1768 Swordsmanship Enthusiast

Nephis concentrated on her sword, guiding it with effortless ease. The movements she performed were not particularly fast or taxing... and yet, her body was under tremendous strain, beads of sweat forming on her fair skin. Her breathing was controlled, but heavy.

That was because she had to infuse her swordsmanship with sincere intent. Without the intent, her display would be meaningless - she would fail to show the essence of her technique to the young enchanter, and he would not be able to forge a suitable blade.

She was straining herself... but, at the same time, she was enjoying herself.

That was because she did not need to think about anything else but the sword in these rare moments of peace. Meeting Master Sunless was not entirely without purpose, but compared to the rest of her endless errands and obligations, it was a respite.

Nephis had always been driven, and never allowed herself to get distracted from the goal. But that was not because she never wanted to put it all aside and enjoy some rest... it was simply because she could not allow herself to do so. Falling behind meant death, and even worse than that, failure.

With the war approaching, the pressure on her had only increased even further, It had increased tremendously. There was so much to do, so much to prepare, so much to foresee and assess and consider... and even then, there was so much uncertainty. The uncertainty of it all was the most burdensome, and even with the help of her companions, it was almost overwhelming.

Because their lives, too, depended on her. She had pulled them into the maelstrom of ruinous change, and it was up to her to see them safely to the shore.

Which was why Nephis secretly enjoyed the time she spent with Master Sunless. The charming enchanter was kind, nice... and, if she was honest with herself, quite pleasing to the eye. There was nothing wrong with indulging in stealing glances at him from time to time, of course... everyone loved beautiful things, after all. She wasn't an exception.

But his looks were not as important as the fact that he was far removed from the dreadful matters involving war, bloodshed, and boundless heartbreak. To the Sovereigns, the dead gods, and the fate of the world.

On the rare occasions she was in his company, Nephis could allow her tired mind to relax, and concentrate only on simple things. Like wielding her sword.

She had always loved swordsmanship, but now... as it turned out, performing it for someone to see was strangely rewarding.

Especially because Master Sunless always watched her intently... very intently, even, never missing a single move.

Nephis was satisfied.

‘He must really appreciate swordsmanship…’

Who knew that the gentle enchanter had such a voracious appreciation for combat techniques?

It felt good to be appreciated.

[Hey, Neph.]

Cassie's voice did not distract her from dancing with her sword. Nephis took a step forward and performed a smooth slash, then answered calmly.

[Yes? Did something happen?]

The response came a few moments later.

[No, not really. It's just that... can you do me a favor?]

Nephis spun her sword into a flowing chain of swift attacks and couldn't help but notice the enchanter's glistening onyx eyes, which followed her movements attentively.

[Sure. What do you need?]

Cassie hesitated for a while.

Was her voice a little strange? Nephis felt reluctant to consider that issue. Cassie had been suffering greatly after losing her prophetic gift, and was only recently able to recover. She didn't want to see her friend fall into an unsettled state again.

However, Cassie's next words almost made her stumble.

[Can you... give Master Sunless a hug?)

Nephis struggled to control her sword.

[W-what? A-absolute not! I... I am not going to hug him! Why are you even asking me to do something like this?]

Cassie remained silent for a bit, then sighed.

[Well... whatever. I can't tell you. If you don't want to, don't.]

She didn't say anything else.

Nephis was stunned.

‘That's... that's right! I don't want to, and so I won't.’

However...

The thought of embracing the charming enchanter had already been planted in her mind, refusing to disappear. After all, people didn't just like looking at beautiful things...

Like that time in the lakeshore park, when he tripped and tried to cover his clumsiness with an equally clumsy excuse.

'Damn you, Cassie!’

Distracted, Nephis failed to suppress her strength and put too much force into her next swing.

The alloy training sword was not meant to be used by Saints, and so, it shattered under the terrible strain.

Nephis stumbled.

The tip of the blade broke off, whistling as it shot through the air with terrible speed... And struck Master Sunless, who had been slow to react, straight in the face. She flinched.

‘Oh, no!’

Before he could even recover, Nephis was already beside him. She traversed the entire arena with a single push, appearing near the spectator seats almost instantaneously.

The charming enchanter had barely had time to react, raising his hands to clutch at his face. Nephis kneeled beside him and raised her own, her gaze anxious.

He was a Master, so an alloy blade would not hurt him too much... but still, still. She was very angry at herself, and concerned about him.

"Master Sunless... please, lower your hands. Let me see."

Covering half of his face, he looked at her with one eye and forced out a smile.

"...It's fine, Lady Nephis. I'm tougher than I look. You don't have to worry."

She gritted her teeth, "Still. Let me see."

The enchanter lingered for a while, then lowered his hands obediently,

Nephis let out a relieved sigh.

She was certain that she would see blood, but the alloy blade somehow falled to break skin despite its dire speed. Nevertheless, his cheek and brow were red and swollen, and there would be a serious bruise on his face before too long.

Scowling, she took his chin with one hand and gently touched his face with the other.

'It's fine... the bone isn't fractured. Just a bruise.’

Nephis calmed down.

In the next moment, however, she realized the position they were in.

Master Sunless was sitting, while she was kneeling on the ground beside him. She was holding his face, and they were terribly close to each other.

His onyx eyes were right in front of her, looking into hers. They were like deep pools of cool darkness.

She could see her disheveled reflection in them.

The young enchanter remained still, looking at her silently.

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then said with false calmness:

"Don't move."

In the next moment, a soft radiance ignited under the skin of her hands.

She was assaulted by the familiar agony, but at the same time, she saw a hint of relief smooth his features. The swelling subsided and disappeared altogether, leaving his skin flawless and unblemished, just as it had been before.

It was cool, silky, and soft to the touch.

"There. All better."

Nephis smiled and felt the corner of his mouth rise into a subtle smile under her fingers.

‘...Why am I still holding his face?'

She lingered for a few moments, then lowered her hands.

With a bit of reluctance…