1771 Curtain Call

There was a private box reserved for Nephis and Sunny. They were guided there by a young stagehand, who was visibly struggling to maintain decorum while bursting at the seams with excitement. It was not every day that Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan visited a theater! In fact, Sunny was pretty sure that she had never participated in these kinds of social activities before.

“There would be a freshly embossed plaque nailed in the foyer of the theater by tomorrow, no doubt. Something like "This humble establishment has enjoyed the patronage of the brightest of stars" or "We are proud to have hosted Her Royal Highness, Saint Nephis of Immortal Flame".

Such a simple thing was enough to enhance the theater's prestige twofold.

'I wonder if this place is secretly sponsored by Cassie.’

The box was luxuriously furnished, dark, and elevated above the auditorium high enough so that no one could see what was happening inside.

Sunny felt frustrated at the fact that his heart was almost racing.

Letting out a sigh, he glanced at the stage and took a seat, The curtain had not been raised yet, and the audience was filling in with excited whispers. He was distracted for a moment when Nephis sat down near him, their shoulders almost touching.

"This private box is a bit cramped, isn't it?"

Well, it couldn't be helped.

He remained silent for a moment, then asked in a neutral tone:

"By the way, what play are we watching?"

Nephis looked at him with a hint of surprise.

"You don't know?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I'm afraid I don't."

She seemed a little embarrassed, for some reason.

Nephis hesitated for a while, then coughed awkwardly.

"...Actually, I don't know either. Cassie... Saint Cassia arranged it. I assumed you would have been informed."

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, it will be a surprise then. Who knows, we might enjoy it a great deal."

Actually, he didn't really care about the contents of the play. He doubted he would be able to concentrate on the actors, anyway, when Nephis was so close to him, in the darkness.

Soon, the lights dimmed, and the curtains were slowly pulled. The audience held its breath.

At the same time, Sunny's smile froze on his lips.

In fact, he had stopped breathing entirely.

His expression slowly crumbled, and he barely suppressed a tormented groan.

Because right at that moment, he saw the title of the play above the decorations. Written in a purposefully messy scrawl, several words were displayed on dark background...

[The Devil of Antarctica]

‘Oh, no!’

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On the stage, the decorations were divided into two distinct locations. On one, a military boat sailed on an icy sea. On the other, tall mountain peaks towered above a snowy cliff.

Sunny tried to sink into his chair, raising a trembling hand to cover his face. He didn't even care if Nephis would notice his strange behavior. He just wanted to disappear and be somewhere anywhere! - else the next moment.

'I'm done for!'

There was an actress wearing a black armor standing on the snowy cliff, gazing down at the audience with a somber look. The armor design was quite austere, but somehow managed to accentuate every curve of her quite... distinguished body very well. Her blonde hair moved slightly in the artificial wind, and her bright blue eyes were full of harsh resolve.

The military boat, meanwhile, seated seven soldiers in the uniforms of the First Evacuation Army. Their leader was standing at the bow, peering ahead with a stolc expression on his chiseled face. He was close to two meters in height and possessed a formidable build, oozing rugged masculinity. The makeup made him look extremely pale, and he seemed to be wearing a black wig.

Sunny took a shaky breath.

‘...These bastards!'

Both the distinguished actress and the square-jawed man were supposed to be inspired by him. He could live with the brutish guy... but the well-proportioned beauty?! Really?!

This was why he had avoided watching the movie version at all costs.

Now, however, Sunny had no choice but to watch.

He squirmed silently.

At that moment, one of the soldiers said to his comrades on the boat:

"Why so glum, comrades? Cheer up! We are nearing Antarctica. Nightmare Creatures stand no chance against the heroic soldiers of the Evacuation Army!"

Immediately, the leader cut him off with a sharp gaze and scoffed.

"Good attitude, soldier! However, the message is wrong. Don't underestimate the enemy, Heroes won't win this war,,, so, don't try to be a hero."

He flashed a dark grin and added hoarsely, his rugged voice easily capturing the audience:

...Be a monster! Be a fiend. That is how you will survive."

Sunny shuddered, knowing that he was in for a very, very long couple of hours.

