2446 Lover's Spat  
  
It had indeed been a good birthday.  
  
Actually, Sunny had been a little dejected prior to the winter solstice… that was because Nephis had been giving him the cold shoulder after that heated conversation in the council chamber of the Jade Palace.  
  
He found himself sleeping on the couch for the first time since they got together — well, in a metaphorical sense. In truth, neither of them had slept anywhere after that night, since both were terribly busy due to the approaching solstice. But he could still feel the flimsy walls of the proverbial doghouse around him.  
  
It was not like Nephis was avoiding him or refusing to talk to him, or even behaving that differently — she had just retreated into her former aloof, impassive self. He could feel that she was angry… as well as that she was hurt beneath the anger.  
  
They talked again after that night, trying to express their feelings and thoughts better. But that calmer discussion only managed to define where they stood better, not resolve the fundamental difference in their opinions. So, there was an awkward distance between them for a few days.  
  
Sunny was saddenеd by that fact… but in a strange way, he was also happy.  
  
To him, it seemed like a good sign.  
  
This was the first fight they had gotten into аs a couple — usually, Sunny was too accommodating, and Nephis was too casual about most things. The fact that she was angry this time showed that she cared about him deeply enough to get angry, at least, which was not at all bad. In fact, it was reassuring.  
  
Sunny would have been much more bitter if she had remained unperturbed and indifferent, instead.  
  
As for how he himself felt…  
  
He was tense and anxious. He knew Nephis, and he knew that she would throw herself into the jaws of the Forgotten God without hesitation in pursuit of her goal… of her unquenchable desire.  
  
So, he was afraid to lose her.  
  
That was why the two of them were angry at each other, and that was why they had spent several days apart.  
  
But then, the solstice arrived. And despite how Nephis felt, she suppressed her stubborn nature and made an effort to make the day as pleasant as he could for Sunny.  
  
Their conflict did not magically disappear after that, but the awkwardness dissipated somewhat.  
  
…And yet, even though things once again seemed normal, some distance still remained between them. That gap was narrow and seemingly insignificant, but Sunny had no idea how to breach it.  
  
'Damnation. Why are all my friends single? '  
  
He desperately needed relationship advice, but there were few people he could ask for it — not that fighting ancient gods of Corruption was something many couples encountered as a stumbling block in their relationships.  
  
There was Kim and Luster… but he would be mad to ask for advice from either Luster or the woman who had married Luster.  
  
Which, basically, only left one candidate.  
  
Effie.  
  
'Yeah, no… I'd rather ask Nether for relationship advice.'  
  
And that guy was someone whose failed relationship destroyed the universe, no less.  
  
Finally finding a narrow and desolate alley, Sunny scratched the back of his head.  
  
'Come to think of it, how come almost all my friends are single?'  
  
The answer was both obvious and sad… they were all workaholics.  
  
But how was humanity going to survive if the cream of the crop of its adult population were not busy making hordes of kids?  
  
Shaking his head and chastising his friends mentally, Sunny dove into the shadows, dragging his unbearably heavy baggage with him.  
  
Apart from the solstice, his birthday, and his first quarrel with Nephis… well, his first quarrel with Nephis after they became a couple, at least… other things had happened, as well. The world kept spinning, not waiting for anyone.  
  
Far north, in the Burned Forest, an ocean of rats was currently besieging an endless legion of appalling millipedes, getting closer and closer to their nests. In the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, one of his incarnations was maniacally altering the design of his future shadowbound Memory to integrate his recent attainments in weaving into the theoretical spellweave.  
  
Another abandoned the Forgotten Shore and was establishing a base in Ravenheart — his experience in Ariel's Game had proven that having almost all his avatars in the north was highly inconvenient during emergencies, so Sunny wanted to enhance his presence south of the Hollow Mountains.  
  
Plus, someone had to guard the Jade Board and the Dollhouse at all times… they had not figured out what to do with these time bombs yet, but keeping them in the Jade Palace was definitely not an option. Sunny had half the mind of tossing at least one of Ariel's creations into the seal containing the Dark Sea, but was not at all sure thаt it was a good idea.  
  
Cassie, meanwhile, had taken a good look at Kai after the charming archer rested from his experiences in Ariel's Game.  
  
Just as Sunny had expected, the rings of ash empowering his friends had disappeared as soon as the game was over… however, they had not disаppeared without leaving a trace.  
  
Kai had a new Attribute now, [Mark of Ash]. This Attribute granted him affinity to ash, whatever that meant — among other things, it increased his already immense resistance to fire, as well as granted him a minor, but scaling enhancement when near intense heat or surrounded by it.  
  
It was nice to know that knowledge and experience… as well as an awesome custom-made bow and a quiver of masterwork enchanted arrows… were not the only things Kai had brought back with him from Ariel's Game. Still, Sunny was of the opinion that his friend deserved way more.  
  
After all, where else would one find a Saint who had slain a Cursed Beast?  
  
Emerging from the shadows on a quiet street, Sunny smiled and headed for a particular manor situated there.  
  
Now that the solstice was behind them… Sunny and Nephis were going to get even busier. He had the new project of enchanting human strongholds in the Dream Realm on his plate, which meant that he and Cassie would be busy with researching sorcery for the foreseeable future, while Nephis was needed on numerous battlefields.  
  
Now that the Cursed Demon was dead and she wasn't tethered to Bastion anymore, she would probably take the Ivory Island on a lengthy journey. The Death Zones south of Godgrave had remained an impregnable wall and a source of worry for them until now — Nephis wanted to conduct a proper reconnaissance of them first.  
  
Before that, though, they had to receive a lengthy report from the agents of the Shadow Clan scattered across the two worlds. It had been put off because of the solstice, so now was the time. Aiko seemed to think that things were fishier than usual, as well… they needed to determine if she was correct with haste.  
  
But that was for his other incarnations to worry about.  
  
This one, meanwhile, had a different task.  
  
Sunny was going to search for the fifth fragment of Weaver's lineage here in Bastion... in the true version of Bastion, to be precise.