1254 Back to Basics

With Saint standing guard, Nightmare keeping her company, and Imp happily munching on the tarnished silver of the Great Monster's battle armor, Sunny was once again left with nothing much to do.

The seven suns were shining in the three-colored sky. The clear waters of the Great River were flowing as they sparkled in the sunlight. The azure serpent was hungrily circling the dark island, ramming it from time to time to make its wrathful madness known. The Sin of Solace was brooding silently.

A gentle breeze was playing with Sunny's hair.

With a sigh, he swept it back and rose, planning to go find Nephis. 'This is too weird.'

He had expected many situations to arise at the start of the Third Nightmare, but one thing he had not expected was being left with nothing urgent to do.

Walking across the weathered surface of the black rock, Sunny went around a torn band of dull silver, traversed a few patches of moss, and finally laid his eye on Nephis.

She was training.

Holding an unfamiliar longsword, Nephis was practicing a complicated chain of moves, her silver hair dancing in the air. There were beads of sweat on her face, and the hem of the airy tunic was flaring, revealing smooth porcelain skin.

Her movements were limber and flowing, gracefully cascading into each other. The sight of it was... beautiful.

Neph's swordsmanship was beautiful. And she was beautiful, too.

Illuminated by the dreamlike radiance of the seven suns and dancing with a silvery sword on a carpet of green moss, with her white tunic and alabaster skin, she was like a fairy.

Sunny found himself standing motionlessly in the shadow of a rock outcropping, watching. He had been planning to call out to Nephis, but now... forgetting about it, he silently remained where he was.

Some time passed. Sunny wasn't sure how much exactly. The island trembled once more.

Eventually, he shifted slightly, as though escaping a reverie, and took a step forward to escape the shadows.

"Hey."

Nephis stopped and leaned on her sword, breathing heavily. Her chest was rising and falling, and her face was slightly flushed. Walking over, Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and offered it to her with a friendly smile.

Accepting the beautiful glass bottle, she sat down and wiped the sweat off her face, then threw her head back and drank greedily.

Sunny glanced at her slender neck and the beads of sweat glistening above the collar of her tunic, which was slightly damp and sticking a little to her body. Then, he looked away.

"Thank you."

After drinking her fill, Nephis returned the Endless Spring to Sunny. He hesitated for a
  
moment, then drank some of the cool, refreshing water himself and sat down near her.

He had completely forgotten what he was going to say.

After a moment or two of peaceful silence, Sunny finally remembered:

"I've been thinking. Currently, the most powerful combatant among us is the Onyx Saint... my Shadow. You must know that she is a Transcendent Devil now. Should something happen, she would be our best bet against the old snake. We should try augmenting her with both of our Aspects, and test just how strong she would

become."

They already knew that Nephis was able to share her flames with his Shadows. But the last time they had attempted it was a lifetime ago, in the basement of his home in NQSC.

Saint had been a mere Ascended Demon back then, while Sunny had been an early-stage Devil. Now, she was a Transcendent Devil, and he was a Tyrant. And Nephis... Nephis was a Terror.

She had absorbed a great number of soul shards during the Battle of the Black Skull, and gained the last few in the Nightmare Desert. The situation back then had been too desperate and frenetic to think about it, and honestly...

Sunny didn't really care about competing with her anymore.

All their powers had risen. Perhaps, with the help of shadows and soul flame, Saint would be able to scratch against the level of strength of a Supreme creature. Of course, there was a big problem... as a being whose flesh was akin to stone, she could not swim, and would immediately sink if pushed into the Great River.

Still, it was worth testing.

Nephis nodded.

"Yes... that sounds like a good idea."

She leaned back a little and closed her eyes, enjoying the cool caress of the breeze with a faint smile.

Sunny watched her silently for a few moments. Eventually, he said:

"Your swordsmanship has changed."

Neph's favored style was always flowing and unpredictable, but now, it had assumed a strange, almost mystical quality.

Sunny had been a complete novice when they first met. His skill now was incomparable with that of four years ago... he had grown with an explosive, truly astonishing speed.

But Nephis had grown, too.

Perhaps her progress was not quite as stunningly rapid — she did not have the benefit of having an Aspect Legacy to fuel it, after all — but, compared to even the most talented humans, it was still tremendously swift.

Sunny and Nephis had sparred a lot after she returned from the Second Nightmare, but she had been held back by her nascent essence control back then. Now, she had fully come into her power as a Master, and was able to push her skill to entirely new limits... manybe even past them.

Opening her eyes, Nephis smiled. "I guess it did."

Then, she leaned forward and looked into the distance with a contemplative expression.

"For me... my understanding of swordsmanship went through a transformation after the Ascension."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Sounds serious."

She nodded with a distant look.

"Yes... it was because of learning to control my essence. Awakened possess a rudimentary form of essence control — they broadly enhance their entire bodies with essence, sometimes narrowing the scope down to a particular limb. After learning to do it as easily as breathing, they can become Masters, and naturally transition to a much more targeted, intricate, and efficient manner of using essence."

Her eyes glinted.

"But I've never been an Awakened. I went straight to being a Master. So, learning to control essence was very hard for me... I had to be conscious of every muscle in my body, every tendon, and every bone. It was like learning to walk again."

A corner of Sunny's mouth twitched as he suppressed a smile. He vividly remembered helping her pass these exact obstacles.

Nephis, meanwhile, continued:

"So, I had to go back to basics. Which groups of muscles do I need to enhance to perform the cut in the most efficient and effective way? My hand, my shoulder, my back, my core, my things, my calves... everything had to work in harmony to produce the best result. It took a while to become proficient enough in controlling essence to do it right without thinking. And, in the process, I became much more aware of my body. I also got submerged in studying the basics, on a much deeper level than before. Going deeper and deeper."

Sunny looked at her with curiosity.

"How deep are we talking about?"

She smiled, lingered for a moment, and then said: "Force equals mass times acceleration."

He blinked.

'What?'

"What?"

Sunny had not expected to hear a physics formula. And he only knew that this was a physics formula because Teacher Julius had once thrown a tantrum about his lack of education and forced him to read a bunch of children's schoolbooks.

Nephis smiled.

"That is the basis of swordsmanship — or spearmanship, or any other kind of weapon skill. Fundamentally, it's all about delivering force. The amount of force is dependent on mass and acceleration. Your body is the source of that force, and your weapon is a force multiplier — it concentrates it into a narrow tip, thus making it easier to deliver lethal damage."

She pointed to the sharp tip of her sword.

"Of course, there are more nuances to that. For example, speed does not exist in a vacuum, it is relative to the enemy. Your body also has to borrow from the ground you are standing on. There is balance, centers of gravity, reaction speed... as for the sword itself, there is flexibility, material composition, center of percussion, and so on. There is also soul essence, Memory enchantments, Attributes, and Aspect Abilities to consider."

Sunny was looking at her incredulously, which caused Nephis to shrug in embarrassment.

"Well, anyway. I've been studying the fundamentals — physics, anatomy, Spell studies, and a bit of other stuff — a lot since returning from the Second Nightmare. And slowly incorporating these insights into my swordsmanship. Uh... something like that..."

He tilted his head, a bit dumbfounded.

'That can't be right. How have we gone from "the essence of combat is murder" to "force equals acceleration"?'

So, Nephis had been studying science... to shore up her fundamentals and evolve her swordsmanship? That sounded very strange.

But the result was apparent... she had clearly improved by leaps and bounds since her Ascension.

Sunny shook his head in disbelief, and then threw a pointed look at her. His voice was incredulous:

"...Care for a spar?"