1892 Purity of Steel

Moonveil was armed with a saber. When Nephis attacked, her own sword — the Kinslayer — fell on it like a bolt of silver lightning. She had activated one of its enchantments, infusing the somber blade with elemental damage, and, at the same time, called upon the Nameless Sun and the Testament of Malice.

The former gifted the mirror sword with the ability to damage souls, while the latter augmented its edge with a corrosive quality — not too potent, but cumulative.

Nephis had activated the enchantments of her armor, as well — those were mostly defensive in nature, supporting her body in its lunge.

The more enchantments she used, the more of her essence would be drained. But without the demanding expenditure of her Divine Aspect, essence was the only thing that Nephis had at her disposal — there was no point in trying to conserve it.

All her Memories were augmented by the Crown of Dawn, which she had worn since the Forgotten Shore. And yet…

The suppressive force of Moonveil and her Reflections was so powerful that the Memories still felt weak and impotent. It was as if her armor was made of paper, and her sword was made from rusty steel.

The Kinslayer still held, but Nephis had a feeling that she would have to request another suit of armor from the enchanters of Clan Valor after the battle was over.

Sadly, they could not craft her a new body.

Despite Moonveil's soft appearance, she was a skilled fighter — Nephis would not have expected anything less from a princess of Song. Additionally, her delicate body seemed to possess fierce, bestial strength. She deflected the Kinslayer easily, shifting her weight and placing her saber at an angle that would both channel and dissipate the force of the impact.

Moonveil's expression was calm.

However, it changed the instant the two blades met.

Nephis had barely started to construct the Phrase, but it was already starting to Shape the world. The blade of the saber was chipped deeply and almost shattered, while Moonveil's bones almost snapped. The Queen's daughter reeled back with a stifled hiss, and looked at her opponent with a stunned expression.

Nephis had no time to enjoy her shock.

The two Reflections were already upon her.

There was a swarm of sparks swirling around her arm — the Memory she was trying to summon only took a few short seconds to manifest. However, in a battle like this one, a few seconds could become an eternity.

The world exploded into a whirlwind of violence.

Nephis was strong and swift,but fighting against three enemies was a losing affair. Neither Moonveil nor the Reflections were weak, and they had the priceless advantage of being able to attack her simultaneously from all directions, working together to mangle her body and end her life.

All Nephis had was her swordsmanship… but that was what she knew best.

Everything seemed to disappear into the melodious song of steel. Her mind was cleansed of all unnecessary thoughts, entering a state of absolute, transcendent concentration.

A million observations, conclusions, and calculations were being conceived in it at the same time.

Nephis knew her every muscle, every tendon, every bone, every nerve. Her essence flowed and raged, enhancing her body just at the right time, and in just the right amount.

The length of her sword, the tensile strength of its silvery blade. The multitude of forces affecting what each impact did, and how it was resolved. The movements of her enemies, and those of her own — all of it was like a complicated dance that followed a beautiful logic, and one who understood that logic could set the pace and cadence of the dance.

Above it all was another, much more labyrinthine layer. The layer of skill and intent. Nephis understood them well, too — granted, her insight was inferior to what Cassie was capable of, and Sunny seemed to be as well. But it was enough to read what the enemy would do, most of the time.

So, she held on.

Her sword was like a flowing stream of silver metal, moving so fast that it almost seemed to turn into a sphere around her. Her every step, every move were flawlessly calculated and optimal, allowing her to defend against the three enemies at the same time. She blocked, deflected, and evaded a suffocating onslaught of blows, preventing Moonveil from making her bleed.

For now.

It was… strange, to fight without using her Aspect.

Nephis had almost forgotten what it was like, to only rely on her trained body and her skill as a swordsman. True, she called upon her powers as scarcely as she could, always attempting to win without resorting to her Aspect — but the circumstances rarely allowed it, and even if she managed to hold out, the knowledge that her flames were hers to command was always there.

She had expected that having to fight without them, and even without the possibility of summoning them, would be limiting and suffocating.

But, in fact, it was liberating.

It was almost euphoric, because for the first time in a long,long time… she was free of pain.

Such a simple thing, but it changed the feeling of this battle completely.

Nephis should have been tense, somber, and on the verge of despair.

She should have been clawing at the chance to turn the situation around.

She should have been missing her powers bitterly.

But instead, she was relieved.

The relief washed over her like a tide, and the simple delight of giving herself completely to the sword put a faint smile on her face.

Her smile seemed to surprise Moonveil.

The princess of Song hesitated for a moment, then asked between two graceful slashes of her saber:

"Why are you smiling, Changing Star?"

Nephis blocked an attack from one of the Reflections, caught another blow on her vambrace and staggered back, feeling a stream of blood flowing into her palm.

Her smile did not waver.

"It's just… refreshing. To be powerless, for once."

With that, she released the hilt of her sword with one hand and outstretched her bloodied palm outward.

At that moment, the swirling sparks finally manifested into a Memory.

That Memory was a torch of black wood, a mass of ghostly blue flame burning in a silver cage on its top.

The blue flames reflected in the placid depth of her calm, grey eyes.