1770 Keen Insight

Leaving the martial hall, they went for a walk. Sunny offered Nephis his arm once again, and they strolled along the lively streets of Bastion, making sure to be seen by as many people as possible.

It wasn't every day that ordinary citizens could catch a glimpse of Changing Star, so many were stunned and excited. She smiled politely at them and nodded from time to time.

Luckily, a Saint was different from a celebrity. Although she was immensely popular, people treated her with a sense of solemn veneration. No one bothered them wanting to receive an autograph, and no one tried to exchange words with her - they just looked from afar and kept a respectful distance.

Nephis herself, meanwhile, was quite curious about the details of the day-to-day life of the city. As they walked, she often asked Sunny to explain this or that, listening to his explanations with keen interest.

"...Before last year, most people in Bastion sustained themselves on the food rations delivered from the waking world and the meat brought back by the abomination hunters. But then, the fields outside the city were finally able to yield a harvest - crops capable of thriving in the Dream Realm soil had been cultivated decades ago, but scaling the production took time. In any case, the city is almost self-sufficient now. These food stalls became popular after the supply of locally sourced flour stabilized, as well. Would you like to try a fish cake? It's not really fish, of course... but it's still delicious..."

She smiled and shook her head.

"No, thank you. I am quite full."

Hearing that, Sunny felt satisfied. It seemed that she had enjoyed the picnic.

Feeding people felt nice, indeed... Especially this particular person. Nephis looked at him with curiosity, and then asked in a neutral tone:

"Master Sunless... can I ask you a question?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Of course."

She lingered for a moment.

"You've been observing my swordsmanship. What did you see?"

He had expected her to ask that, somewhat.

The arrangement between Nephis and him was for the purpose of crafting a weapon for her, and to do that, Sunny had requested to study her swordsmanship and battle technique.

However, his persona was that of a sorcerer, not a warrior. Nephis did not know how deep his understanding of combat went, and if he was even capable of learning anything about her transcendent battle prowess. In fact, if anything, she would think that his knowledge of swordsmanship was shallow.

She did not know that although Sunny's understanding of combat was not the deepest in the world, it was certainly the broadest. He doubted that anyone, including her and the three Sovereigns, had absorbed as many battle styles as he had.

So, Nephis was curious to learn how much he saw, and to what degree he was capable of appreciating her swordsmanship.

Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed and said in a somber tone:

"Your swordsmanship... is ruthless."

She seemed amused by his answer.

"Ruthless?"

He nodded and contemplated his next words carefully.

"At first, I was really surprised. You are renowned across two worlds as one of the most skilled warriors of humanity, Lady Nephis. You are also the daughter of Broken Sword, whose swordsmanship is legendary. And yet... your technique seems grossly reckless and unbalanced."

She smiled silently,

Sunny coughed, and then continued calmly

"It is an exceedingly aggressive style, and your offense is stunningly lethal. However, the defense... the Master of that martial hall earlier would have beaten his students senseless if he saw them neglecting defense to that degree. Despite that, your footwork is too strange. It is meaninglessly conservative, to the point of appearing awkward. It's all a proper mess."

Nephis laughed quietly.

"In other words... I am a fraud?"

He smiled sadly, then shook his head.

"It would seem like that, but of course, it is not true. The truth of the matter is that you are too ruthless."

Sunny's smile faded slowly.

"Your battle art has no mercy at all - not for your enemies, and not for yourself. You disregard defense because you expect to be hurt, mauled, and maimed. Your Aspect allows you to recover from almost any wound, after all, so no matter how terribly your body is mutilated, you can continue to fight. For that reason, your style simply breaks every possible convention of combat technique. You've reinvented the very concept of swordsmanship from the ground up, removing self-preservation from its foundation."

He sighed.

"Of course, simply removing one of the cornerstones of swordsmanship is not enough to create a functional battle art. You also had to replace every basic principle of combat connected to it with a new one, Incorporating being hurt into the very core of your technique. Your flesh might heal, but force is still transferred when you receive a blow. Your balance is still affected. Your sword won't strike true if your sword arm is severed. So, you did not simply discard defense in favor of overwhelming offense. Rather, you replaced defense with controlled harm, learning how to kill the enemy in the most efficient way while sacrificing your body in the most calculated manner."

His expression turned somber.

"That is why your technique seems so reckless, and why your footwork is so strange. Of course, that impression is woefully wrong. In truth, you are not reckless at all... instead, you are so strategic that it is almost chilling. Your knowledge of physics, anatomy, and the underlying laws of combat has to be staggering... otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to create such a diabolical battle art."

Nephis seemed very satisfied by his answer. She looked at him with visible appreciation, and then smiled.

Her striking grey eyes were almost beaming.

"I didn't expect you to possess such keen insight, Master Sunless, Your expertise in swordsmanship is truly outstanding"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then looked away and sighed again.

"Well... It's just a preliminary conclusion, and a shallow one at that. There is a limit to how much 1 can learn from watching you practice. To truly understand enough, I'll need to observe you in actual battle."

Her smile widened a little.

It was a rare sight, to see Nephis smiling like that.

...Which was a shame, because her sincere smile was simply too beautiful.

Sunny felt his heart skipping a beat.

She chuckled quietly, and then said in a pleased tone:

"You shared your insight, but not your opinion. What do you think of my swordsmanship, Master Sunless? Care to give me a compliment?"

He looked away and hesitated for a while.

There were a lot of flowery words he could use to describe her technique. It was quite tantalizing, after all, not to mention lethal and deeply ingenious.

However, in the end, what he said was something else,

"It's inhuman."

The smile froze on Neph's face, and her mirth was replaced by confusion.

"...Inhuman?"

Sunny nodded somberly.

"It is built upon pain, Lady Nephis. Humans naturally avoid suffering... so, forgive me for being presumptuous. But I really wish that you avoided getting hurt, as well."

Nephis stared at him for a few moments, then turned away and shrugged with a faint smile.

When she spoke, her voice sounded a little wistful.

"It's just pain."

He looked at her, his eyes full of darkness.

"Those words again...'

Sunny studied her beautiful face for a while. Her hand was resting on his forearm, and he could feel her presence illuminate the world like a warm sun.

Why did such a radiant person have to live in constant agony? Why did she have to grow numb to pain?

He opened his mouth, then closed it and exhaled slowly.

Then, he smiled and said in a light tone:

"Still. Try not to get hurt too much, Lady Nephis. It might be hard to believe because of my outstanding and refined appearance, but I actually know a thing or two about pain... one time, I wasn't mindful enough and grabbed a hot pan! It hurt like hell... I have been very careful around pans since then..."

Nephis glanced at him, blinked a couple of times, and then laughed.

By then, they have already reached their destination...

It was a theater hosting a popular play.