1678 Path to Supremacy

Nephis had not been dismissive when she answered the question posed by the Lord of Shadows...

How could one kill a Supreme?

After years of striving bitterly to maneuver herself into a position where resisting the Sovereigns was not a foolish, futile, and frivolous delusion, she had come to understand that the only plausible way to defeat them was to attain Supremacy herself.

Years ago, she had come back to the waking world after an eternity of being lost in the Dream Realm, defeated and broken. Back then, she had made a decision to join the Great Clan Valor, knowing that there would be no better way for her to come to know her enemy.

When Nephis killed a Nightmare Creature, she dissected the carcass to examine its anatomy and learn how to slay such abominations better. But she couldn't dissect a Great Clan... so, joining one was the best way to study the enemy from within.

She had also harbored other aspirations - to earn the trust of the King of Swords and therefore place herself in a position where striking him down would be tenable. Nephis was a master of combat, after all, of which decelt and misdirection were Integral parts, Life wasn't that different from combat... her life was not, at least,

But, although she had attained some success in her ambition to Infiltrate the Great Clan and become trusted by its King, the more Nephis learned about the enemy, the more hopeless her burning desire to vanquish the Sovereigns seemed.

Even if she knew everything there was to know about Valor, and even if the King of Sword lowered his guard one day... she wasn't confident at all that she would be able to defeat him, despite all her power as a Transcendent Titan.

So... Nephis had to become a Supreme Titan, instead.

The problem was that she was not allowed to even try.

Times had changed, and there were many more Awakened, Masters, and Saints walking the world today. The Sovereigns had relaxed their iron grip on achieving greater power... a little. But they still demanded fealty from the absolute majority of Transcendents, and would certainly never let someone rise to the throne of Supremacy and become their equal.

Anvil and Ki Song could not even tolerate the existence of each other. How could they allow someone else to become their rival?

Not to mention someone like Nephis, who had a perfectly justified reason to hate them and plot their downfall.

They would never let her challenge the Fourth Nightmare. Even if she found a suitable Seed, entered it without permission, and survived... she would be slaughtered Immediately after returning to reality. The might of a Sovereign lay in the power of their Domain, after all, and hers would not be established yet right after achieving Supremacy.

A newly crowned Supreme was only inconsequentially more powerful than a Transcendent, considering the perilous threat of the older Domains.

For these reasons, there was only one path for Nephis to take. She had to attain Supremacy without the help of the Nightmare Spell, by following in the footsteps of the Awakened from ancient times.

Not only that, but she had to do it in secret.

...Needless to say, that path was just as problematic.

Nephis had learned a little about how the ancient Awakened walked the path of Ascension from Ananke. However, the old priestess had not known anything about the leap between Transcendence and Supremacy - after all, there had been no Supremes in Weave.

In fact, the only Sovereign of the River Civilization had been the Serpent King, a stranger from a realm consumed by the Nightmare Spell,

It meant that Nephis could not learn the natural way to Supremacy from somebody else, She had to invent it herself, discovering the long-lost truth without anyone's help.

The task seemed unreasonable even for her, but having no other choice, she had been striving to accomplish it for the last four years.

She had not been able to come anywhere near becoming a Sovereign. But she was mostly sure that she had discovered the key to Supremacy... or rather, the correct lock to it.

Just like the Awakened of ancient times learned to control their essence before forming their soul cores instead of the other way around, Nephis believed that she had to realize a Domain first to become Supreme.

The Nightmare Spell gave humans a chance to challenge the Fourth Nightmare, attain Supremacy, and therefore the ability to manifest a Domain. However, without the Nightmare Spell... Nephis had to claim that authority herself. It was her ability to be the ruler of a Domain that would make her a Sovereign, and not the other way around.

However...

She had no clues about how to manifest a Domain, either.

In the beginning, that was.

Now, four years later, Nephis was at least on the right track - at least she thought she was,

The secret to going further on the Path of Ascension was, reasonably, hidden in the changes that the soul of a living being underwent during Transcendence,

The soul of a Saint broke the limits of the mundane and expanded, coming into contact with the world and becoming intertwined with a part of it. The soul of a Sovereign, then... had to not only become fused with the world, but also claim authority over its part.

That was the essence of Supremacy. To be a ruler.

But every Saint was unique. The nature of the connection they shared with the world was unique, as well. Therefore, each Transcendent had a unique path to Supremacy.

For Nephis herself... that path was easy to understand, but impossibly hard to tread.

After becoming a Saint, her soul had become capable of being nourished by the ambient essence of the world, the spirit essence. Of course, it was only so for the spirit essence born from a particular source.

Most people assumed that her source element was flame, some assumed that it was light. But all of them were wrong.

In truth, Neph's source element, the foundation of her future Domain... was longing.

In hindsight, she should have known it much sooner. It had always been there, in the description of her Aspect...

Aspect: [Light Bringer].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a creature of light that was banished and doomed to exist in the darkness. You bring radiance and warmth to wherever you go, but with it comes indescribable longing.]

The spirit essence Nephis could absorb was born from the souls of those living beings she inspired to yearn for something. It didn't matter what they longed for - and, unlike the loyalty demanded by the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms, she didn't need to be the subject of their yearning. Any kind of aspiration born from knowing her, or knowing about her, became the source of spirit essence for her.

Her [Longing] Ability also seemed to have evolved after her Transcendence, fusing with her presence. Over time, Nephis had noticed that when people were in her presence, their souls grew more susceptible to inspiration, and the flames of their desires burned brighter.

That was the foundation of her future Domain, which she had already built without even knowing it.