1909 Feel Alive

Nephis walked over to the edge of the water, looked at it for a few moments, and then sat on the ground.

Her voice sounded a little raspy, but mostly just as it always did:

He has regained consciousness and is binding the Gateway now. Revel's imprint is strong, so it will take some time... ten minutes, at least. Maybe half an hour."

She sighed.

"Some of us will have to return to the waking world after that, to bring back the initial reinforcements. You know what happens next."

Sunny did know.

Once the Gateway was bound by a Saint of the Sword Army, Anvil's Domain would manifest in the Hollows. The King of Swords would probably arrive at the ruined Citadel himself, and the war would finally spill beneath the surface of the ancient bones.

The subjugation of the Hollows was bound to be an affair both spectacular and harrowing. Considering how powerful the predators of the ancient jungle were, the king would have to lead the conquest personally... at least for a while.

By the time the immediate area around the lake was conquered by the Sword Army, both sides would have prominently established themselves in Godgrave. The first stage of the war would be complete, and the two armies would start clashing in large-scale battles, clamoring for control.

Control over the surface, control over the Hollows, control over the paths to the remaining two Citadels.

Everything that had happened before was merely a prelude, and the true bloodshed would begin now.

Well... there were ten more minutes before that happened, at least.

Nephis sighed and looked down, at her blackened, shredded armor. Then, she dismissed it and summoned a soft white tunic instead.

Her voice sounded a little gloomy:

"You know... I think I am going to give up on wearing armor altogether. What is the point, if it only ends up being destroyed? Or worse, a burden. Especially these suits of full plate that Knights of Valor prefer — in the last battle, the left elbow joint was bent almost immediately. I had to struggle every time I needed to bend my arm."

A faint smile appeared on her face.

"I think it will be great... less burden, more mobility, wider field of view. Not to mention the heat — everyone still cooking inside a steel armor will be green with envy, looking at my well-ventilated self."

Sunny gave her a long stare, not at all happy at the thought of people staring at Neph's... well-ventilated... body.

And unhappy for another reason, too.

"If it wasn't for your armor, it would have been your arm being cut instead of an elbow joint being bent."

Nephis shrugged nonchalantly.

"I can heal my arm. I can't repair a broken piece of armor."

He frowned.

"Only, this time, you couldn't."

She did not respond, looking at the water with a hint of wistfulness in her gaze. After a while, Sunny sighed. The facade of arrogant coldness the Lord of Shadows usually wore slipped a little, and he said in a more humane tone:

"It must have been hard, fighting against an overwhelming enemy without your powers. I had my Shadows with me, at least. You were alone."

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"...Actually, it was nice."

Her gaze grew distant.

"I almost forgot, what it felt like — to hold a sword without the promise of pain. I loved swordsmanship once, you know? That is because... I don't have many memories of my father, and in those that I do, he is teaching me how to hold a sword. So, even after he was gone, training made me feel a connection to him."

She looked at the water.

"But I don't love it anymore. Wielding a sword has become simply something that I do, because it is one of the tools at my disposal... the sharpest of them, perhaps. In fact, I don't know if there's anything left that I love."

Sunny remained silent, but his face fell a little behind the mask.

'Ouch.'

He knew that Neph's feelings for him were more shallow than his feelings for her were — after all, from her perspective, they had only known each other for a few months. But it still wasn't very pleasant, to hear his supposed girlfriend say something like that.

Oblivious to his bitterness, Nephis sighed.

"Sometimes I wonder what my grandmother would have thought if she saw me now. Would she have been proud? Or heartbroken? Is this what she wanted for me? Probably not... I doubt it."

Sunny sat beside her, then turned and looked at her through the dark chasms of his mask's eyes.

His voice sounded a little hesitant:

"From what I know... she would have been happy that you are alive. She would say — good job staying alive, my dear. Well, or something like that. In any case, you are your own person. Your grandmother could not know the burden you carry and the scars that remain on your heart. She could not understand the choices you make, or why you make them. No one is better qualified to know these things than you are, so no one has the right to critique your decisions. Don't worry about it."

Gods knew, the same held true for Sunny. Both of his parents had been menial workers — he doubted that they would have had a lot of insight into the life of a Saint, let alone one as exceptional as Sunny was. Their mundane lives had been far away from the matters of gods, daemons, Supreme tyrants, and world-ending wars.

But they would have been happy to know that both he and Rain were alive and healthy. That they were forging their own path in life, despite how hard and unforgiving the world was. That they had not been bent and misshapen by its cold cruelty.

Nephis looked at him, remained silent for a few moments, and said evenly:

"...Your mask has a crack in it."

Sunny blinked.

'Right.'

It had cracked during the battle against Revel. The enchantments still functioned, but with Anvil potentially arriving in a matter of minutes, it was better to dismiss [Definitely Not Me] and don the real deal.

He sighed and dismissed the damaged Memory, summoning Weaver's Mask instead.

...However, soon after the first mask dissolved into nothingness and before the second one manifested itself into reality, Nephis suddenly placed a hand on the back of Sunny's neck, pulled him closer, and kissed him.

He froze for a moment, then hurriedly dismissed the manifesting Divine Memory and responded to her passionate kiss.

The softness of her lips, the heat of her skin... were intoxicating.

They quenched a thirst that he had not known he was suffering from, and at the same time ignited a fire within him that was much more scorching than the flames devouring the ruins of the fallen Citadel around them.

Dazed and enraptured, Sunny quietly cursed the Onyx Mantle for preventing him from feeling the warm, supple fullness of her embrace.

Their fervent kiss lasted for a long time.

Nephis only drew away when both of them were on the verge of running out of air. Breathing heavily, they remained silent for a few moments.

Sunny touched his lips, blinked a couple of times, then asked in an unexpectedly shy tone:

"What... what was that for?"

She turned away with a slight smile and shrugged.

"Just... I thought I would die, for a few moments back there. So, I suddenly wanted to feel alive."

He remained silent for a bit.

"So, do you feel alive now?"

Nephis considered his question seriously, then looked at him with a solemn expression.

"I'd say... I'm about halfway revived?"

His eyes glistened.

...Before too long, both of them felt an imperceptible shift in the air. It was as if an invisible, but palpable presence settled over the area, changing it subtly — at the same time, irrevocably. Making it colder, sharper, and heavier with solid intent.

The Sword Domain had descended into the Hollows.