1879 Bone Crack

The second war party left the camp, but the first one did not return.

That was because Nephis had conquered the fissure, and for a while, the expedition force was busier than usual.

While Summer Knight and his soldiers clashed with the sprawling jungle, the entire encampment was dismantled and moved forward, chasing the vanguard to the edges of the abyssal chasm.

The great fissure used to look like a jagged wound on the surface of the sun-bleached bone, its terrifying depths full of impenetrable darkness. That darkness was gone now, replaced by a boiling mass of black smoke and brilliant flame. A billowing pillar of smoke was rising into the overcast sky, falling into the stormy clouds.

The great bridge of vines connecting the Hollows to the surface was on fire, but it was stubbornly clinging to life. New sprouts of scarlet growth were shooting out of the smoke, trying to crawl their way onto the surface of the white bone. There was a chain of sweaty soldiers positioned along the edges of the fissure, burning the monstrous saplings down before they took hold.

Looking at the vermilion tendrils slithering out of the crack, Sunny couldn't help but think that they looked like fibers of bloody muscle tissue.

…Perhaps that was what the scarlet jungle truly was — the flesh and tendons of the colossal skeleton that were desperately trying to regrow and envelop its bones once again, but were burned away by the merciless sky before the dead god could rise from its deathbed each time.

Over and over again, for eons…

'What a disturbing thought.'

Sunny arrived near the fissure at the head of the marching column. The camp of the expedition force was relocating here — both to make building an extermination outpost around the chasm easier and to lessen the return time for the troops battling the jungle. The first war party, which had recently finished its shift, did not have to return at all this time.

He left the soldiers behind and walked to the very edge of the fissure, where a lonely figure could be seen, looking at the billowing flames. Nephis had dismissed her Transcendent form and the outer layers of her armor, enduring the suffocating heat in light clothes. Her fair skin was smeared in ash and soot, with beads of sweat glistening on it like tiny jewels.

He glanced into the infernal depths of the burning chasm and then turned to face her.

Sunny remained silent for a moment.

"Did you… melt down your armor again?"

Nephis looked at him with no emotion in her cold, grey eyes.

Eventually, however, a subtle smile twisted her lips.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

She chuckled, then shook her head.

"No, I was careful. I can't keep requesting new suits of armor from the enchanters of Clan Valor. They are already quite cross with me, to be honest…"

In this camp, wearing this mask, Sunny could not make Nephis delicious food and comfort her, chasing away the emotionless coldness dwelling in her eyes with the warmth of human touch and connection. However, he could at least show her that there was someone she could lean on here.

Master Sunless could do the former, but only the Lord of Shadows could do the latter.

So, wearing the mask was not all bad in the end.

He sighed, then said with a hint of envy in his voice:

"Well, you are fighting Great Nightmare Creatures every day. I am sure you will receive a durable Memory armor sooner or later."

Nephis looked doubtful.

"Maybe. But haven't you noticed? Now that we are fighting more powerful abominations, the rate at which the Spell bestows us Memories seems to have reduced considerably. I am not even talking about Echoes… I'm not sure I've even seen a Supreme Echo before, except for that silver devil of yours."

Sunny was surprised.

"Really? I... haven't noticed."

He had killed some Great abominations before being erased from the tapestry of fate — the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn, Daeron of the Twilight Sea... he had received a Memory both times, but then again, Sunny used to be Fated. Chance and probability had always been in a mess around him, before.

Nephis nodded.

"I slowly realized it over the past four years, and these days in Godgrave only confirm that suspicion. Well, it makes sense. It must take more… more of whatever it is that the Spell uses to create Memories and Echoes to fashion them out of truly powerful abominations. One Supreme Memory must be worth ten thousand Awakened ones, so it is being frugal."

There were a million Awakened in the world, but only three Sovereigns. So, her conclusion made sense.

Sunny still felt bitter about not being able to receive bountiful rewards from the Spell, but his bitterness had been alleviated a bit.

'Come to think of it, it's good news for us. Otherwise, with more than a decade to prepare, the Sovereigns would have been drowning in Supreme Memories and Echoes… maybe even Sacred ones.'

They could still possess those, but at least not a vast arsenal of them.It also made Sunny much more valuable, since his knowledge of weaving was deep enough to craft Supreme Memories, provided he had suitable materials and a few Supreme soul shards.

Looking into the billowing flames, Nephis asked suddenly:

"Do you remember what you felt when you received your first Memory?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised by the question.

"My first Memory? Well… if I remember correctly, I was full of indignation. Because it was so useless."

He paused for a moment, then added with a smile:

"But after a while, I came to appreciate it. In fact, I value it more with each year that passes. It might not be powerful or useful, but it is a… a memento of the things that I left in the past. Being able to remember is a precious thing, sometimes."

Sunny glanced at Nephis asked:

"What about you? What did you feel when you received your first Memory?"

She blinked a couple of times.

"Me? Honestly, I was in no state to feel anything when I received it, since it happened at the very end of my Nightmare. But later, when I had time to examine it… I guess I felt humiliated. Because of how glad I was to receive a boon from the Spell."

Nephis sighed.

"That Memory served me well, though. I wielded it for many years. Across the Forgotten Shore, the Nightmare Desert, and the Underworld... it never betrayed me. These days, it is too weak for me to use, but I still cherish it a lot."

Sunny remembered the Memory Nephis was talking about — the Dream Blade — very well. After all, that sword had saved his life many times.

It had also tasted his blood, mangled his flesh, and caused him terrible pain in the Crimson Spire.

Considering Neph's historic accomplishments, that Awakened Memory of the Sixth Tier had had a spectacular career before retirement.

He chuckled.

"I guess we are both quite sentimental."

Nephis looked at him with a surprised expression. Her sincere confusion was quite endearing.

"Me? Sentimental?"

Sunny smiled.

"I did not specify which sentiments make us sentimental, though… bloodlust is also a sentiment, for example…"

Neph's expression changed slightly.

"Wow. The thirst thing that came to your mind has to do with lust?"

He froze, trying to think of an answer.

'...That damned Flaw!'

Far away, in the main camp of the Sword Army, Master Sunless stopped what he was doing as well and stared into the distance with a contemplative look.

His eyes narrowed, as if he was considering something.

After a while, he mumbled quietly:

"Dream Blade, huh?That is… promising, I think…"