1588 Unchained

The ground shook, and some parts of the crater's slope collapsed. Sunny, who was standing on the edge of its mound, lost his balance and rolled down, dirt and pieces of debris raining on him from above.

'Ouch.'

Coming to a halt much further down the slope than he had been before, he could not see the Dream Gate and the King of Swords anymore. What he could see, however...

Was a towering pillar of white flame rising from the torn depths of the wide crater.

It moved and twisted, as if alive. As though a giant made from pure flame was stretching its shoulders after being trapped underground for a long time. For a moment, Sunny was entranced, thinking that he could make out the shape of a winged being woven from dancing flame, hidden in the depths of the incandescent pillar.

Then, the whirlwind of flame collapsed on itself, and slowly formed into a humanoid figure.

The radiant being looked like a beautiful, pure spirit of immaculate light, her graceful body contrasted against the dark soil of the deep crater. With wide wings spread behind her like a blinding mantle, she slowly glided down. The moment her feet touched the ground, it started to melt.

Slowly, the brilliance of her skin grew dimmer, and was then extinguished. Without the blinding light, Sunny could finally see who had just escaped the ruins.

Of course, he had already guessed who it was.

It was Nephis.

She looked just like the last time he had seen her... but also different.

Not only because the white metal of the Starlight Legion armor was torn and scorched, breached in half a dozen places...

And not only because her presence seemed to illuminate the world, so much stronger and tantalizing than it had been before.

And not even because she had grown even more beautiful after undergoing the rebirth of Transcendence.

No... it was because Nephis had wings.

A pair of white wings extended from her back, looking too majestic and pure to be a part of this mortal world.

Sunny stared, enthralled.

'...Partial transformation?'

There were Transformation Abilities that had several steps to them. From the looks of it, Neph's had at least three — the winged form, the brilliant spirit of light whose radiant body seemed to contain an ocean of furious flame, and the vast mass of unleashed fire that could seemingly assume any form, or no form at all.

At least that was what Sunny surmised after catching a glimpse of Neph's striking arrival.

There had to be more to this Transformation, of course. Sunny doubted that a Divine Aspect would be limited to enhancing one's might and granting one the ability to fly.

He stared for a few more moments, then sighed.

'Well, I can ask her later.'

For now...

Sunny had to do something very unpleasant.

Namely, explain himself.

What was one supposed to say after leaving his partner to face the last challenge of a dreadful Nightmare alone?

Sorry, I had to step out to break fate really quick?

He winced, not looking forward to that conversation at all.

Shaking his head, Sunny stood up and spent a moment evaluating his appearance through the shadows.

He would lie if he said that he wasn't apprehensive about his looks at the moment. Becoming Transcendent had improved his body once again, after all. So... he was certain that he was now reasonably attractive. Even though it was a bit childish, he wanted Nephis to see him in the best possible light the first time they met after escaping the Tomb of Ariel.

Sadly, it did not really matter.

No matter how beautiful the Transcendence had made him, it was impossible to tell what he looked like right now. Because Sunny was completely covered in dirt, dust, and soot. His face was almost entirely hidden beneath a layer of grime.

'Ah... curses...'

He hastily rubbed his face, but only managed to spread the dirt around.

'Goddammit.'

It was too late, however, because that movement attracted Neph's attention.

She turned her head and looked at him, her eyes shining with radiant white light.

Sunny smiled nervously, then hesitated and took a step in her direction.

He had more than one reason to feel nervous.

There were the complicated intricacies of his relationship with Nephis and the consequences of the choice he had made, yes.

But there was also the reason he had made that choice.

His connection to the Nightmare Spell was gone, and his [Fated] Attribute was also gone.

What about Shadow Bond?

As Sunny walked, considering what he would say, Nephis spoke in a calm, even tone:

"Stop."

He took a couple more steps and froze, stunned.

First, because she had broken her promise once again and given him an order.

And second, because he had not felt compelled to follow that order.

'It's... it's...'

It was gone.

The connection between him and Nephis was gone.

Even though Sunny had stopped, it was of his own volition. When she told him to do so, there was nothing forcing him to stop walking. Nothing had overwritten his personal will, nothing had violated his freedom and agency.

Even though he had received a direct command, there was no reaction at all.

Sunny took a shaky breath.

'It... worked. It worked!'

An involuntary smile found its way onto his face.

'I'm free!'

Sunny had been a bit scared to face Nephis after abandoning her at Verge... but he was much more scared that his decision to leave had been for nothing. That would have been a really, really bitter pill to swallow.

But, luckily, it had not been in vain.

Everything had worked just as promised.

[Fated] was gone. The chain of Shadow Bond wrapped around his neck was gone, as well.

His wish had come true.

His smile widened, refusing to go away... which was a bit awkward, considering the nature of the conversation they were about to have.

Sunny opened his mouth, trying to say something...

But Nephis beat him to it.

Looking at him coldly, she frowned slightly and asked:

"Who are you?"

There was no hint of recognition in her voice.

"...Identify yourself."