1676 Inalienable

The carnivorous plants and the abominable vermin populating the jungle had hidden away out of fear, terrified by the approach of the masters of the ancient ruin. So, Nephis ran fast, covering a great distance with each second.

The wind was cool, soothing her slender body.

The Lord of Shadows had taken the lead, his strides like that of a beast. His powerful limbs tore the ground, and from time to time, he used the trunks of the towering trees to leap forward, sending splinters flying back.

Soon enough, Nephis sensed the approach of a new enemy.

The same kind of golem broke through the wall of vines, and the ground quaked from the crushing impact of its footsteps. The creature looked just like the one they had slain a minute earlier - tall, overgrown with scarlet moss, its ancient stone carapace ace covered by a net of cracks.

This one was armed with a diamond scepter instead of a mace a split second later, the scepter was already flying at the shadow demon's head.

Its speed was so dire that a fatal blow seemed inevitable. The jungle itself swayed, following the trajectory of the diamond weapon.

Nephis raised her sword to block.

A fraction of a second later, the Lord of Shadows.... simply disappeared from the path of the scepter. There was a thunderous boom, and a devastating shockwave spread in a wide cone from the point where the asura's weapon had been supposed to hit.

A vast swath of the jungle, hundreds of meters across, was instantly devastated.

Sadly enough, Nephis was right in the middle of the cone of destruction. The sword she had raised cut through it, sharp and indomitable, allowing her to continue moving forward without slowing down too much.

She jumped, stepped on the diamond scepter, ran across its length, and delivered a dire downward slash all in a matter of a single moment.

The tough stone carapace of the Great Beast did not split open, but that was not her goal. What Nephis aimed for was to infect it with the decay of the [Testament of Malice].

Before the creature could catch her, she had already jumped back, twisting gracefully midair.

The Lord of Shadows appeared from the darkness behind the creature, his enormous odachi falling down like the blade of a giant guillotine. In that demonic form, encased in fearsome onyx armor, he was no less imposing than the abominable asura. The might of his strike was so terrible that the knees of the Great Beast buckled, its feet sinking deep into the moss.

The ground itself split open.

Stone shards shot into the air like shrapnel.

"There is another one!"

Towering above the kneeling Nightmare Creature, he used two of his hands to grab its head viciously, locking it in a chokehold. His other two hands turned the black odachi downward and drove its tip into the crack infected by the decay of the [Touch of Malice].

Nephis spun and swung her sword. Up until this point, she had only used her Dormant Ability. At that moment, though, she summoned a spark of soul flame and, enduring the agony, uttered the Names of fire and wind.

That single spark exploded into a raging inferno, incinerating everything in its path. The jungle in front of her turned to ash, revealing the dreadful form of the second asura.

The abomination's charge had been broken by the shockwave of the directed explosion, and the flame stuck to its carapace, burning hot enough to melt Transcendent steel.

The stone armor of the asura held, but was softened by the terrible heat. The desiccated flesh buried within it, though, caught aflame.

Wreathed in fire, the towering Nightmare Creature rose like an infernal fiend.

‘There is no time....’

Nephis used the momentary delay to lunge at the abomination being held down by the Lord of Shadows. Knowing how to destroy one, they could dispose of it with relative speed... but a Great Beast was a Great Beast.

It was already a miracle that it could be wrestled to the ground by a Saint.

Her sword blazed with brilliant radiance, absorbing the full augmentation of her titanic soul.

There was an explosion of blinding light, and the abomination's stone carapace crumbled. The joint attack of light and shadow had overcome its decaying resilience, and the perfect unity of their murderous wills had overcome its will to live.

The kneeling asura slowly fell, the diamond scepter slipping from its grip.

The second Nightmare Creature was almost upon them...

With cold darkness nestling in the crack of his visor, the Lord of Shadows growled deeply and strained his mighty body. Nephis ducked as the massive corpse of the slain asura was tossed into the air, its dire mass crashing into the burning abomination like a siege ram.

After that, they made short work of the staggered creature.

She killed the first. while the Lord of Shadows killed the second.

Three Great Beasts in just as many minutes... even for Nephis, that was a remarkable result.

But it was still not fast enough.

Without even stopping to retrieve the Supreme soul shards, the two of them rushed away. More of these terrible creatures were coming, and the survival of the two Sleepers was hanging by a thread.

As they ran, the Lord of Shadows spoke suddenly:

"This place... we might very well die here."

His voice was even and clear, as if he didn't care either way.

Nephis answered succinctly, long accustomed to feeling the cold breath of death:

"That is true."

He lingered for a moment.

"Is it really worth it, to die for a couple Sleepers?"

She jumped over a fallen tree, landed nimbly, and lunged forward with stunning speed.

"It is!”

To her, it was a strange question... but then again, people often misunderstood her. She had answered honestly, but the question itself was wrong and misguided.

Because she wasn't risking her life for these Sleepers. The Sleepers were merely a circumstance, but what she was ready to die for were her principles. She believed that saving these teenagers was the right thing to do, and so, she wanted to do it. And it was also the right thing to do because she wanted to do it.

Before, a long time ago... Nephis had been truly powerless. She watched fearfully as everything their family possessed was taken away. Their heirlooms, their wealth, their home. Even people who surrounded her were either killed or chased away one after another, disappearing without a trace.

Their absence had left a scar.

Perhaps because of that, she didn't value material possessions, and many other things that people usually held dear. The things she valued the most were inside of her, and therefore, could never be taken away.

Her beliefs, her principles, her will. As long as she held fast to that, nothing could scare her, and nothing could make her feel truly powerless.

However...

While these things could not be taken away, they could be lost. She could betray herself, and thus discard them. It was the easiest thing in the world, to lose oneself.

Then, she would truly have nothing.

The thought of that... was too appalling. Much more terrible than death.

And so, Nephis would rather die.

It didn't matter if she risked her life for two Sleepers or to fulfill her greatest desire. To her, both were one and the same both were expressions of her self, and therefore equally important.

The Lord of Shadows laughed.

"Why?"

Hadn't she already told him that it was because she wanted to? It was simple as that... and as deeply complicated as that, as well.

She had long given up on trying to explain herself to people. But, somehow, Nephis felt... that, maybe, the Lord of Shadows would be able to understand.

Running as fast as she could, Nephis smiled faintly.

"Because otherwise, I wouldn't be me!”