1617 Duel of the Saints

Sunny held his odachi lightly as he watched Nephis take unhurried steps in his direction. The familiar white flames were dancing in her eyes…

But what was this?

As he walked, the same sparks ignited in the eyes of the seven Fire Keepers. A moment later, their bodies shone with a soft white radiance, and the bruises and contusions left on them by his restrained blows disappeared without a trace. Expressions of gratitude and relief appeared on their faces, and at the same time, Neph's own face grew colder.

'Since when can she heal others from a distance?'

Before he could consider the implications of that unexpected turn of events, her sword left the enchanted scabbard with a quiet murmur. Its mirror-like blade was as black as the night sky, the light of the magical lanterns reflecting in it like distant stars.

He knew that sword well… or rather, he had known it once.

The silver blade was a Transcendent Memory of the Seventh Tier Nephis had received after slaying Soul Stealer. It was a mighty weapon, and had been made mightier still by Sunny himself. He had transplanted a Supreme soul shard as one of its nodes, augmenting the fundamental enchantment of the silver blade..

But now, it was different.

Sunny frowned behind the mask when he noticed a familiar symbol branded into the mystical steel just above the crossguard. An anvil pierced through by a sword…

Had one of the forgemasters of the Clan Valor deemed themselves competent enough to improve on his own work? No, they wouldn't have been able to.

That left only one person, then.

The King of Swords himself.

That bastard. Who gave him the right to taint the gift I gave her with his dirty hands?

Suddenly, Sunny felt displeased.

And since he did, the shadows drowning the great hall of the Nameless Temple moved, overcome by the same displeasure.

The Fire Keepers, who had been retreating to give the two Saints space to fight, suddenly paled.

Nephis sensed the change in the atmosphere, too.

What is the matter, Lord Shadow? Do you not wish to fight me?

'Sunny smiled darkly.'

...I am a peaceful man. I hate fighting.

As he said that, he lunged forward without any warning and thrust his odachi at Neph's throat. His sudden attack was violent and ruthless, aimed at slicing open her arteries and severing her spine.

Of course, Nephis deflected the black odachi easily, taking a sidestep in the opposite direction at the same time. Her movements flowed like a placid river, and yet Sunny instantly felt that he was in mortal danger.

The silver sword had pushed the blade of the odachi down just a split second ago, but was already flying forward. It was moving at a speed that could not be perceived by the Fire Keepers, and even Sunny struggled to sense its passing. Unable to pull his own sword back in time, he had no choice but to jump back.

The tip of the silver sword missed his chest by mere centimeters.

After that first exchange, Sunny and Nephis circled each other for a few moments.

The, she suddenly spoke:

"The battle style you used. Only those trained by Valor are masters of it."

Tilting his head a little, Sunny responded coldly:

"My esteemed guests have been sent by the King of Swords. It only seemed polite to greet them by using the battle style of his knights."

The corner of Neph's mouth twitched subtly.

"Then what style would you have used if we were sent by Song?"

Sunny raised his odachi and took a step forward.

"Something like this."

A moment later, they were upon each other once more, their swords weaving a complicated web of attacks and deflections in the air. Both were moving with astonishing speed, exchanging dozens of blows in a second. The clangor of steel fused into a continuous wail that echoes in the darkness of the solemn hall, followed by a thunderous sonic boom.

A shockwave spread from the spot where the Lord of Shadows and the radiant Star of Ruin clashed, sending a cloud of dust rushing outward like an opaque sphere. The Fire Keepers reeled and staggered back.

'This is it… this is it!'

Straining his Transcendent body to its limit, Sunny was momentarily overcome by the exhilaration of combat. He had missed having someone to spar with, and dueling the Fire Keepers had not satisfied his thirst.

…Of course, the clash between him and Nephis was much more furious and destructive than the previous fight. After all… he was a Trasncendent Terror, and she was a Transcendent Titan. Neither was using their Aspect to augment themselves, but their power was still terrible enough to devastate their surroundings.

Luckily, the Nameless Temple was very hard to destroy. It would not have remained standing from the dawn of the Age of Gods to this day otherwise… granted, Sunny had found it in a rather sorry state, and had to perform plenty of repairs to make this ancient Citadel presentable.

In any case, he wasn't worried that it would be seriously damaged… not unless either Nephis or him decided to unleash their full power.

'Now… how do I lose without having Nephis realize that I threw the fight…'

There were two problems.

First, Nephis was too good of a swordsman, so weaving any kind of pretense in front of her was not easy.

And secondly… Sunny was having too much fun.

He didn't want their fight to end so quickly.

'Shall… shall we make it more interesting, then?'

Grinning behind the mask, Sunny suddenly shifted his weight and switched to an entirely new technique. The battle style of Clan Valor was sharp, domineering, and fatal. But this new technique… it was flowing, unpredictable, and supremely adaptable.

It was the battle style taught to Nephis by her family, and then by Nephis to him.

'There. Finally!'

The mask of indifference that she wore finally cracked a little, and he could feel her blade waver for a split second.

That split second was all that Sunny needed.

Breaking through Neph's defense, he delivered a swift strike. And yet, no matter how swift his attack was, she still managed to compose herself and evade it by disengaging.

Nephis took a step back, and the tip of the black odachi hissed angrily past her breastplate, separated from the polished white steel by no more than a centimeter.

She lingered for a moment.

"...Who taught you that style?"

Her voice was even, but Sunny knew Nephis well enough to recognize a somber undertone within it.

He pulled his odachi back and answered in an even tone:

"Nobody."

With that, Sunny lunged forward once again.