1684 Pure Agony

They could not escape, but they also could not fight the Cursed Tyrant.

In that situation, the only way out Nephis saw was to create a momentary lapse in the Tyrant's concentration.

It was the abomination's profane will that was preventing them from reaching the jungle. If that will was weakened, even for a few moments, a path to freedom would be theirs to take.

Nephis had no hope of killing the evil deity, and no confidence to face it in a prolonged battle. However... she was pretty sure that she could at least hurt it.

She knew pain better than most. She knew how hard it was to keep calm and steady when your body and soul were being blackened by flame. How it felt to burn alive.

Anyone's will would be shaken by that agony.

But her adversary this time was a Cursed Tyrant. Not any flame would be able to hurt it, and her usual attacks were woefully insufficient.

So, she had to give it her all.

...Which required time.

The Lord of Shadows had to buy her that time.

As the pursuing asuras closed in on them, he glanced at her briefly.

Then, he sighed and let go of his black odachi.

The tenebrous sword fell to the ground, but rippled like liquid in the air. She thought that she saw a glimmer of serpentine scales.

A moment later, the odachi turned into a torrent of shadows, and then coalesced into a human form... that of a woman, both her clothes and skin perfectly black, her hair like a waterfall of silken darkness. She was standing with her back to Nephis, so her face was hidden from view. And yet, it felt like the mysterious woman was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

More than that... her presence was that of a Transcendent.

A moment ago, there were two Saints facing the Great Beasts.

Now, there were three.

Pulling another sword out of the darkness, the Lord of Shadows lunged at the ghastly asuras without wasting any time. The black woman followed, moving with dire speed and indescribable grace.

They clashed with the abominations a split second later.

Sadly, Nephis could not observe their battle.

She was reaching into her soul.

The blinding light emanated by her radiant figure grew even more intense, its heat more unbearable, The vines and moss covering the ruins around her turned to ash, revealing ancient stone structures, The weathered stone started to melt.

'It's going to hurt…’

Her goal was to cause the Cursed being pain, but to achieve it, she had to withstand her own share of agony.

As something too harrowing to witness and too appaling to see slowly revealed itself from beneath the collapsing soil, Nephis steeled her will... and ignited her soul.

It was different from summoning soul flame or activating her Abilities. What she was doing was a derivative skill of her Aspect, something she had always been capable of, but only truly learned how to do in Twilight.

Instead of merely burning soul essence, she was burning her very soul.

But, unlike the crude way she had done so in Twilight, Nephis was doing it in a much more refined and controlled manner now.

With each moment, her soul cores grew weaker, and her counter of soul fragments plummeted with dire speed. Each soul fragment she sacrificed turned into a torrent of immolating flame.

That incandescent inferno grew and grew, the terrifying power contained within it reaching a truly chilling scale,

Nephis could detonate a soul core to produce a tremendous explosion, But an explosion was a wild thing.., it spread in all directions, annihilating everything in Its path. Such a calamity could obliterate a vast number of enemies, both weak and strong.

To deal a wound to someone as strong as a Cursed Tyrant, however, such a dispersed tool of destruction was sulted poorly. She needed something much more concentrated, targeted, and controlled.

Consumed by a harrowing agony, Nephis endured the feeling of her soul being burned to ash, and slowly raised a radiant hand.

In front of her, the Lord of Shadows and the mysterious Saint he had summoned were drowning in the tide of Great Beasts.

She concentrated deeply, and whispered several Names, shaping them into a verse. Channeling that verse put a terrible strain on her mind, her burning soul, and even her brilliant vessel.

The Name of the Fire to control the flames.

The Name of the wind to fan them.

These two were easier.

The other two...

Nephis trembled as she uttered a terrible word.

It was the Name of Destruction.

The Name of Destruction to greatly enhance the destructive force of her soul flame.

And finally, the last one...

Perhaps the most important one.

She smiled darkly.

“…Condemnation!"

The True Name of the Cursed deity, the hint to which had been so generously provided to her by the Spell.

To bind the devastating flame to the ancient fiend, and bind the fiend to the flame.

Names were a powerful thing.

And so, Nephis called flame and destruction upon the Tyrant, using her own soul as fuel.

In the next moment, a perfectly white ray of concentrated flame shot off her palm, connecting it to the terrible shape of the rising giant many kilometers away. Its arrival was instantaneous. Its passing burned the world itself, leaving a scar on it.

Even though it consisted of flame, it seemed like a ray of pure white light.

That light bit into the flesh of Condemnation, slicing it apart like a sharp blade. Terrible burns were left in its wake.

And just as Nephis was drowning in terrible agony...

The Cursed Tyrant convulsed, its mind pierced by unbearable pain,

An indescribable, deafening, harrowing sound shook the world. It was a sound that would drive a mundane person..., no, even an Awakened, a Master, a weaker Saint... mad from simply hearing it.

Condemnation was screaming.

"R-run!"

Nephis swayed, her radiance dimming. Her Transformation was dismissed, and she once again turned into a human. The white tunic she had been wearing was singed and burned, barely holding in place.

'Right... I should summon the rest of my armor...'

But she was momentarily dazed, paying the price for burning away a part of her soul.

Nephis had told the Lord of Shadows to run, but found herself unable to follow her own advice.

Before she could do anything, though, two strong arms grabbed her. Raising her unceremoniously, he dashed away without saying a word. The onyx surface of his armor was smooth and cool to the touch.

'Am... am I... being carried?'

She was stunned.

When had something like that ever happened to her?

"Grab a hold of yourself, princess!"

Despite the situation, his voice sounded as cold and arrogant as always. Maybe even a little colder than usual.

She closed her eyes for a moment, then summoned the rest of her armor.

By the time it weaved itself from sparks of light, the Lord of Shadows let go of her, and they ran toward the edge of the ruins together.

The echoes of the Cursed Tyrant's pained howi were still traveling across the Hollows when they escaped into the Jungle, leaving the forgotten city behind.

Just like that, their one-on-one expedition into the Hollows was over.

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A few hours later, Nephis was sitting on the steps of the Nameless Temple.

The world... was mercilessly stark, black and white, with no place left for feeling or compromise.

As it always happened after she overused her Aspect, her emotions were dampened and weak, almost gone. Her heart was cold.

Or maybe it was so impossibly scorching that it felt cold.

She was tired, but couldn't feel the tiredness.

One could not remember pain, but remembering having suffered pain was all too easy.

Raising a hand, she allowed a soft radiance to ignite under her skin and stared at it silently.

'It still hurts.’

Good. That was good. Nephis knew that she had not truly lost herself as long as she could still feel the pain, and fear it.

Sne signed.

It was time to return.

The Fire Keepers had already gathered in front of her, ready to depart. The three Sleepers were also there, looking around with awe and amazement. Even Tamar, the Legacy girl, was subdued by the solemn atmosphere of the dark temple.

The master of the temple, meanwhile, had not come to see them off. Only his Echo was watching.

The Lord of Shadows...

Such a mysterious man.

Nephis tilted her head a little, remembering how he behaved in the forgotten ruin. Not during the battle... but before it.

Surprisingly enough, the cold warrior seemed to have a lot of interest in history, almost like an explorer. That was a side of him she had not seen before.

Which was understandable, considering that they didn't know each other too well.

However...

At that moment, her indifferent eyes glinted slightly.

She thought back to their first meeting, when he challenged her to a duel.

The style he used once belonged to her family - naturally, Nephis had asked the Lord of Shadows who taught that style to him.

And what had he answered?

And what had he answered?

Her lips parted.

"...Nobody.”