1767 Restless Mind

The first customers arrived, and the avatar got busy in the kitchen. Sunny, however, remained on the porch, enjoying the fresh air with a leisurely smile on his lips. The lively noises of the city filled the air like a bright melody.

At some point, the door opened, and Aiko walked out, dressed in a smart business suit and wearing a leather messenger bag over her shoulder. The petite girl yawned, stretched her arms, and mumbled:

"I'm off to the Castle, boss."

Sunny looked at her with a good-natured smile.

"You're delivering Memories, you know. What's up with the bag?"

Aiko stared at him with indignation.

"What do you even know... one has to look the part to make the right impression! That's business essentials!"

She glanced him over with suspicion.

"And speaking of looking the part... you seem a bit different today, boss, What is that... did you style your hair?"

Sunny blinked.

"I did not!"

Aiko gave him a sarcastic nod.

"Uh-huh... sure."

With that, she grinned and hurried away.

"Have fun with Princess Nephis, boss! Perform well! We're raking in real money here, so don't screw it up for us!"

The petite girl used her Aspect to skate on the cobblestones and disappeared behind a corner in the blink of an eye. Sunny was left standing on the porch, flabbergasted.

"What? What does she mean, perform well? I always perform well! Wait... that did not sound right....”

Just at that moment, he felt a familiar presence Illuminate the world. Sunny did not have to look to know that Nephis was close.

There was a rustle of feathers, and then, a slender silhouette was standing on the shore of the lake. Her wings had already disappeared, and only a beautiful halo remained, fading slowly as it contoured her figure against the tranquil water.

Nephis was wearing white clothes, her silver hair held down by the Crown of Dawn.

Sunny, dressed in black as usual, froze on the spot.

'D-damn... I hope she did not hear that...'

Noticing him, Nephis smiled lightly and walked over with easy steps.

"Master Sunless. Are you ready?”

He knew that she was terribly busy preparing for the war. However, she had diligently made time to keep their appointments in the past few weeks, and never seemed distracted by other issues in his company, giving him her full attention.

Sunny had a timid hope that Nephis actually enjoyed their outings, and found shelter from the burden of her crushing responsibilities in the time the two of them spent together - no matter how fleeting it was. He was quite pleasant to be around, after all... at least he tried to be, for her.

Of course, it was far more likely that Nephis simply treated their meetings as part of the war preparations. There was a purpose to them Sunny was a hired sorcerer who had to forge her a superb sword, after all. So, the diligence she treated him with was the same she afforded her other responsibilities, no more and no less.

Even though he would never admit it, the latter possibility made him upset.

"Master Sunless?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then offered her a pleasant smile.

"Yes, I am ready."

He offered her his arm, and when she wrapped her own around it, picked up the picnic basket.

He had prepared the food inside himself. He had also bought the pienic basket specifically for the occasion, since nothing in the Brilliant Emporium felt nice enough.

The two of them walked together. Nephis was calm, while Sunny was pretending to be nonchalant. They made for quite a stunning pair, and passerby stared at them with wide eyes... but he did not care. Rather, he enjoyed their stares.

‘There, there. Look more!'

"You seem to be in a good mood."

Hearing Neph's remark, Sunny realized that there was a wide smile on his lips. He lowered his gaze in embarrassment.

"Ah... yes. Today seems like a pretty good day. Don't you think so, Lady Nephis?"

She studied his face for a few moments, then smiled slightly and looked away.

"Yes, I have to agree. It does seem like that."

They walked a short distance away and reached a newly built martial hall. Bastion was full of Awakened warriors, and not all of them had a Legacy clan sponsoring them - so, they needed a place to practice and hone their skills, as well as experienced instructors to guide them.

For an independent Master, opening a martial school was a good way to earn some coin - most seasoned Ascended were busy protecting the human enclaves and subjugating the wilderness of the Dream Realm, so there was always a shortage of good instructors.

Usually, the status of a Master was enough to create a sufficient reputation for a martial school. On any day, there would be a dozen or more warriors practicing Inside under the observation of the owner and his Awakened helpers.

But today, the martial hall was entirely empty. Nephis had reserved the whole building, displacing even the founder... their outing had to be public, but what they were about to do had to be kept away from prying eyes at the same time.

Walking inside, she nodded at Sunny and said evenly:

"Get comfortable, Master Sunless. I'll be with you shortly."

Sunny nodded and went to the courtyard of the martial hall, which was fashioned into a sand arena. Sitting down on the spectator bench, he put the picnic basket down and looked at the sky.

'It's indeed a nice day...'

Soon, having changed into a set of training clothes... which looked quite flattering on her despite not being designed for that purpose... Nephis walked into the arena. Picking up an alloy sword from the stand, she swung it a couple of times, nodded in satisfaction, and looked at Sunny.

"I... I'll begin, then."

He nodded.

"I'll be watching"

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then looked away and coughed.

"...Watch well."

With that, she began a set of training exercises. Although slow and weak by Transcendent measures, they were nevertheless full of powerful intent. It was as though Nephis was performing a sword dance, fighting a duel against her shadow.

For a moment, the image of her dancing with the sword fused with his memories of the Black Island, where the two of them had spent a blissful month during the Third Nightmare. Sunny had been mesmerized by her practicing swordsmanship back then, as well.

Her technique had changed tremendously since the Nighthmare, though. It was still flowing, versatile, and unpredictable, but had become both different and much more... complete.

What Nephis was showing him today was her true battle art one that she kept hidden from everyone else. There was no enemy for he to fight and no environment for her to unleash her Aspect, but Sunny could still infer many things from watching these simple katas.

There was one problem, though...

He was having trouble concentrating on the movements of her sword.

Instead, his eyes could not help but follow the movements of her body.

Its graceful lines, contoured by the light fabric of the training suit. The smoothness of her steps, the supple beauty of her form. The heads of sweat glistening on her alabaster skin...

'Ah, I'm in trouble.'

Sunny used all of his self-control to keep his face neutral. He was under terrible strain!

Worst of all... best of all... the day was still young. There were many hours ahead of them.

He took a shaky breath.

‘...I'm not going to get a nosebleed, am I?’