2060 : The Blessing

Nephis studied the beautiful longsword, then carefully raised her hand, trying to make as little noise as possible.

A moment later, she caught herself and realized how comical her action was. She was afraid to disturb the dreams of the man who was sleeping soundly with his head resting on her bed, his silky black hair scattered across the bedsheet. As if he was not the great and terrible Lord of Shadows, the sinister Saint who had crushed a dozen Transcendent champions of Song while laughing.

…But he was also Master Sunless, the sweet and gentle enchanter who had become her spellsmith, companion, and lover.

It was just that he had looked so drained there, in her dream. And that he looked so tired here in the real world, as well.

His porcelain skin was even paler than usual, and his lovely features were sunken and sharp, the labored breaths escaping quietly from between his lips.

She froze for a moment, surprised by the unexpected and unfamiliar feeling swelling in her chest.

Was it… tenderness?

Nephis was not an unfeeling monster, of course. She had experienced affection. Concern and worry about those who were dear to her, too — however, this subtle, but intense feeling was new.

It was both bitter and sweet… but mostly sweet.

And daunting.

She looked at him for a few moments too long, then slowly shifted her gaze to the beautiful longsword.

The sword… was both familiar and strange. It looked very similar to her faithful and reliable companion, the Dream Blade — the weapon she had wielded on the Forgotten Shore, during the long and lonely journey to the Underworld, and into the horrors of the Second Nightmare. But it was also so much more.

It was much more striking, to start. The narrow and flawlessly straight blade seemed to shine in the splendid rays of sunlight, so bright that it was almost blinding. The ivory hilt felt cool and welcoming in her hand, as if it was meant to be there. The weight was perfect. The balance was beyond reproach.

The design of the sword was simple and elegant, with no needless embellishments or adornments. However, there was graceful beauty to the few stylistic elements it did possess… it was pure and true to its purpose, alien to all compromise and pretense, just as a killing implement was supposed to be.

There was also a chillingly lethal aura to it that was both cold and scorching, as if the sword possessed a presence of its own. The strangest part, however, was that the sword felt… warm and responsive to her touch, as if it was almost alive.

It was breathtaking.

Nephis found herself reluctant to look away from the resplendent blade. She also felt a rush of childish excitement, wanting to immediately jump off the bed and play with it… perform a few sets of training katas, that was, to get familiar with its feel and weight.

But she forced herself to stay still, and instead summoned the runes.

Her gaze swiftly focused on the new and unfamiliar string of them.

Holding her breath, she studied the runes:

Memory: Blessing.

Memory Rank: [???]

Memory Tier: [???]

Her gaze slid lower, to the runes comprising the description of the beautiful sword.

They read:

Memory Description: [Ascending the path, Changing Star said thus to the -unknown-:

"You have to light yourself on fire to reap the blessings of the fire. That was what my grandmother used to say, so that was what I did. I doused myself in oil, and set myself aflame. And I burned."

…The -unknown- listened.]

Nephis frowned.

These words… seemed to describe her self-immolation in the First Nightmare. However, she did not remember ever speaking them to anyone. She had shared the details of her trial with very few people — Cassie was probably the only one who knew most of it. But Nephis did not explain what had truly pushed her to take that terrible step even to her, and she definitely did not mention the parable of her grandmother.

Who was that -unknown- that the Spell seemed to think Nephis had bared her soul to?

She could not recall speaking to any Void Beings, and she had definitely never spoken to the Forgotten God. Neither would she have had the reason to pour her heart out to a stranger.

It was strange, very strange.

And it made her feel strange, as well. As if there was an empty void in her heart, echoing with a hollow, dull pain.

Gripping the hilt of the Blessing tighter, Nephis looked back to the runes.

Usually, there would not have been anything after the description of a Memory, but this time, there was an additional string.

Memory Enchantments: [Shadowbound Relic].

As she concentrated on it, several new runes shimmered into existence.

[Bind the relic?]

Nephis hesitated for a few moments.

Her heartbeat accelerated suddenly, and a soft smile found its way onto her face.

She glanced at Sunny, who was still sleeping peacefully.

He had promised to forge her a blade to slay the gods…

And it seemed like he had fulfilled that promise.

The tender feeling of thankfulness she experienced was more powerful than she had expected, too.

Troubled, Nephis looked away and nodded.

"Yes."

The beautiful longsword seemed to ring, as if answering her call…

And flashed with blinding radiance, turning into a ray of pure light. That light was then absorbed into her hand, illuminating her body from within… fusing with her body and soul.

Becoming a part of her.

The Spell whispered into her ear, its voice strangely quiet:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

[...You have received an Attribute.]

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"Yes."

Sunny stirred, not quite asleep, but not quite awake yet, either.

He felt tired… exhausted, really. He was also truly and utterly out cold, which meant that all his incarnations had fallen into a deep slumber. The Lord of Shadows was sleeping on his throne — of course, he was. After all, he had been riding Nightmare on a journey across dreams not too long ago. Rain's teacher was asleep, as well, hidden safely in her shadow.

That guy had to wake up quickly, though, lest something unexpected or undesirable happened.

As for the original body…

'When did I pass out, anyway?'

Before Sunny could will himself awake, a blinding flash suddenly shone through his eyelids. Opening his eyes with a start, he just managed to catch a glimpse of a ray of pure white light entering Neph's body.

She was illuminated from within for a moment, as if there was a literal star burning in her chest. Then, the radiance dimmed, and he could see her lovely features clearly once again.

Neph had a distant expression on her face, tilting her head a little. It was as if she was listening to something happening inside her soul.

The sword he had forged was nowhere to be seen…

It took Sunny a few moments to realize the implication.

His eyes widened.

Jerking upright, she stared at her and asked hurriedly:

"Did it work?"

Sunny had collapsed from exhaustion immediately after finishing sewing the shadow of the sword and Neph's shadow together, so he did not even have the chance to study the result.

Had his binding held?

Did the Spell do what it was supposed to and oversee the process?

And not quite as importantly, and just as curiously…

How had it named the new Memory? What description had it given it?

Usually, Sunny named and described the Memories he crafted personally. But reforging the Dream Blade was different — after all, he had never taken it from Neph's soul. It had always remained a Memory belonging to a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, and therefore, one under the Spell's purview. That was the whole point.

Nephis lingered for a moment, then shifted and looked at him with a faint smile.

With that, she outstretched her hand. It shone with a soft radiance, and a ray of radiant light shot from it, instantly taking the form of a beautiful longsword.

The sunlight reflected on its silvery blade, making the room feel brighter.

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

That was not all, though…

A moment later, the longsword ignited with incandescent light, making its presence feel even more daunting… overwhelming, even. Nephis must have used her Aspect to augment it.

Infused with soul flame, the silver blade seemed like a narrow line of pristine whiteness, a rift in the fabric of reality that cut the world in half. It was so pure and bright that he struggled to discern if the weapon Nephis was holding was still made from steel, or had simply turned into a sharp, narrow plain of radiant flame.

Then, the shape of the sword suddenly rippled, and it turned into a stream of liquid fire… or incandescent metal, perhaps. That stream flowed down Neph's right arm, wrapping around it and turning into a silver bracelet.

She studied it with a curious expression, then looked back at Sunny and beamed with a brilliant smile.

"Yes. It worked."

The stoic, unflappable Changing Star…

Was just like an excited girl who had received a shiny new toy.

Looking at her, Sunny couldn't help but smile, as well.

'...I should forge her soulbound relics more often.'