1674 In Tandem

A Great Beast...

Killing a Great Beast could pose no trouble at all, or all the trouble in the world. Beings of that Rank were more than mere creatures - each of them possessed a mythical power, reality itself coming undone under the pressure of their existence.

When Nephis had been a Master, a single Great abomination was like a cataclysm...

Now, Nephis was a cataclysm herself.

Igniting the flames of her soul, she shone with pure radiance and met the eerie golem with the full strength of a Transcendent Titan. Pain washed over her, bringing the world into focus. Everything was stark and clear in the world of pain, ready to surrender to her will.

Except for the Lord of Shadows.

The black blade of her sword met the diamond mace of the Nightmare Creature, deflecting it and dissipating its force. An impact that would have produced a devastating shockwave was suffocated, its destructive potential disappearing without a trace.

The golem was fast - faster than Nephis. But she knew its movement well. They were lacking insight and intent, almost entirely without refinement. Because of that, the creature wasted precious moments, while she wasted none.

A split second later, the tip of her blade burrowed into the red moss, aiming to destroy one of the golem's shoulder joints.

The sword the Lord of Shadows had given her was supposed to be equal to a Transcendent weapon and a potent one, at that. Cutting the flesh of a Great abomination would have been hard, but not impossible. Still, Nephis did not hope to break the golem's stone carapace, and aimed at a weak point, instead.

She already knew that the creature would not be able to avoid her strike.

That was Neph's power. She could not predict the future, like Cassie could, and did not possess an Aspect Ability that would allow her to read the enemy's mind. However, she knew the laws of combat - knew them intimately, instinctually, and comprehensively. From the philosophy of combat to how the atoms interacted with each other to form a steel blade, she knew it all.

So, she did not have to see the future. Knowing the laws of combat, she could simply tell what movements her enemy could perform, was most likely to perform, and would perform in any given situation.

That was the easiest part of being a master at combat. The hard part... was actually dictating the situation to make the enemy move how she wanted them to move.

Of course, to achieve that, she had to know the enemy as well.

The shoulder Joint of the eerle golem had turned out to be far more durable than she had anticipated. Her blade bypassed the stone carapace, but the desiccated flesh beneath was Just as tough. Her sword bit into it and failed to cut deep, leaving only an insignificant scratch.

Nephis frowned, knowing that she was now open to the creature's retaliation.

The diamond mace rose, flying at her head with terrible speed... and was pushed aside by the odachi of the Lord of Shadows. Not only had he protected Nephis, but he also created an opening for her to deliver another strike.

This time, she aimed for the golem's eyes.

Fighting side by side with the Shadow Saint was... comfortable.

Nephis had known that he was a swordsman of exalted skill - that much was apparent from their duel. However, what had stunned her the most was how excellent he was at supporting a partner in a battle, and being supported by a partner in turn.

Too excellent, maybe.

She would have expected that such a solitary and reclusive person would have trouble cooperating with others. But actually, the opposite was true.

It was as though her shadow had really come alive, fighting by her side with effortless ease, The Lord of Shadow seemed to anticipate her every move, and was always exactly where she needed him to be, playing his role both flawlessly and with utmost effectiveness.

Even stranger still... Nephis herself was oddly attuned to his style of combat. She didn't have to put any effort into acting in unison with him, as if it was something natural.

The warriors of Valor were highly disciplined and promoted unity, often training and going into battle together. And yet, she felt more at ease in the company of this total stranger.

Perhaps that was a unique skill of a Transcendent with a high affinity to shadows - shadows never existed on their own, after all. It was their nature to be cast by someone.

Her sword plunged into the golem's eye, sinking deeply. That did not kill the Great Beast, but it did seem to slow it down a little. Just to be sure, Nephis cut the flower growing from his other eye socket, as well, wondering if the creature was actually a predatory plant.

But it was not. The flowers, it seemed, were mere decorations.

[Break the armor.]

Cassie's voice let her know where the creature's weakness lay. Living beings were relatively easy to kill, because they shared the same weaknesses - heart, brain, vascular system. But constructs and the undead were tricky, since destroying them was always a guessing game, Especially if they were powerful enough so that obliterating them completely was out of the question.

"Aim for the breastplate!"

Nephis and the Lord of Shadows abandoned their attempts to damage the tough flesh of the abomination, concentrating instead on the cracked armor of the stone golem. She even sacrificed some of her physical augmentation to enhance the black sword instead - luckily, the manifested blade easily accepted the soul flame, igniting with a strange kind of dark radiance.

The battle laster for a dozen seconds, and by the end of it, and entire swath of the jungle was completely overturned. Nephis and her aloof guide rained a barrage of blows on the breastplate of the Great Beast, easily avoiding its utterly devastating, but simplistic and predictable attacks.

Each of them might have had a tough time of fighting the creature alone, but together, they overpowered it without too much strain.

Soon, the ancient stone cracked even more, and then exploded in a rain of shards. The golem staggered, and toppled to the ground.

The Spell whispered into her ear, its voice mocking and insidious:

[You have slain a Great Beast, Asura of Condemnation],

[Your soul shines brighter.]

Nephis breathed heavily and dismissed her helmet, loose strands of hair sticking to her fair face. She studied the collapsed golem warily, knowing that this was just the beginning of a dreadful battle.

The Lord of Shadows had said that there were a lot of these abominations in the ruins, after all.

Her guide, meanwhile, walked closer to the stone creature, stared at it for a bit, and then gave it a kick.

Then, he said, a hint of somber emotion in his usually cold voice:

...It's an MWP."

Nephis was surprised. She lingered for a moment, then raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

He pointed to the dead golem with the tip of his odachi:

"This creature, it's an MWP. Mobile war platform. Well... I guess it's more of a powered armor suit. Mundane soldiers used them in Antarctica."

The Lord of Shadows remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"The mummified corpse inside was an Awakened warrior, and this golem is the power suit he wore. Of course, it was powered by sorcery, not technology,"

His voice slowly returned to the usual indifferent nonchalance:

"They were defenders of this city, I guess.”