1421 Joy of Life

Sunny was so dumbfounded that he found himself listening passively as Effie gave him the talk about the birds and the bees, her face absolutely straight. In the middle of it, he was suddenly shaken awake and pointed an accusing finger at her.

"No! That's not... I mean... I know how this stuff works, damn it! What I mean is how? Since when? Who's the father?!"

Effie stopped talking and looked at him with a grin. Then, supporting her belly with one hand, she wobbled past him and pulled her spear out of the stone. Leaning on it, she sighed and shrugged.

"I think we already ascertained how. As for since when... should be since five months ago? Somewhere around that."

She patted him on the shoulder and added: "Oh, and I'm glad to see you too."

Sunny froze for a few moments.

Five months? Thirteen had already passed since the start of the Nightmare, but for Effie, it had been only two. Which meant... which meant that she had already been pregnant during their journey through the white desert, the battle of the Black Skull, and most of her time in Antarctica.

But not all of her time in Antarctica.

Suddenly, he slapped himself on the forehead. 'I'm... I'm such an idiot!'

A flood of memories surfaced in his mind. All the signs had been there. He should have noticed it much sooner!

Back when the cohort traveled across the Chained Island, Effie had been acting strange. Her appetite had been unstable, and her choice of snacks had been odd... which would have been normal for any other person, but not for the gluttonous huntress!

He had even teased her for suffering from motion sickness aboard the Chain Breaker. In hindsight, that sickness had nothing to do with the motions of the flying vessel at all.

There were other hints, as well... like Effie hesitating for a while before

refusing Beastmaster's offer to take her back to the waking world and leave the rest of the cohort behind.

If Sunny had been more attentive, he would have realized that the Effie he knew would not have needed any time to think. She had lingered with the answer because she had been considering not just her fate, but also that of her unborn child...

'Ah! A child! Just thinking this word is weird!'

He covered his face with a hand for a moment, then forced out a few words:

"Yeah... I'm glad to see you as well. Of course."

His mind was still in turmoil. Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then added weakly:

"So... I am going to be Uncle Sunny soon?" Hearing him say that, Effie grinned.

Her voice was warm:

"I think you mean Uncle Doofus."

But her words were not!

Sunny stared at her in outrage.

"What Uncle Doofus! Don't you dare corrupt my precious nephew... or niece... with your nonsense!"

There was so much they needed to discuss... like how Jet was already safe, and how to get back to the Chain Breaker, the dangers of Wind Flower, the time loop...

But Sunny was still stuck on Effie... Effie, the famed huntress Raised by Wolves... being with child.

How had it even happened?

'I mean, I know how... and she's a perfectly healthy young woman... stupidly attractive, too... but still? Still!'

He stared at her, then suddenly frowned.

"Wait... which bastard knocked you up? Do I need to beat him up?" His eyes widened again.

"Wait... do I need to beat Kai up?!"

Effie remained silent for a few moments, then laughed.

"Gods, Sunny. Relax... Kai is not the father."

Sunny did, indeed, relax a little.

He felt a strange mix of relief and disappointment, both emotions glaringly irrational.

'What the hell. Did I want Kai to be the father?'

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Sunny lingered for a bit, then asked with in exhaustion:

"So who is?" She smiled.

"If you must know, he's just someone I got to know in Antarctica. A very nice guy, from the Evacuation Army. We met by accident, and, well... one thing led to another. You know — war, adrenaline, the exhilaration of having survived another day, the fear of impending death... all these things make one want to feel alive. As alive as possible."

Effie had always been a physical person, and one that rejoiced in her physicality — precisely because it had been denied to her prior to becoming a Sleeper. Chained to a wheelchair, she had been a prisoner of her own body for most of her life. So, she exulted in being healthy and able ever since the Spell had given her a chance.

So, Sunny could see how Effie would have let passion take over in the middle of a disastrous war.

Still...

He shook his head.

"What's his name?"

She suddenly coughed.

Sunny's frown deepened.

"What's with that reaction?"

Effie hesitated for a moment, then looked away. "Uh... that... I don't know."

Sunny stared at her, scandalized.

"Effie!"

His voice was full of disbelief and astonishment.

She raised her hand defensively, a rare look of embarrassment appearing on her face.

"Hey! It's not what you think! I know this guy very well! He is really a nice and upstanding guy... he's a local of Antarctica, but went through the campaign in the Antarctic Center with the First Evacuation Army. He was wounded in Falcon Scott and shipped east with the other injured soldiers during the last round of evacuations. That's how we met, actually... I was visiting one of my wounded subordinates in the hospital, and he was being discharged..."

Sunny felt a little relieved. At least she actually seemed to like the basta... the guy. And he was from the First Evacuation Army. Sunny might have even met him...

"So how come you don't know his name, then?" Effie coughed again.

"That... uh... that's his Flaw, actually. He is... he was a Sleeper, back then. By now, he must have already Awakened."

Her face suddenly fell, and after a short pause, she added quietly: "...Or died. I don't know."

Sunny was suddenly speechless.

'A Sleeper... from the Antarctic Center... whose Flaw is that his name can't be remembered?'

So the bastard who kno... the father of Effie's child was the young soldier who had been infected with the Nightmare Spell in Sunny's refugee convoy?

So he had delivered the scoundrel to her doorstep with his own two hands?!

Sunny was happy to hear that the nameless Sleeper had been evacuated from Falcon Scott and survived, actually. But at the same time...

'I am definitely beating him up once I'm back!'

Sunny was preoccupied with his own emotions, but noticing Effie's forlorn expression, he pushed them down and took a deep breath.

They had entered the Nightmare not long before the winter solstice. So,

by now, the nameless Sleeper was indeed either an Awakened... or dead.

Much more likely dead, considering the state they had left Antarctica in.

But that was not what she would want to hear.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then forced out a smile.

"Oh... that guy? Bah! I know him. Don't worry too much — he's not that easily killed. I'm willing to bet that he's perfectly fine, even. We traveled three thousand kilometers together, after all... and I personally gave him literally hundreds of soul shards to saturate his core. One could even say that I practically raised him! Will a Sleeper I raised go and die without asking my permission? No, he would be too afraid..."

Effie looked at him for a while. Slowly, the sad expression disappeared from her face, and a faint smile appeared on it instead.

Noticing that smile, Sunny frowned.

"What? I know that you're thinking about something inappropriate again... cut it out."

She shook her head and giggled.

"No, no. I was just thinking... since you say that you raised him... it should be Grandpa Doofus, then, not Uncle. Right?"

Sunny blinked.

His expression froze.

His heart skipped a beat.

"...What Grandpa Doofus?! Like hell! Take it back!"

'This evil woman!'