1865 Into the Fray

They did not have a lot of time to talk, so the discussion was brief. Afterwards, Cassie left to have a separate conversation with Jet. Sunny and Nephis were left alone.

Nephis had just returned from the battlefield, and she would have to leave the camp in an hour or two — this time, not just to lend her power to the expedition force, but also to become its commander.

Her armor was smeared by soot, and her hair was blackened by ash. Grime and dried blood stained her alabaster skin… this was a good sign, actually. It meant that she had not been forced to assume her Transcendent form as of late, at least — otherwise, her body would have been pure and pristine, all the dirt burned away by the incandescent flames.

Still, now that they had a moment to breathe, Nephis looked at herself, then threw a quick glance at Sunny and left to have a bath.

Soon, she returned, her silver hair glistening with moisture. She had dismissed the outer layer of her armor, and was now wearing only the thin cloth underlayer, which clung slightly to her damp body.

Sunny studied Nephis carefully.

He could tell that she had called upon the power of her Aspect recently — and extensively, as well. Her condition was not too bad, but there were telltale signs. There was a distant look in her eyes and a hint of coldness written in the graceful lines of her beautiful face. There was an afterglow of immolating flame and a memory of scorching heat in her brilliant presence.

Nephis had been suffering the torment of her cruel Flaw too much, and too often.

Sunny sighed. Noticing that she was rubbing her shoulders with a grimace, he raised his hands and smiled.

"How about a massage?"

A subtle smile illuminated her face, as well. She nodded silently.

He moved to her wide bed, while Nephis sat in front of him, leaning on his chest. Sunny placed his fingers on her shoulders and got to work, kneading her tense muscles with masterful ease. From his point of view, he could see the top of her head, the tip of her nose, and the beads of water glistening on her delicate clavicle.

Her garment was thin, so he could feel the heat of her body. Her skin was silky and smooth. He put more strength into his fingers, causing her to let out a small whimper, and then a satisfied sigh.

He felt her body relax a little.

Nephis remained silent for a while, enjoying the massage, and then asked:

"How come you are so good at this?"

Sunny froze for a moment before continuing to rub her shoulders. He would have really, really preferred to keep the source of his massage skills a secret, but sadly, his own Flaw compelled him to answer.

He hesitated for a moment.

"Well… one of my Attributes makes me particularly good at all kinds of handiwork."

He paused, then added reluctantly:

"Oh, and I have practised on myself a lot while wandering the Dream Realm."

'Ah. How embarrassing.'

Nephis let out another contented sigh and closed her eyes in pleasure.

"...Perks of having many bodies. Unfair."

Sunny chuckled.

"You're the one who is benefitting from that unfairness in the end, though. So should you really be complaining?"

Nephis smiled faintly.

"I'm not complaining."

Sunny worked on her shoulders for a while, then switched to her back. When he finished, Nephis looked much more relaxed. Her overall condition had improved significantly, as well, and the hint of detached coldness disappeared from her gaze.

He embraced her from behind and asked gently:

"Hungry?"

She nodded.

His shadow disappeared for a few moments, and then returned holding a tray of food. It was taken directly from the Marvelous Mimic's kitchen and smelled delicious — thanks to the Dream Gate, the army did not really suffer from the lack of supplies, and he received his fair share from the Fire Keepers.

...He also had his own stash and received a less fair share through the backdoor connections established by Aiko, but that was nor here nor there.

Sunny let Nephis go and watched her eat with a pleased expression. Eventually, though, he sighed.

"I really hoped that we would get to spend more time together"

Both of them were in Godgrave, but he remained on the Ivory Island most of the time. Nephis, meanwhile, was always on the forefront of the moving battlefield, helping the expedition force carve a path through the monstrous jungle. There was a rotation system in place to let the legions and their commanders rest and recuperate, but hers was a special case.

Nephis was too important to the offensive effort, so she only returned to camp once a week, at best. Now that Morgan was gone, and she was assuming command of the whole expedition force, those rare days would become even fewer and far between.

She gave him a confused look.

"But we do get to spend more time together."

What she meant was that, this time, the Lord of Shadows would be accompanying her to the battlefront. So, the two of them did not have to separate… technically.

Sunny grimaced.

"That's not the same. "

The Lord of Shadows was still him, but that incarnation of his was stuck wearing a suit of armor and a mask all the time. The temporary encampment of the expedition force was also not a place where one could get privacy, let alone share tender moments such as this one.

Sunny had not exactly expected that they would get many opportunities to go on dates in Godgrave… but that did nothing to quench his greed. He had barely got the taste of being with Nephis, and he wanted more.

He wanted to experience all the profound things that lovers experienced, and all the stupid things too. Sadly, war — especially one as dire and dreadful as this one — was a terrible background for romantic encounters.

'Damnation. What does a man have to do to take his girlfriend out on a date?'

The answer, apparently, was to conquer a Death Zone and kill a couple of Sovereigns.

'...Noted.'

Nephis finished her food and looked at him silently for a while. Eventually, she said with a hint of a smile in her voice:

"I am still happy that the Lord of Shadows is coming with me, this time."

Sunny couldn't help but raise his chin a little.

He coughed.

"Are you? Oh, that guy… he's not bad, I guess."

Nephis gave him a nonchalant look and lingered for a few moments.

Then, she sighed.

"I wouldn't mind if he was a little bit bad, though."

Sunny gave her an intense stare.

"That can be arranged, as well…"

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A couple later, Nephis and the Lord of Shadows left the warcamp, accompanied by the returning Saints.

In those hours, the Sword Army had been shaken by the appalling news. The treacherous Queen of Worms had eradicated the House of Night and took control of the Stormsea. Now, her forces were mounting an invasion from the south, threatening to annex the defenseless rear territories of the Sword Domain.

Many of the soldiers had families and friends there. They were rattled, dismayed, and frightened.

Many were scared of what the disastrous attack would mean for them here in Godgrave. The morale of the army suffered a tremendous blow.

In these circumstances, Nephis had to project an image of absolute confidence. Which she did, instilling the frightened soldiers with a sense of renewed determination and hope.

Her brilliant figure was like a symbol of bravery and steadfast will. Anyone who saw her couldn't help but feel something stir in their souls, and straighten their backs unconsciously.

And so, her flames spread.

A dark figure that walked by her side attracted much less attention. And yet, those who saw it felt calmer, as well — albeit for an entirely different reason.

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame was valiant and noble.

But the Lord of Shadows, that man… he was sinister and ruthless.

And now, he was entering the fray.