1687 Suddenly, and Without Warning

It was winter in NQSC, but here in Bastion, the weather was warm and mild. Nephis did not receive a lot of opportunities to take a leisurely stroll around town, but she remembered enjoying the thriving atmosphere of the swiftly developing city during her last outing, which was... about a year ago, now?

The city sprawling around the beautiful lake had changed tremendously since then. Of course, Nephis was familiar with all these changes - she gazed down upon the bustling streets of Bastion often from the tranquil height of her heavenly island, studying the lively flow of human activity from a distance.

Every time the Ivory Tower returned here, the city seemed different. The humans, however, were the same.

Sadly, Nephis did not enjoy diving into their liveliness today. She was still recovering from the battle with Condemnation, after all.

Her stroll was not entirely for leisure, either.

She had left the castle with a specific purpose in mind.

Nephis had long been searching for a talented enchanter, She and the Fire Keepers received plenty of Memories by slaying Nightmare Creatures, sure, but those Memories were too dependent on the whims of the Spell. Very few of them sulted her needs perfectly, or were powerful enough to make a difference.

That was where Awakened enchanters could help. The problem was that craftsmen capable of forging Memories, or even enchanted items, were extremely rare. Most of them belonged to the Valor family, and while Nephis could easily commission a Memory from her own clan... that would defeat the purpose.

It was precisely because her most powerful Memories were either known to or directly created by the Great Clan Valor that she was searching for an independent enchanter in secret.

Yesterday, Cassie informed her that their search had finally borne fruit. Not only that, but the person in question resided right here, in Bastion... and as a cherry on top, he even happened to possess an extremely rare affinity to shadows.

The last part was of no importance for the commission, but given the sudden entrance of the Lord of Shadows on the stage, Nephis was curious to learn more about this unusual element and its nuances.

Therefore... Cassie had decisively sent her to meet the enchanter personally. Nephis was not sure why she had to go herself, but since Cassie assured her that this person could be trusted to keep a secret, she arrived at the place late in the evening - knowing her friend, the man would have passed an extensive background check, so there was no reason not to.

That said, it wasn't easy for Nephis to walk freely on the streets of Bastion. Her fame was too great to remain unrecognized. So, she used several cosmetic Memories to slightly alter her appearance... even then, she had only ventured out after it was already dark.

Reaching the quiet lakeshore street, she glanced at the cosy brick cottage, and then at the sign hanging above the door.

'Sunny's Brilliant Emporium: Café & Memory Boutique.’

For a moment, Nephis tried to imagine what it would have felt like, to live in a simple cottage like that and make a living by doing peaceful things, away from the bloodshed and stench of the battlefield.

All of it seemed so... alien.

And yet, that was exactly how this humble enchanter - and most people in the world - lived. This peaceful life was what she was trying not to lose sight of.

Well... the peaceful part was true, but very few people lived in a cottage quite as unique as this one. Cassie had warned her that it was a strange kind of Echo. Otherwise, there was a risk that Nephis would misunderstand things and accidentally burn it to the ground.

Nephis took a deep breath, prepared herself mentally for the awkward feeling of meeting an unfamiliar person, and walked inside.

A moment later...

There was the sound of plates scattering on the floor.

She froze, looking down in confusion.

The enchanter was sprawled on the floor, staring at her with a stunned expression. He seemed to be... a very clumsy person, to have tripped on his own feet like that.

No coordination whatsoever. A person like that would definitely not last long on the battlefield... which was fine. Not everyone was born for combat.

They stared at each other silently for a few moments, and then the young man jumped to his feet, dusting off his clothes in embarrassment.

Having done so, he smiled at her as if nothing had happened.

"Welcome to the Brilliant Emporium."

Nephis was momentarily stumped.

When Cassie had told her about a talented Master capable of forging powerful Memories, she had imagined an older man, sharp and austere - like most smiths of Valor were.

What she had not expected was that the shopkeeper would be so young, delicate... and good-looking.

Nephis was used to being in the company of extremely attractive people, of course. And yet, the proprietor of the Brilliant Emporium stood out even among them... most Saints included.

He was not very tall, with a slender build and delicate features. His skin was smooth and white, like flawless marble, while his onyx eyes were like darkly glistening gems. His raven-black hair was carelessly gathered in a knot, and there was a subtle sense of calm confidence to him... one that seemed understated, but almost demanded attention.

He was like an elegant porcelain doll dressed in fine black silk.

This softer kind of beauty of his was so unlike the rugged handsomeness of the seasoned warriors Nephis usually encountered. More than that... the young man entirely lacked presence - the mystical kind - hinting that he wasn't very powerful a Master.

Which... made sense. Not every Awakened was a warrior, and after Antarctica, there were even plenty of Masters who had Ascended out of necessity, not choice. Someone with a Utility Aspect did not have to wield a sword, and many lived without experiencing much strife or violence.

Or even none whatsoever.

No matter how distant and strange such a life seemed to Nephis.

'Cassie... did not tell me...'

She suddenly realized that she had been silent for too long.

Keeping her face expressionless, Nephis spoke:

"Ah... yes, Master Sunless, I presume? Saint Cassia sent me."

The enchanter looked at her strangely, hesitated for a moment, and then said politely

"Indeed, I am called Master Sunless. Please forgive me, Lady Nephis. Saint Cassia did not warn me…”

Nephis nodded.

"Yes. She didn't warn me, either."

He blinked.

"Sorry?"

She cleared her throat and looked away in embarrassment.

"No, nothing. I am here to talk about a Memory.”