2445 Longer Days  
  
  
About a month later, just before the full moon, Sunny returned to Bastion.  
  
Or rather, another of his incarnations did. The first had actually returned to Bastion weeks ago, but this one took a detour to the frozen wastelands west of Ravenheart first.  
  
There were scouting parties of the Human Domain prowling there in search of Citadels — granted, they neither dared nor could survive going deep into the hellish cold, and only the Saints ventured beyond the outer reaches of the seemingly boundless expanse of ice.  
  
So, Sunnу had employed Silent Stalker as a guide... well, more so informed her of the fact that she would be his guide... and the two of them spent several unforgettable weeks together, shivering in the cold and eluding the strange, fearsome Nightmare Creatures who reigned in that frozen hell.  
  
That was how Sunny learned that Silent Stalker was not, in fact, mute. As it turned out, she could talk after all — or, at least, she could hiss and curse like a sailor.  
  
Whatever made the usually taciturn Song princess so expressive all of a sudden… he had no idea.  
  
It was probably the cold.  
  
In any case, eventually, when it became too dangerous for Silent Stalker to follow him, he left her in a shelter he had dug in the ice and continued west on his own. A few days later, a pale and shaken Sunny returned, and the two of them started on the way back to Ravenheart.  
  
From there, Sunny passed through the Dream Gate to Bastion — it opened regularly, connecting the two largest human cities in the Dream Realm at set intervals.  
  
And here he was.  
  
A mass of people were flowing out of the towering Dream Gate, and he was safely hidden in its middle. Sunny was wearing a ragged robe atop the Nebulous Mantle, having already changed his facial features — members of the Shadow Clan used special Memories for that, but he simply reshaped his avatar a little for the sake of anonymity. Masking his appearance had become much easier after he lеarned how to grant manifested shadows color in Ariel's Game.  
  
Making himself less handsome felt like a crime against humanity, but what could he do? Such was life… plus, he was a taken man now, so drawing admiring gazes would do him no good.  
  
There was a long, narrow object wrapped in cloth tied to his back, protruding high above his head. Sunny walked as if it was a light as a feather, but in fact, it took all of his Supreme strength not to stagger under thе weight of the damn thing. Even the wild shadow he had attached to his feet and controlled to mimic his movements seemed to be sweating from the burden of the object's shadow.  
  
'Holy hell… why is this thing so heavy?'  
  
Letting out a shaky sigh, Sunny allowed the current of the crowd to carry him away from the Dream Gate. Soon enough, he encountered a problem.  
  
Standing on the waterfront, he watched ferries move across the lake. He had to cross the lake, as well, but no ferry would be able to support his weight. At best, the deck would crack beneath him… at worst, the entire ferry would sink, taking the passengers with it.  
  
In fact, the only reason why the ground was not fracturing beneath his feet already was that he was in the Castle, where the cobblestones were made from the same mystical stone as the walls of the great fortress itself.  
  
Sunny scratched the back of his head.  
  
'Should I just Shadow Step to my destination?'  
  
Failing to come up with a better idea, he went to find a dark alley where no one would notice him vanishing into thin air. It would do no one any good if he was seen using powers similar to those of the Lord of Shadows.  
  
Being dead was such a hassle sometimes.  
  
As Sunny walked, he thought about what had transpired in the past month.  
  
Many things had happened while his incarnation was enduring the cold of the frozen hellscape. Early winter was the busiest time for the Human Domain, after all, because of the winter solstice.  
  
By now, most of the Sleepers who had been infеcted by the Nightmare Spell last year were either Awakened… or dead. Others were still somewhere out there, in the Dream Realm, making their way to human Citadels. Some had Awakened long before the solstice, having passed through the Dream Gate in advance — in fact, there were many of them, significantly reducing thе death toll.  
  
This winter solstice in particular was especially important because it served as proof of concept. It was the second solstice of Neph's reign, but the first one she was able to prepare for — the previous one had happened too soon after the end of the Domain War, when everything was in chaos.  
  
Not that things weren't chaotic now.  
  
Depending on the results of all the measures Nephis and Cassie had taken to ensure that as many Sleepers as possible survived their first journey to the Dream Realm, all following solstices could drastically transform…  
  
There weren't many of those left for humanity, though, since the waking world was going to be consumed by the Dream Realm before too long.  
  
But that was merely the significance of the winter solstice to all of humanity. It was meaningful to Sunny on a personal level, as well — after all, it was his birthday.  
  
He had turned twenty-eight.  
  
This time, Sunny had enjoyed several birthday parties at the same time — one in the Dark City, with Aiko, his Shadows and incarnations, and the strangely stiff members of the Shadow Clan; one in Ravenheart, with Nephis, Cassie, and Kai; and one with Silent Stalker of all people, who had not seemed enthused about his insistence of celebrating a birthday in the middle of a Death Zone at all.  
  
Sunny still had fun. Actually, he felt quite at home in the company of the quiet Song princess, not the least of all because she reminded him of Saint and Slayer — so, he secretly favored her above other Song sisters, despite the fact that the feline huntress did not seem even a little bit friendly.  
  
It had been a good birthday, still...