2276 Warm Awakening  
  
Sunny woke up from the warm touch of sunshine on his bare chest. Sunlight was pouring through the curtains, the white fabric murmuring quietly as the gentle wind made it stream and flutter.  
  
He remained motionless for a while, basking in the warmth and the softness of the bed. It was truly one of life's greatest joys, to wake up with a smile on his face. A few moments later, he turned his head and looked at Nephis, who was sleeping peacefully by his side. Her silver hair was scattered across the pillow, and her beautiful face was blissfully calm and endearingly vulnerable as she slept.  
  
He enjoyed the view for a few minutes, not in a hurry to wake her up. Opening the Dream Gate for the Night Garden had taken a lot out of her yesterday. So, she deserved some rest. He would have loved to share the burden of yesterday's undertaking, but sadly, that was something only Nephis could have done. Both of them could accomplish unique feats while opening Dream Gates. Sunny, for example, was capable of opening seven of them instead of one. Meanwhile, Nephis could open a Dream Gate that allowed passage in both directions. Nightmare Gates led from the Dream Realm into the waking world, while Dream Gates led from the waking world into the Dream Realm. However, Nephis was a Dreamspawn — a being existing on the edge between nightmare and reality, and therefore belonging to both worlds — and perhaps because of that, her Dream Gate was special. That was why only she could have sent the Night Garden to Earth.  
  
As Sunny wondered what would happen to her power when the two worlds completely fused, Nephis stirred and opened her striking grey eyes. Sunlight reflected in them, making her pupils spark. She turned her head sleepily and looked up at Sunny, then smiled. "...Were you staring at me again?"  
  
He nodded shamelessly. "Absolutely. Why wouldn't I stare at the most beautiful woman in the world?"  
  
Nephis lingered for a moment, then scoffed and pushed his face away. Sunny laughed, surrendering to her gentle push…  
  
He did not fail to notice the slight blush appearing on her cheeks, though.  
  
Rising from the bed, Nephis summoned a light tunic from a storm of radiant sparks and raised her hands above her head, stretching with a satisfied sigh. Sunny climbed out of bed, as well, manifesting simple clothes from the shadows. The uppermost chamber of the Ivory Tower was spacious and permeated with golden light, but where there was light, there were also shadows — so, he never had trouble summoning them to do his bidding. That said…  
  
Sunny appreciated Neph's graceful figure for a few moments, then said in a pleasant tone: "I just had a brilliant idea. How about… we climb back into bed?"  
  
He did not really need to say anything, really, because she could sense his desire.  
  
Nephis looked at him scornfully over the shoulder.  
  
"Unlike you, I only have one body."  
  
Sunny tilted his head. What was that supposed to mean?  
  
Was she… was she hinting that he had worn her down last night?  
  
But she was capable of recovering from any strain in moments. Her single body was literally inexhaustible…  
  
Had he exhausted the inexhaustible?  
  
Sunny was suddenly torn between pride and disappointment. At that moment, Nephis frowned slightly and threw a pillow at him. "I meant that I can only be in one place at a time! I'm already late to a meeting with Effie… erase whatever lewd thoughts you're thinking from that dirty head of yours, scoundrel!"  
  
Sunny allowed the pillow to hit him in the face and smiled innocently. "Welp. I guess I have a grudge against Effie now…"  
  
Nephis stared at him sternly for a few moments. He could see that she was suppressing a smile, though. Eventually, she shook her head. "I need to get ready…"  
  
Soon enough, Nephis left her living quarters and descended the steps of the Ivory Tower. Sunny, of course, was hiding in her shadow by then — that was where this incarnation of his spent most of its time while his other avatars were busy with their own tasks. That way, he could both stay close to Nephis and be aware of all important developments happening on her side without having to use Cassie as a messenger. If there was one unfortunate side to this situation, though, it was that Sunny could not be with her in his human form all the time. After all, he was officially dead. …It was alright to appear in front of the people who knew the truth, at least. Effie was waiting in a parlor on one of the lower levels of the Ivory Tower, enjoying the plentiful tray of snacks. Hearing Nephis approach, she smiled and waved a hand.  
  
"Damn, Princess. These are to die for… who's your chef? Please tell me. I am definitely not going to steal them!"  
  
Then, she frowned for a moment and then looked at Nephis with a mischievous smile. "Oh, I guess I can't call you Princess anymore. Our Princess is more of an Empress now. Ah... they grow up so fast…"  
  
Nephis smiled faintly and sat down opposite Effie, the wide desk separating them. "Sunny made the snacks."  
  
Effie froze. The vivacious huntress had been affected perhaps the most by the revelation that the menacing Lord of Shadows was, in fact, none other than charming Master Sunless. Sunny still could not help but laugh wickedly every time he remembered the array of mortified expressions that had flashed across her face at that moment. From stunned silence, to the slow realization that it was the sinister Saint who had been pampering her son with ice cream, to a sudden horror at the memory of slandering him in front of Nephis to win points for the delicate, gallant enchanter…  
  
And so much more. No, really, it was a priceless memory for Sunny now. So priceless, in fact, that he generously forgave half of the times Effie had forced him to listen to the talk about the birds and the bees on Alethea's island. In any case, she had been acting uncharacteristically subdued and borderline meek around him ever since. Now, too, Effie grew tense at the mention of his name. She cleared her throat. "Right. About him. Listen, Princess, I know that you are a big girl now, but…"  
  
Effie froze for a moment, then asked cautiously:  
  
"He's not behind me, is he?"  
  
Nephis looked at her in confusion.  
  
"No…"  
  
Effie instantly turned into her usual lively self:  
  
"That guy! The Lord of Shadows! I know that he is stupidly hot, rich, charming, powerful, and stupidly hot, as well as an amazing cook who is also great with his hands… wait, did I say hot twice? Whatever! What I mean to say is that there's plenty of fish in the sea. You should find yourself a kind and honest man instead of settling for the first random Supreme you met on the street!"  
  
But Nephis was not done talking. "...Technically, he's under the desk."  
  
Effie froze. Sunny chose that exact moment to assume his human form and sit down on a chair next to Nephis. He smiled pleasantly at Effie, remained silent for a moment, and then said in a pleasant tone:  
  
"Yеs, you did say hot twice."  
  
She let out a groan.