1255 Dancing Spirits

With a faint smile on her face, Nephis nodded and raised her sword, pointing it at him in invitation. Sunny summoned the Sin of Solace and took a stance opposite her. From the Forgotten Shore to the basement of his home in the peaceful terrace district, they had trained with each other numerous times. This simple sequence of actions was as natural for them as breathing.

However, today, there was an awkward pause.

Sunny scratched the back of his head and glanced at the jade jian.

"That... isn't going to work, is it?"

Nephis seemed to have come to a similar conclusion, looking at him sheepishly. 'No, what the hell... since when does she know how to emote? This is just too cute...' He coughed.

The problem facing them was that both had grown too powerful — and, subsequently, the weapons they used were too powerful, too. The Sin of Solace was a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, and quite a harrowing one at that. Sunny was not entirely sure what the level of Neph's longsword was, but it had to be quite a menacing weapon, as well, considering that it had come from the soul arsenal of a Saint.

It would be already bad enough if the Sin of Solace damaged or destroyed it. But what if Sunny was not careful enough and scratched Nephis in the process? The curse of madness carried by the jade blade would either crush her mental defenses, or at least put debilitating pressure on her mind for a period of time.

Standing some distance away, the spirit of the jian smiled. "No, no. Don't worry... I'll be gentle."

However, that smile of his was more than a little bit sinister.

Sunny frowned, then dismissed the jade sword and got lost in thought for a few moments. Eventually, a smile of delight appeared on his lips.

"Let's do this."

The shadows around them suddenly moved and flowed toward him, then slowly formed into two inky black swords. One of them was a fearsome odachi, while the other was an elegant longsword.

The odachi was easy to create — this was one of the shapes Sunny had practiced relentlessly, after all. The longsword was a little bit tricky, since he had never created one before. Nevertheless, he was familiar with it as well, and so managed to produce a passable one with some effort.

One would think that manifesting shadows into a weapon would be easier than shaping them into articulated hands, since weapons were static by nature. However, in reality, shaping a sword was just as complex of a task.

A good sword had to possess certain characteristics to feel right in the hand — weight, balance, flexibility and rigidity, center of percussion that Neph had recently mentioned, and so on. It was especially daunting with something like the odachi, which possessed a flexible edge and a rigid spine.

To improve in that regard, Sunny had even studied a bit of blacksmithing on the network. Back then, Clan Valor had been preventing him from visiting the Dream Realm, so he had a lot of free time.

There were many levels to Shadow Manifestation, and shaping was only the most basic of them. Sunny could also affect the material composition of the manifested shadows, although that demanded a higher essence expenditure. He could manipulate the density of the shadows, for example. He could make them feel like steel or porous limestone.

With some effort, he could even make them slippery or adhesive. In the past, all these internal transformations had been very difficult to achieve, but after inventing Shadow Incarnation, Sunny made a breakthrough in his mastery of Shadow Manifestation as well. Now, it was much easier.

All that was to say...

When Nephis dismissed her longsword and curiously took the shadow weapon from his hand, he secretly held his breath. She weighed the black longsword, then swung it a few times to test how it felt. Then, she nodded in satisfaction.

"That works."

Sunny suppressed a proud smile and raised his odachi. "Let's begin, then."

Ah, that feeling... he missed it. The Sin of Solace was a piece of art in the form of a jian, but Sunny's heart still lay with blades like this one. Maybe because it was what he had learned swordsmanship with, wielding Midnight Shard on the Forgotten Shore. Not to mention all the fun times he had had as Mongrel in the Dreamscape...

Raising the odachi slightly, Sunny pushed himself forward and attacked.

The two of them were instantly entangled in a breathtaking dance of singing steel. Their swift figures blurred, and soon, nothing but a dark shape and a light shape could be seen, moving across the green moss as they weaved and circled around each other. It was as though two spirits were dancing under the bright light of the radiant suns.

'She really has improved...'

Neph's swordsmanship felt... different. It had always been somewhat ineffable due to her eerie ability to control both the battlefield and the enemy, but now, there was an even more bizarre quality to her graceful skill.

The steps seemed the same. The cadence seemed the same. The offensive and defensive moves seemed the same, as well.

However, these familiar elements were somehow entirely different, and incredibly more dangerous. Her light steps never failed to deliver her into the best possible position to attack. Each strike packed a devastating punch that seemed too extreme even for an Ascended Terror. Her defense was nearly impenetrable, alternating between immovable hardness and inviting softness, which dissipated the force of Sunny's attacks and made him feel as though he was drowning in a bog.

No... he was drowning in her flowing sword. 'How is she so different?'

It was not as though Sunny did not understand the same principles Neph had spoken about. The relationship between mass, acceleration, and force... he was intimately familiar with it, as well.

After all, Sunny had long incorporated the ability to change his weight at will into his battle skill, so much so that it had become second nature to him. By manipulating how much his body, or various parts of it, weighed on the fly, he was able to enhance the force of his attacks, secure his balance, and even perform seemingly impossible moves by shifting his center of gravity.

By now, it was like an instinct.

He knew a lot about anatomy, too, both from his own training after the Ascension, mastery of Shadow Dance, and learning how to create shadow hands.

Everything that Nephis had mentioned, Sunny studied too. However, as they thought, he understood the difference between them.

It was the difference between an intuitive, instinctual knowledge and a comprehensive, systemic understanding.

And so, even though Sunny could perceive the essence of what Nephis was doing through Shadow Dance, he couldn't repeat it with the same level of insight.

This was different from fighting Morgan. Morgan was supremely skilled, yes, but the main challenge of dueling her was the dire power of her enchanted body and her sharp, killing will.

Nephis was not using any augmentations, and her will was vast and calm as an ocean. Beneath that indomitable calmness hid the fiery fury of a roaring flame.

It was pure technique, pure insight, pure mastery.

Pure passion.

Sunny frowned, feeling that he, too, was starting to sweat.

Nephis was strong, but he was strong too. Among human swordsmen, he was perhaps one of the strongest.

His mind was clear, his elusive skill was perilously insidious. He was not the same person he had been before. Antarctica had forged him into someone much more steady, powerful, and deadly.

Their duel... was exhilarating.