1695 All According to Plan

Leaving an avatar behind to help Aiko in the kitchen, Sunny left the Brilliant Emporium with Nephis.

The avatar did not have the benefit of wearing the Nebulous Mantle, but his Transcendent presence would be safely contained as long as he did not enter the dining hall. Since the entire interior of the Brilliant Emporium was situated in the dimensional storage of the Marvelous Mimic, anyone would find it hard to catch a glimpse of what was happening in the kitchen.

The café would still close for the day as soon as the current customers left, though. When Sunny told Aiko about the contract with the Fire Keepers, she was beyond happy for a few moments... however, pretty soon, they discovered a problem.

Although the real purpose of the Memory Purveyor position was to hide the commission of an enchanted sword for Nephis, that cover still had to be maintained. Which meant that the Brilliant Emporium would really have to handle the sales of the Memories earned by the Fire Keepers, as well as the acquisition of the Memories they wished to purchase.

The problem was that Sunny's reputation as a Memory broker was all a smokescreen, and he did not really possess a network of connections to facilitate such deals. Luckily, Aiko still had some contacts from running the Brilliant Emporium alone in the past - so, she had to come up with a business plan and accomplish a lot of relevant things with utmost haste.

The petite girl seemed daunted by the sudden task, but he could almost see piles of coins reflecting in her eyes.

In any case, that was what was happening to Aiko and the avatar in the Brilliant Emporium.

Sunny himself, meanwhile...

Was accompanying Nephis on a leisurely stroll across Bastion.

He had to admit that they made for quite a pair. Nephis looked elegant and sharp in her crisp civilian clothes, while his attire was refined and tasteful. Sunny noticed that the two of them collected a lot of stares - some people even turned around to watch them go.

Some of them recognized Nephis, some of them didn't.

He felt a little uncomfortable with all that attention, but knew that it was the very reason they were out in the open.

The streets of Bastion were lively at that time of day. Nephis looked around with curiosity, a faint smile playing on her lips. Eventually, she asked:

"Have you lived in Bastion long, Master Sunless?"

He shook his head.

"No... only for about a year."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Where were you before?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shrugged,

"After Antarctica... here and there. I spent some time exploring the wilderness after the Nightmare."

Sunny did not specify which Nightmare he meant, letting Nephis make her own wrong conclusion. There was nothing strange with saying that he had wandered the Dream Realm for years before settling in Bastion, either - it would have been a deadly affair before, but after the Dream Gates were open, there was much more travel between various Citadels.

Both the Sword Domain and the Song Domain were swiftly turning into actual states, as opposed to loose alliances of isolated strongholds. There were all kinds of activities going on in the wilderness of the Dream Realm these days - roads were being constructed, trade routes were being established, fortified relay stations were being constructed, and so on.

As the infrastructure of the Domains was being built at a staggering speed, there was a need for all kinds of people to head into the wilds.

The vast expanse of the Dream Realm - the part of it conquered by humans - was not a place where only warriors could survive anymore. Of course, every team had to be guarded by Awakened escorts, but there were geologists, map-makers, builders, explorers, messengers, merchants, and numerous other specialists traveling across it now.

Nephis most likely assumed that he was a part of a large merchant caravan in the past.

She smiled.

"I've been here... for about three years, 1 guess. But actually, with how often I am away, the actual number of days I've spent in Bastion won't even account for three months. So, in a sense, you've been living here longer than me."

Her smile grew a little wistful.

"How does it feel, to live in Bastion? On this side of the lake, I mean."

Sunny thought about it for a few moments, then answered in a light tone:

"Well, it's sort of tranquil... for me, at least. There is always something going on, and the city is boiling with activity, but unlike the cities of the waking world, it's less suffocating here. Both literally and metaphorically. The air is clean, and the people are... optimistic about their lives. Back on Earth, everyone spent their days pretending not to know that everything was falling apart. Here, everyone is working together to build something from the ground up, instead. It's nice."

