1897 Above and Below

The top floors of the ancient castle had been destroyed, torn apart by the devastating explosion. The floors below were an inferno of raging flames and billowing smoke. Scorching heat permeated the suffocating darkness, and burning walls were crumbling as they fell down, into the surging waters of the distant lake.

In that hell, someone coughed hoarsely, and a pile of debris suddenly moved. A delicate woman threw aside a smoldering support beam that weighed several tons and slowly rose to her feet, her beautiful face smeared with ash.

At almost the same time, another figure rose from the floor, looking around with cold intensity. It was a young woman with silver hair, wearing a severely damaged suit of lustrous armor. In one hand, she was holding a silver sword. In the other, a broken black torch was dissolving into a whirlwind of white sparks.

Neph's ivory skin was just as pristine as it had been before. Moonveil's body, however, was covered in gruesome burns. She let out a pained hiss and staggered slightly, looking at Nephis with a tortured grimace.

Eventually, her lips parted.

"...You are a Shaper."

Moonveil's voice was full of barely contained shock. It was commendable that she knew about Shaping and managed to recognize it — after all, there were no true practitioners of that extinct sorcery left in modern day... at least none that Nephis knew of, apart from herself.

She took a step in Moonveil's direction, preparing to lunge into an all—out attack. "Barely."

Time was short.

Nephis had indeed invoked the True Name of Fire and woven it into a simple Phrase to cause the powerful explosion. Her own Aspect was suppressed, so she had used the black torch as the source flame.

The result had exceeded her expectations, but it was not nearly enough to win the battle.

Nephis had escaped the explosion mostly unscathed, since she was all but immune to all kinds of fire except for her own. The Reflections would be relatively fine, as well — they were far too powerful to be destroyed by a mere conflagration. So, she had only a few precious moments to deal with Moonveil. Moonveil, meanwhile, had suffered the most damage.

Not only because she was a mere Transcendent Beast, but also because Nephis was still burning her essence to channel the True Name of Destruction. Invoking it demanded a lot from the Shaper, but it was worth it for a killer like her. Calling upon Destruction did not summon a bolt of lightning from the heavens to smite her enemies, and it did not crush them like a shockwave, either.

Instead, the result of invoking that True N amc was insidious and subtle. Nephis had not been falsely modest when she answered Moonveil's question — her mastery of Shaping was indeed rudimentary and devoid of nuance. She had fathomed a fair deal of Names thanks to Ananke's lessons and her Aspect Legacy, but the ways she could channel them were crude, and her Phrases were primitive.

Still, even on her lips, the True Name of Destruction was a fearsome instrument. If she simply channeled it without much guidance, her attacks would become more destructive than they were supposed to be. If she connected it to an enemy's name — and more so their True Name —then the enemy would become cursed, as if a mystical hex had been placed on them.

Every cut they received would be deeper, and every blow they endured would bruise more. That was why Moonveil had suffered the most from the explosion. It was as if the world itself was being reshaped to destroy her.

Such was the power of Shaping — the power to bend the world to one's will. Perhaps it was because Nephis had been stripped of her Aspect, becoming powerless for the first time in many years, that she saw Shaping from a new perspective in that moment.

‘Will…’

As Nephis attacked, a sudden thought surfaced in her mind. Wasn't that the essence of Supremacy, to force one's will upon the world? She was commanding the flames, and she had placed the spell of destruction on Moonveil. Both of those things were bending the world to fit her desires. Of course, she was not achieving that with her own will — instead, she was using the Sorcery of Names as its conduit.

But was there maybe a hint to the path she had to tread in order to attain Supremacy in the miraculous power of Shaping?

Before Neph's sword could even reach Moonveil, there was a booming crash, and one of the Reflections tore through a burning wall, its saber slicing the adamantine wood like paper.

Nephis had lost her torch, but they were surrounded by fire now. She was still channeling its True Name, so she exerted her will and made the scorching flames swell and descend upon the creature, barring its path.

