1900 Vanquishing Light

Amidst the flames consuming what remained of the pinnacle of the garden temple, Nephis was fighting against Moonveil and her two Reflections. Countless wounds were littering her body, and she felt a strange, nearly forgotten feeling of growing weak from losing too much blood.

Transcendent bodies were tough, but they weren't indestructible. She had accounted for her miraculous physique when calculating how much punishment her body could take without sacrificing too much of its functionality... and that limit was approaching swiftly.

Nevertheless, her expression was calm, and her movements were just as fluid and unrestrained as they had been before. Her hands never wavered on the hilt of her sword.

The battle was ruthless and unrelenting. Triumph and defeat were separated only by a thin, brittle line.

Monnveil was strong... but Nephis was stronger. Moonveil wielded her saber as if it was an extension of her body, her skill both beautiful and polished to a state of near perfection... but Nephis was a much better swordsman, and had a much deeper command over the cadence of battle.

Even without her Aspect, she could have defeated the proud princess of Song. But precisely for that reason, there were two Supreme Reflections aiding Moonveil... and dealing with them was much harder.

Someone had evaluated the strength of: the Sword Domain champions very well. Nephis was using Shaping to control the surrounding flames and keep the Reflections at bay. Sometimes, she managed to slow them down, and sometimes, she failed. When facing two or more enemies at the same time, she followed her perilous strategy — to disregard everything in pursuit of killing Moonveil, even if it meant sacrificing her blood and bone.

As a result, the beautiful princess was forced to defend herself without having a chance to launch a counterattack Her Reflections, however, made up for that with a vengeance.

'Ah. It hurts...'

Both Nephis and Moonveil were bloodied... however, Nephis was bleeding more. Her wounds were more dire, and more plentiful. It was already starting to become a detriment to her strength and mobility — not because she was paralyzed by pain, but simply because her muscles were cut, her tendons were damaged, and her bones were cracked.

She had managed to avoid receiving truly debilitating damage, but the harm done by countless small wounds was slowly mounting.

Moonveil could see that, as well.

Therefore... she grew a little more confident.

Nephis would have smiled if it didn't seem like a lot of effort.

'Got her.‘

She remembered being a fairly straightforward person, a long time ago. But somehow, over the years — she couldn't quite remember how — Nephis had come to value deceit and misdirection, even if it was not something she was naturally good at.

She must have learned how to use lies to her advantage by quietly observing people around her. If so, she had been blessed with good teachers.

Shifting her weight from one leg to another, as if preparing to launch a new strike, Nephis grimaced and swayed. It looked like her right leg, which had been cut gruesomely by one of the Reflections before, finally betrayed her.

The Reflection itself was a dozen meters away, pushed back by a torrent of flame. The other was just behind Nephis, since she had just evaded its attack and sidestepped the creature.

It would take it a little time to spin around and renew its assault.

So, the only one who could use her momentary loss of balance was Moonveil herself.

Strangely enough, Nephis was a good actress. Her act was subtle, but convincing. The grimace she had made was just small enough to look involuntary. The nature of her misstep was reasonable and believable, since her right leg was indeed damaged quite severely. Her eyes even widened slightly, selling the moment of realization more.

If Moonveil hesitated, she did not show it.

Instead, she decisively lunged into a swift attack, her white hair fluttering in the wind.

Neph's gaze instantly turned cold and heavy.

'...Too honest.‘

Who would have thought that the fearsome princess of Song would be a little naive?

Abandoning all pretense of weakness, she righted her stance and sent her longsword into a simple thrust.

Her attack was simple and unadorned... however, that did not make it any less deadly.

Because, even when two Transcendent champions fought, the fundamentals of combat still played a significant role in the outcome of the battle.

Speed, mass, force. Time, movement, and space.

In this instance, the fundamental principle that doomed Moonveil was rather obvious, something the importance of which most humans of the walking world learned as children.

It was the simple fact that Neph‘s sword was longer than her elegant saber.

And therefore...

Before Moonveil could behead Nephis with a decisive slash, the Kinslayer pierced her chest, penetrated her heart, snapped her spine, and exited from her back. Blood spilled on the floor. The saber clattered as it fell.

The delicate woman stared at Nephis in disbelief, her beautiful eyes widening in horror.

'I won.‘

Nephs had achieved her goal... however, she did not feel any joy or elation. All she felt was regret.

Because humanity had lost a powerful Saint — one of many that would die in this appalling, senseless war.

It was such a waste.

But then again, the battle wasn't over yet. She had no time to...

Pushing her mangled body as hard as she could, Nephis reeled back to avoid the Reflection's saber.

The creature moved past her, the sharp blade whistling past her neck. In the next moment, a small hand struck her in the chest, sending Nephis flying back — she hit the floor a couple dozen meters away and rolled awkwardly, her vision blurring momentarily from the terrible surge of pain.

By the time she staggered back to her feet, both Reflections were near Moonveil. One was holding her in its arms, while the other was standing between them and Nephis.

She pushed some air into her burning lungs.

'Now... what happens next depends on the nature of Moonveil's Aspect.‘

Either the geas placed on her would disappear with Moonveil‘s death, unsealing her Aspect... or it would not.

If it was the former, she would be able to deal with the Reflections quite easily. If it was the latter... things would turn really ugly.

However, in the next second, something unexpected happened... something Nephis had not anticipated, even though she should have.

Moonveil was dying, but her eyes regained their sharpness for a split second, piercing Nephis with a heavy gaze.

And then...

Nephis felt the seal binding her Aspect suddenly fall apart. Moonveil had released it.

At the same time, the Reflection holding the princess of Song in its hands shimmered slightly. And changed, assuming a new form.

Silver hair, fair skin, and calm grey eyes.

A face that could have been beautiful if it was expressive and lively instead of being cold and motionless like a lifeless mask.

A lithe and slender body.

It was her own face, and her own body.

The Reflection had mirrored Nephis.

She belatedly understood her mistake.

A moment later, a soft radiance enveloped the hands of the Reflection, pouring into Moonveil's body.

And Moonveil‘s terrible wounds miraculously healed.

...Nephis stared at her from a distance, feeling dismayed.

'What a cheat.‘

The princess of Song was as good as new.

...Of course, now that Nephis had been given back her Aspect, her wounds were also healing, and a raging flame was rising in her soul.

For a moment, nobody moved. Moonveil was panting heavily, looking at Nephis with a hint of wariness.

Nephis, meanwhile...

Smiled a little.

'On the other hand... that works, as well.‘

Moonveil and her two Reflections wore somber expressions as they readied themselves to continue the battle — which would grow infinitely more devastating and terrible now, without a doubt.

But Nephis was about to surprise them, as well.

She unleashed the suppressed power of her Aspect, assuming the incinerating form of the radiant spirit. At the same time, she called upon the sea of flames surrounding them, wrapping it around herself like a mantle.

However, she did not direct all that fiery power at her enemies.

...Instead, she aimed it at the wooden floor beneath her feet.

Surrounded by blinding light and a raging tide of immolating fire, Nephis fled from the battle and rushed down, piercing one level of the ancient Citadel after another like a falling star. Countless layers of mystical wood parted in front of her, crumbling into ash, as she burned a scorching path into the depths of the castle.

Lower and lower...

And lower still.

Until she plunged into a sea of impenetrable darkness, vanquishing it with her light.