1699 First Impressions

Nephis and Effie were staring at him in surprise. Maintaining a smile, Sunny cursed inwardly.

Over the years, he had gotten used to his Flaw, and it rarely landed him in real trouble these days. That was why he had relaxed a little, allowing himself more leeway while holding conversations.

There was also the fact that the true reason why the Flaw was so dangerous, his True Name, was gone now.

But there were still things he should not say!

"Crap."

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then said calmly:.

"Lady Nephis might not remember, but we actually met before."

It would have been extremely inconvenient if she asked when or where, so before either Nephis or Effie could, he added of his own accord:

"We briefly met in Antarctica, near the end of the campaign."

Both statements were true, and since he had volunteered them without being prompted, there was no question that would have demanded a more precise explanation. Of course, the statements were also not connected to each other, and although each of them was factual, together, they created a false impression.

That Sunny had met Nephis for the first time in Antarctica.

She raised an eyebrow.

Really? I think I would have remembered someone so…

She paused without finishing the sentence, remained silent for a moment, then added evenly:

Remembered someone, so to speak.

Huh?

Her wording was a bit odd.

Sunny pretended to be embarrassed.

'Oh… it was on the day the Sword King defended the SQSC. It might not have been very memorable for Lady Nephis, considering everything else that was going on. Well, I was also covered in dirt from head to toe, so anyone would have had trouble recognizing me…'

She stared at him for a few moments, and then asked suddenly:

Was meeting me very memorable for you?

Sunny froze momentarily.

What kind of question is that?

That meeting of theirs… yes, it was quite memorable. In fact, it was seared into his memory like a brand, still festering even after all these years. That was the moment he had learned about his existence being erased from the hearts of everyone who knew him, after all.

Their actual first meeting was fresh in his memory, as well. Back then, on the bridge in front of the Academy... he had been attracted by how aloof and detached from the world young Nephis looked, standing there calmly with her headphones on. He had also felt a subtle sense of kinship with her, because she had been the only other Sleeper wearing the standard-issue police tracksuit, just like him.

Sunny smiled.

"For me… it was unforgettable."

Nephis kept his gaze on him for a brief moment, then looked away.

Then, a corner of her mouth curled upward slightly.

A second later, though, they were interrupted by Effie's excited squeal:

"I… I can't! The two of you are too cute!"

She laughed, then poured herself more wine and viciously attacked the plate of refreshments. As she was chewing, her gaze landed on the floorboards of the deck.

Effie lingered for a bit, then asked curiously:

"By the way, Master Sunless… it seems that you don't have a shadow today?"

He followed her gaze, noticing that Neph's shadow was all alone, painted in black across the floorboards. Gloomy was currently serving as an avatar, after all, channeling Sunny's consciousness to help Aiko.

Sunny shrugged nonchalantly.

"Oh. I seem to have misplaced it."

It was not a big problem to be seen without a shadow while he was strolling with Nephis or here on the ferry, but once they reached the castle… he would prefer to keep the strange nature of his shadow a better-guarded secret.

'What to do?'

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then used Shadow Control to call over one of the wild shadows populating the ferry. After it glided across the deck and glued itself to his feet, in reverent awe at the prospect of pretending to be the Lord's own shadow, he shaped it to resemble the contours of his body and nodded.

"Is this better?"

Effie blinked a couple of times.

"Nice trick! Right… so you were in Antarctica, as well? I don't think I ever had a chance to ask. Were you one of us army grunts?"

Sunny sighed.

"I guess. It was nothing spectacular, though… certainly not anything worth bragging about. I had a cushy assignment at Army Command before ending up in a Nightmare. By the time I returned, there was nothing left to do but get on a boat and escape."

Sunny did not mention that he had been a member of the First Irregular Company and the Special Reconnaissance Unit before landing a position as a special government envoy to Clan Valor, technically assigned to Army Command. He wanted everyone to believe that he had been a mere paper-pusher in the vast military machine.

That suited his harmless persona much better than being known as a decorated officer who had fought on most of the deadliest battlefields of the Southern Campaign.

Effie shook her head gently.

"Frontline, Army Command… it's all the same. Everyone did their part. Anyone who survived that hell deserves my respect."

Then, she grinned.

"We are comrades! So, how about a military discount next time I come to eat at the Brilliant Emporium? One soldier to another… wait, actually, how about a family discount? Princess and I, we are practically sisters! Right, Neph?"

She looked at Nephis expectantly.

Nephis remained silent for a moment, and then said in an exceedingly even tone:

"I don't know her."

Effie stared at her with a betrayed expression.

Then, she whispered loudly:

"Come on, Neph. Help a sister out! Marry this guy fast so that I could save some money…"

Neph's eye twitched a little.

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The ferry floated across the lake, slowly approaching the castle. The conversation flowed naturally, with Effie easing up on teasing them… a little… after getting her fill.

Sunny was not supposed to know much about the inner workings of Bastion, so he mostly kept silent, letting the two women catch up after not seeing each other for a while.

Effie was leaning back, looking at the water with a wistful expression.

"...Anyway, I don't have much time to waste. As soon as we reach the castle, I'll be rounding up people and bringing them back to NQSC. There's trouble in the Western Quadrant… again. I'm afraid that I'll be gone for a while, this time."

Nephis frowned, a hint of concern written on her face.

"How bad is it?"

Effie chuckled.

"Bad enough that they're sending Jet, as well. That should tell you everything you need to know. Oh… I'm sorry, Master Sunless. Beast Farm is going to be gone from Bastion for a few weeks, maybe even a couple of months. You'll need to find a new supplier."

He shook his head.

"That is okay. Don't worry about it."

He had other means of getting ingredients, albeit not as fresh and delicious as what Effie's husband grew. The Brilliant Emporium would have to cut down on food services, too, with him being busy following Neph around and crafting a Memory.

Effie smiled, then looked at Nephis.

"What about you? Where are you off to next? I don't believe that those Valor bast…"

She glanced at Sunny, then corrected herself:

"...that those wise Valor elders will let you rest for long. "

Nephis lingered for a moment, then answered in a calm tone:

"Back to Godgrave, I suppose."

The huntress suddenly seemed excited.

"Oh, right! You must have met him! That mysterious Saint, the Lord of Shadows… what is he like?"

Sunny was suddenly all ears.