more, then shrugged dismissively.

"An enchanter? Never heard of him. He must not be very good."

Hearing the Lord of Shadow say that, Master Sunless smiled.

His smile was a little forced, though…

He said politely:

"Really? Ah, but I have heard of you."

Nephis was alternating between looking at them with a hint of bafflement in her eyes.

The Lord of Shadow glared silently.

"What did you hear, and from whom?"

Sunny's smile widened a little.

"I think I heard it from Saint Athena? She mentioned that you must be terribly hideous behind that mask."

The Fire Keepers held their breaths. Nephis seemed to have suddenly remembered that conversation and closed her eyes with a subtle wince.

Cassie did not show a reaction, but it looked like she was trying to suppress a laugh.

The Lord of Shadows lingered for a moment, then scoffed.

"That woman certainly does not sound like a handful. She has never seen my face, and yet she sings me praises."

With that, he turned away and walked into the gates of the stronghold without looking back.

Sunny, Nephis, Cassie, and the Fire Keepers were left behind in tense silence. The coldness left behind by the Lord of Shadows was slow to dissipate.

After a few moments, one of the Fire Keepers patted Sunny on the shoulder and gave him a thumbs up.

"I admire you, Sir Sunless. You truly are a brave man! I would have never dared to talk back to that devil."

Another nodded.

"True. That guy is beyond creepy. And he stared at our lady like a wolf every time they meet… good job, Sin Sunless!"

A third one sighed.

"Still, try not to antagonize him. He is immensely powerful, even among Saints. It's better not to make an enemy out of someone like him…"

Sunny coughed.

'How come I am both pleased with and offended by their nonsense?'

"Ah, yes… I'll try not to, next time…"

Nephis, meanwhile, was looking at them in confusion.

"...Huh? What do you mean, stares like a wolf?"

The Fire Keepers glanced at each other.

"Sorry to tell you this, my lady, but I think you're the only one who has not noticed. The way he looks at you, it's… you know, as if he wants to gobble you up…"

She hesitated for a few moments, seemingly unsure how to respond. Eventually, she asked:

"You think he's a cannibal?"

Sunny struggled between the impulse to cover his face with a hand and the desire to give her a hug. He wasn't one to point fingers, in that regard, but really… how could she be so adorably clueless?

'I mean, she can literally sense people's desire!'

One of the Fire Keepers coughed.

"No, that's not… anyway, why are we gossiping about the Lord of Shadows? We have Master Sunless right here. Unlike some people, he's a perfect gentleman, and always maintains proper decorum when gazing at our lady."

Another nodded.

"Yeah! If anything, it's our lady that stares at him like a wolf…"

Realizing that he said something wrong, the Fire Keeper fell silent and cleared his throat.

"Well… aren't we going to be late to the war council? L—let us proceed post-haste…"

Nephis gave Sunny a curious look and then smiled with a corner of her mouth.

"Alright. Let's go."

When the Fire Keepers headed for the entrance, she fell back, waited until the two of them were a few steps behind the others, and whispered into his ear:

"So… you want to gobble me up, huh…"

Sunny made his best effort not to trip.

After maintaining silence for a few moments and regaining his composure, he smiled pleasantly and asked:

"...Why? Are you on the menu?"

Nephis studied him silently, then chuckled and hastened her steps, leaving him without an answer.

His expression crumpled a little.

'No, but I really want to know...'

Walking into the stronghold, Sunny touched his ear and let out a heavy sigh.

Sometimes, he really wished that everyone were beholden to the same Flaw as he was.