Trying to defeat Moonveil and two Supreme Beasts was not a safe bet. So, Nephis had chosen the most promising strategy — to disregard the Reflections and aim to eliminate the weakest link, the princess of Song, at all costs.

Still, be wasted a moment of concentration to stall the first Reflection.

Moonveil used that split second to brandish her blade.

She was quite a skilled swordsman herself.

Sharp steel bit deeply into Neph's side through the breach in her mangled armor, and scarlet blood flowed like a stream...

A normal human would have been stunned by pain after receiving such a gruesome wound. Even a trained, seasoned warrior would have reacted, trying to save themselves or reeling back. At the very least, they would have flinched.

But Nephis did not react at all, as if pain did not matter to her. As if being cut by a sharp blade was nothing.

More than that, she indifferently turned her body just a moment before the saber slashed her flesh — not to avoid it, but to make sure that it struck her ribs instead of plunging into her soft abdomen.

Because of that, her sword left a bloody mark on Moonveil's body, forcing the princess of Song to jump back.

Not paying any attention to the bloody wound on her side, Nephis continued her assault. Her face was impassive, and her eyes were calm like two deep lakes. Inside, however, she was a little regretful.

Because she would not be able to enjoy liberation from pain anymore. Even if being cut by a sharp blade was a mild and meager torment, this wound was only one of many she would have to receive in order to win.

As flames spread and Nephis clashed with Moonveil, eerily indifferent to the excruciating agony and the harm being done to her body, the princess of Song seemed more and more disturbed.

Eventually, she asked, a curious smile twisting her pale lips:

"Changing Star... what kind of monster are you?"

Nephis brought her sword down and said in her usual, even tone:

"Monster?"

Her sword whistled as it flashed in the air, missing Moonveil's neck by a mere millimeter.

She turned her slash into a perilous thrust in one flawless, flowing motion.

"I don't remember. I haven't been a Monster in a long, long time..."

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Far below, on the shore of the dark lake, Saint Rivalen of Aegis Rose let out a pained cry and rolled down the stone stairs, leaving a bloody trail in his wake. His Transcendent form had long crumbled, and he was a mere human once again.

One of his eyes was missing, and his golden armor was breached in half a dozen places. Falling into the water, he let out a stifled groan and struggled to stand up.

His enemies did not seem to be in a hurry to finish him off, and yet... his death was inevitable.

"Curses..."

Sir Rivalen swayed and fell to his knees, his blood mixing with the restless water. He looked up with a stalwart expression.

A giant beast that looked like a graceful panther was slowly descending the stone steps. Worse still...

Two human figures were walking in front of it, each bearing terrible wounds. They were the corpses of two paladins of Valor that the daughter of Ki Song had already killed, brought back to a perverse semblance of life by the villainous queen. His former peers, comrades, and companions.

Sir Rivalen gritted his teeth, knowing that there was no escape.

He wasn't really afraid of death, as long as it was for a noble cause. However... becoming one of these things, being used to harm his fellow knights...

It seemed too vile.

He looked down, at his bloodied reflection in the water, and whispered quietly: "...I'll have to make sure that my body is entirely destroyed, then."

His voice was weak, but full of resolve.

The enemies were drawing near...

Before Saint Rivalen could do anything, though, he felt the water grow strangely warm around him... searing, even.

Then, it suddenly seethed and surged.

A moment later, a dreadful monster rose from the lake right behind him.

It was a great fiend forged of black metal, with four long arms and infernal flames burning in his malevolent eyes. Rivers of water streamed from his polished, spiked carapace, hissing as they evaporated and turned into clouds of steam.

Towering above the kneeling Rivalen, the fiend looked down at Silent Stalker and the two Transcendent corpses.

Then, he opened his terrible maw and spat a mouthful of glass shards into the lake.

Saint Rivalen was momentarily befuddled.

'What?‘

Why did it seem as though the harrowing creature had a disgruntled expression on its ferocious face?

...And why did it seem as if it had been chewing on glass?