He paused, then added somberly:

"Of course, it's not all bliss and sunshine. Most of the people on this side of the lake come from Antarctica, so they are scarred and traumatized. In the worst cases, people reach their breaking point and snap. Crime is not exactly rampant, but it does exist... worse than that, with how many Awakened there are now, the government and the Legacy clans can't police them all effectively anymore. It is one thing if a mundane person suffers a mental breakdown or succumbs to greed, but if it is an Awakened... well, you can imagine"

Sunny looked at Nephis and smiled sheepishly.

"Sorry... I seem to have spoiled the mood"

She stared at him for a moment, then hurriedly looked away.

"...No, it's alright. It is exactly what I wanted to hear. People like me are tasked with protecting humanity, but, strangely enough, we mostly exist in isolation from the actual people we are meant to protect. So, it is good to learn such things. So that we... don't snap."

They reached the waterfront and followed along the shore of the lake, heading for the distant ferry. This section of the lakeshore was fashioned into a park, and there were a lot of people here, resting on the grass.

Many young couples included.

Sunny suddenly felt a little hot.

He caught himself staring at Nephis, whose profile was contoured by the radiance of the sun, for a moment too long.

"Does it bother you? The isolation?"

She looked at him and wanted to answer, but at that moment, Sunny's eyes suddenly widened.

His expression changed.

'What the hell... not again!'

That was because just then, a powerful tremor shook the Nameless Temple in the distant Godgrave. He was momentarily distracted... and slipped on a wrapper someone had carelessly dropped on the ground.

‘This can't be happening... I'm a Saint! A Saint, for the love of gods!'

Why was it that every time he saw Nephis, he ended up tripping over his feet?!

Sunny considered whether he wanted to perform a sudden somersault to regain his footing, but that would look even more ridiculous than falling. Using Shadow Step was out of the question, as well, since that Ability was already known to belong to the Lord of Shadows.

So, he resigned himself and prepared to hit the ground.

A moment later, though...

Nephis took a step forward and wrapped her arm around his waist, gallantly stopping his fall before his back could touch the cobblestones.

Sunny suddenly found himself face-to-face with

her, his entire weight effortlessly supported by her strength, staring into her calm grey eyes.

Their bodies were almost pressed against each other.

Looking at him calmly, Nephis asked in an even tone:

"Master Sunless... are you alright?"

Sunny's heart fluttered.

He stared at her silently, his face growing pale.

He... was not alright.

'What the hell is that?! Am I in a romantic drama?! If so... why the hell am I the one being caught?! It's the man's job to catch the pretty female lead!'

Although romance was not his genre of choice, Sunny had consumed a lot of such stories during his years in the outskirts. Back then, he had always mocked the hapless female leads, who always seemed to trip, slip, and fall... right into the arms of the cold and aloof male leads, of course.

He had even suspected that there was something in the water wherever the characters lived, since their coordination seemed nonexistent.

Who knew that he would find himself in the same situation, one day?

And in the wrong role, to boot!

He cleared his throat.

"I am fine now, thanks. You can let me go."

It seemed that Nephis only realized that she was still holding him at that moment.

There were a lot of people staring at them with wide eyes.

She remained silent for a few moments, then smoothly pulled him to his feet, unwrapped her arm from his waist, and touched her hair lightly. Her expression remained perfectly nonchalant.

"I see. That is good."

Sunny straightened the Nebulous Mantle, trying to chase away the memory of her warm touch from his mind.

And failing.

Turning away, he sighed, bent down, and picked up the wrapper. Then, he walked to a nearby trash bin and tossed it inside.

Returning to Nephis, he smiled apologetically.

What was he supposed to say now?

"I... dislike people who litter."

'What was that?!'

She nodded, still looking away.

"Yeah. Let's... hurry to the ferry, now. I think we put on a good enough act, already. Well done."

Sunny blinked.

"Yeah... a good act, right... I thought I'd improvise..."

The two of them continued on their way to the ferry, both keeping quiet. Sunny was too indignant and embarrassed to speak, while Nephis... probably didn't care to.

There was something strange about her, though.

Had her shoulders trembled a few times?

No... it was probably just his imagination.