1432 Admission

Sunny and Nephis shared the desserts and enjoyed the tea. Their conversation flowed easily. Time passed slowly, but eventually, she rose and went to check on Jet and Cassie. Soon, the sound of her light steps faded away, and Sunny was left alone.

He leaned on the trunk of the sacred tree, looking into the fog. His heart felt warm and at peace.

But at the same time...

Sunny could not throw what Neph had said out of his head. 'Do something that I never dared to do before...'

There were a few things he could think of.

He sighed and stared into the distance.

Sunny... had complicated relationships with his closest companions, to say the least. Nephis, Cassie, and he — there was a mess of emotions trapped between the three of them. Most of the things they wanted to say to each other had been left unspoken for a long time.

Especially between Sunny and Nephis. He hesitated.

At this point, he would have to be a complete fool to remain blind to how he felt. Sunny shifted uncomfortably and lowered his gaze. His heart suddenly felt stifled. He grimaced, then brushed his hand across the wooden deck.

'Just say it. Can't you even say it?'

If he couldn't even say it now, then when would he?

Wasn't he supposed to be the most honest person in two worlds? So why couldn't he even be honest with himself?

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then let out a heavy sigh. 'I... care about Nephis.'

No, that was not it. That was just being coy. He grimaced and looked up, at the swaying branches of the sacred tree.

Sunny remained motionless for a while. Then, he took a deep breath. And thought:

'I love Nephis.'

His expression collapsed.

It was true. It had been, for a long time. Sunny was not the most emotionally intelligent person, or at least he had not been before. If anything, his emotional development had been stunted — first by the rough life in the outskirts, then by the ruthless reality of the Nightmare Spell.

Who had time to think about emotions when every day was a lethal battle for survival?

So, it had taken him a long time to recognize the truth of how he felt for Nephis ever since the Forgotten Shore. In truth, he had already been in love with her before they reached the Dark City... hopelessly so, perhaps.

And those feelings had not grown any weaker despite their many bitter disagreements. In fact, they were the reason why Sunny was so often infuriated with Nephis — if he felt nothing for her, he would not have cared either way.

His feelings had not faded or disappeared despite the long period of

separation, either. If anything, they only grew more intense, almost

becoming an obsession. To be stronger than her... to be equal to her.

To be free of her?

That was what he had claimed, but it was a lie.

The indescribable relief, joy, and completeness he had felt when she returned to the waking world. The maddening fury he had felt when she unanimously decided to join Valor. The deathly terror he had felt when the Skinwalker snapped her neck.

By now, there was no denying it.

Whether through fate or coincidence, for better or worse, Nephis was... his person. The only one there was, and would be, for him.

More than that...

Sunny was not blind. Even though neither of them had ever dared to say it aloud, he knew that she felt the same way.

It wasn't that hard to see.

However, there was a reason why both of them kept quiet. Too many reasons, really.

He lowered his head and closed his eyes for a moment.

It was not because both of them did not really know how to handle their feelings and were shy about such things. Emotions were terribly messy, and that was just on their own. But when there were other obstacles involved...

Sunny and Nephis had different goals, and most of those goals were directly opposed to each other. Her pursuit of revenge against the Spell left no space for something as frivolous as affection... or at least, in her heart, affection would always have to take the backseat.

As for him...

He had his reasons to stay silent as well.

But maybe... maybe here in the loop, he didn't have to.

"How sweet."

Sunny flinched and opened his eyes.

The hateful sword wraith was standing in the mist, staring at him coldly.

"Ah, young love... well, you aren't wrong. I've been forced to watch you two circling each other fearfully for so long that it makes me sick to simply remember. At least you idiot finally admitted it. My, oh my. All it took was dying dozens of times."

Sunny looked away.

"Shut up."

There was no energy in his voice. The Sin of Solace grinned.

"So, what are you going to do now? Gather your courage and confess?" Sunny threw a sharp gaze at him.

"So what if I do?"

The apparition laugh.

"Well, well. I wish you luck. Oh, there's just one problem... she's going to forget everything, isn't she? How cowardly of you. Seems rather unfair to the poor girl."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

The bastard... was right. As much as he hated to admit it, the wraith was telling the truth.

He hesitated, then spat:

"Then I'll do it after we escape the loop. Why, you think I won't?"

The Sin of Solace stared at him for a while, then sighed. Shaking his head, the sword wraith crouched and looked him in the eyes.

"Aren't you forgetting something else, though?"

Sunny frowned, unwilling to answer. However, the apparition did it in his stead:

"You're her slave, Sunless. She owns you. What kind of relationship do you think is possible between the two of you, as long as your bonds remain?"

Sunny's expression grew ugly. Angered, he looked away and uttered through gritted teeth:

"She would never use it." The Sin of Solace smiled.

"Oh? Won't she? How do you know? If there's one thing that this Nightmare proves, it's that no one knows what the future holds. I mean, all your precious friends are right here, changed into Corrupted monsters, going around slaughtering people. Even you are no different! Have you ever expected that Jet would brutally murder you one day? Or that Effie would satiate her hunger with your flesh? Funny that you are expecting Nephis to never abuse her power over you in the same way."

The wraith leaned closer: "After all, she already did." Sunny's mouth twitched. "That... was to save my life. And she swore to never do it again."

The apparition laughed.

"But she already broke that oath!"

Sunny frowned, staring at him angrily.

"What are you talking about? That time when she begged me not to die? That hardly constitutes a command."

The Sin of Solace was smiling.

"No, no... it was that time the Drowned attacked the Chain Breaker. What did she say back then? Go, I'll handle things here! And then you instantly went into the water to fight the leviathan."

Sunny looked at him in confusion. "What? I was going to, anyway."

But the apparition's smile only widened. "Were you?"

The mist was swirling around them, cold and suffocating. Sunny tried to remember how their first battle with the Drowned had gone, exactly, and scowled.

"Yes, I was! Even if I wasn't... it was just a slip of the tongue." The sword wraith looked at him disdainfully.

"A slip of the tongue? Certainly, certainly... if you say so. Yet, can you imagine having a relationship with someone who can rob you of your free will with a simple slip of the tongue? How do you imagine such a relationship working? What kind of perverse partnership would it be? Are you really willing to be at her mercy, always, and absolutely?"

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Gods. You are so odious. So loathsome. So pathetic... tell me, is there a more pathetic thing than a slave who begins to trust his slaver?"

Sunny stared at him silently, not knowing what to answer.

Eventually, the apparition chuckled, shook his head, then stood up and walked away. His dark figure disappeared into the mist, as if it had never been here.

"If you are, go and surrender!" Sunny lowered his head.

A dark storm was raging in his mind

'Curse it... curse it... curse my Flaw, and curse the Shadow Bond. I wish it had never existed...'

The cold mist swirled around his face, hiding it. The world was silent.