2039 Princess in the Ivory Tower

The tranquil silence of the Ivory Tower was disturbed by the clangor of steel.

The chilling litany of clashing blades echoed from the pristine white walls, and powerful gusts of wind battered them like siege rams. However, there was no battle raging under the roof of the great pagoda.

Instead, three figures moved across its floor in a graceful dance, wielding blades made of shadow against each other.

They were Nephis and Sunny — two incarnations of him, to be precise.

Changing Star had been sent away from the main force of the Sword Army, but the Fire Keepers were not. That, too, was part of her punishment… and although Sunny could see that she was concerned about her people, he was selfishly glad that they practically had the entire Ivory Island to themselves.

No one was here to disturb them, so they could spend time together however they wished.

And they had.

It felt strange, to enjoy warm days of contentment and bliss in the middle of a calamitous war, but he was not complaining… far from it. If anything, the dire threat of the looming war made every moment they spent together feel much more vivid and precious.

Especially because it also felt as if these were the last tranquil days they would get to enjoy before the inevitable storm.

There were all kinds of leisurely activities they had been up to since Nephis returned to the main camp... but today, they were subjecting themselves to a different kind of physical strain.

The battle was subdued, but their Transcendent Battle Arts had enough room to express themselves fully.

Sunny was enjoying the feeling of completion, freedom, and endless possibility his Art gave him. It was graceful, infinitely adaptable, fearsome, and — most of all — absolutely deadly. He had already tested its daunting potential during the Battle of Godheart, but some of his powers had been restricted then.

Of course, that was not really a detriment to his Art — on the contrary,it was an undeniable confirmation of its dire lethality and insidious design. His formless Art was flexible enough to serve him well even when placed under the harshest of restrictions, after all — just as he had intended it to be. That was one of its most dangerous aspects.

Now, however, there were no restrictions placed upon Sunny, which gave him a chance to experience the full repertoire of his Art.

Of course, Nephis herself was an astounding swordsman. No matter how deadly his Art was, Sunny was having trouble dealing with a nearly immortal opponent.

He was curious to know how the battle would have ended if both of them were serious about it, and were not restrained in the magnitude of power they released. What would happen if seven of his incarnations were here instead of only two? If Nephis fully unleashed her flames? If they didn't care about hurting each other or leaving their surroundings intact?

He was honestly not sure. The only thing he knew was that the main camp of the Sword Army would probably be erased from existence.

Sunny was enjoying himself, and he had a feeling that Nephis was enjoying herself too — even more than him, most likely. But of course, this spar was not simply for their enjoyment. It had a practical reason, as well.

In these few weeks before Nephis was once again recalled to the frontline… Sunny had to finish forging her sword.

He had been preparing for this moment for many months now, and a large part of his preparations had to do with studying how she fought. From spending time in the rented martial halls in Bastion to observing Nephis in actual battle, Sunny had learned a lot.

Today's duel was the final lesson, and he was absorbing it with all his being.

Finally, utterly exhausted, they stopped. Neither had won… not that achieving victory was a point.

Nephis smiled in contentment, wiped the sweat off her brow, and inhaled deeply. Her chest was heaving, proving how strenuous the spar had been.

And making Sunny's eyes wander.

"Your swordsmanship have changed."

There was curiosity in her voice, as well as a hint of approval.

A part of Sunny was surprised that she noticed.

…Most of him, however, was too preoccupied by being stirred by the sight of beads of sweat glistening on her ivory skin, her slightly flushed face, and the tantalizing contours of her body contoured by the light training clothes.

'Ah… I'm in trouble.'

There was too much for him to do today, and he could not allow himself to get distracted.

It was just that his self-control was faltering in the face of an overwhelming adversity.

Sunny nodded absentmindedly.

"Ah... yes. I rarely receive an opportunity to fully unleash my talents. The recent events were one such opportunity, and it gave me the last push I needed to improve."

'Cold shower… right, that is what I need…'

Nephis studied him for a few moments, then asked in an amused tone:

"What are you thinking about?"

Sunny almost choked.

"Just that… uh... that we worked up a sweat. I was thinking that a cool shower won't hurt."

She looked at him, then smiled and stretched leisurely.

Sunny had already been struggling to contain himself, and that last bit of cruelly stimulating visual feast almost sent him over the edge. Suddenly, he was lucky that Blood Weave was there, preventing his blood from rushing to all the wrong places.

His eyes still turned fierce and hungry, though.

Nephis chuckled and offered in an innocent tone:

"Well… we can take a refreshing swim in the lake, if you want."

Of course, Sunny could not help but remember the last time they played in the water together, during the wonderful date at the beach. That swimsuit...

His pupils widened a little.

No, no… taking a swim in the lake was not going to help the situation one bit. If anything, it would make things ten times worse.

He remained silent for a while, then used all of his Transcendent willpower to slowly shake his head.

"No… I mean, yes! A hundred times, yes. But let's do it in the evening."

Nephis lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

She almost looked disappointed.

"As you wish. We do indeed have a lot to do today."

Regretting all his life choices, Sunny gave her a disheartened nod.

"Right. For now… let's just grab a quick bite and get to business."

The two of them separated briefly to refresh themselves, then met again at the beautiful gazebo behind the great pagoda. This was where the stone arch that had once led to the Ebony Tower was located — now that a vast distance separated the two flying islands, the connection between them was severed, and the portal could not be activated anymore.

Instead, a tastefully carved stone table was placed in the gazebo, which Sunny now set a light breakfast on.

The two of them enjoyed a delicious meal and a bit of invigorating wine while listening to the peaceful sound of rustling leaves that came from the nearby grove.

Sunny could not take his eyes off Nephis. Sitting there in the shade, wearing a simple white tunic, smiling slightly as she sipped cool wine… she simply looked too lovely.

She seemed to have mostly recovered from unleashing her Aspect during the battle, too — faster than usual.

It was good to see.

Noticing his gaze, Nephis smiled.

"So… are you going to explain what it was that you asked me to interpret, or not?"