The play followed two Ascended. One of them was an antihero only known as the Captain, who led a convoy of refugees on a tumultuous journey across the Antarctic Center. He possessed a devilish charm and a cynical personality, but displayed a surprising amount of valor and resolve, as well, hiding a compassionate heart under the snide facade of a disillusioned fatalist.

The other was a mysterious female warrior who joined the army in the early stages of the campaign, displaying stunning power and indomitable courage. She was aloof, but noble and selfless, breaking the tide of several dire battles while refusing to say anythhing about her background and allegiance.

The two quickly became known as the Devil of Antarctica and its Guardian Angel, respectively. Their paths intersected in the middle of the play, during the tragic siege of Falcon Scott, where a tentative romance bloomed between them against the bleak backdrop of war.

Sunny was perfectly expressionless as he watched the play,

'No, but.., how does it even make sense? Am I romancing myself?’

He was too embarrassed to look at Nephis, staring directly ahead.

'Ah, I want to die…’

The production was stellar, and the actors were quite talented. The story was not even that tasteless, even if it twisted most facts to fit the narrative presented by the government propaganda machine at the time. It was just that... Sunny had been there!

And he certainly had not been in the habit of constantly spewing witty one-liners, sharing gems of jaded wisdom with the admiring soldiers, and looking soulfully into the distance every other minute!

Worst of all, he felt that the play would be a hit.

The horror!

'And there I was feeling happy that there was no video streaming services in the Dream Realm!’

Feeling a strong desire to manifest a swarm of shadows and collapse the roof of the theater, he furtively glanced at Nephis.

Coincidentally, she was also looking at him at that moment.

Just then, the first act concluded, and the lights went on.

Nephis tilted her head a little and asked neutrally:

"How do you like the play, Master Sunless?"

Sunny forced out a smile.

It was one of the hardest things he had done in his life... and he had put his head back after being decapitated once!

He lingered for a few moments, and then said in a flat tone:

...It's directed well. I'm not a fan, though"

Nephis chuckled, then sighed.

"I am sorry. I don't know what Cassie was thinking... you participated in the Southern Campaign as well, after all. It must be unpleasant, to see a censored version of the calamity you lived through on the stage."

She looked at the curtain and shook her head.

"I heard that the Captain is based on a real person. I was in East Antarctica, though, so I wouldn't know. He must have been quite a character."

Sunny did not respond.

'He's quite a character, indeed...'

They spent the intermission in awkward silence. Sunny was thinking of a way to convince Nephis to leave, but sadly, he couldn't think of any. Especially due to her status... an ordinary person could slip away in the middle of a play, but if Changing Star did it, the theater would go bankrupt the next day, Such was the power of her glorious fame.

Eventually, it was time for the second act to start It was then that Nephis said calmly, never looking away from the stage.

"We are being watched."

Sunny raised an eyebrow. He usually kept his shadow sense restrained in Bastion, so he wouldn't know.

"Who would anyone be watching us?"

She sighed.

"You don't have to worry. It's nothing serious... someone is probably suspicious and wants to confirm the nature of our relationship."

He relaxed.

"Oh."

She had just survived an assassination attempt recently, and the whole world was in turmoil as a result. There were no riots on the streets, but tensions were running high. If something happened to Nephis in the meantime... he was afraid that everything would explode.

So, even though it was unpleasant to know that someone was spying on them, Sunny felt relieved. Not for long, though. Because the second act had started.

On the stage, the Falcon Scott had fallen, and the Devil was separated from the Angel during the evacuation, carried away unconscious on the last ship. The latter was presumed to have perished in the siege.

The second part of the story took place in East Antarctica, where the forces sent by the Legacy clans helped to stem the tide of Nightmare Creatures. The Captain, grief-stricken and heartbroken, went from gazing soulfully into the distance every other minute to doing so about every thirty seconds. The frequency of his sardonic remarks decreased, but his general disposition had only grown more obnoxious.

Sunny was in a foul mood and grinding his teeth.

...It was then, however, that Nephis raised a hand and wrapped her arm around him firmly, pulling him closer in the darkness.

He froze.

'What... what is she doing?’

"Please forgive me, Master Sunless. We must play our parts, as well."

She was terribly close.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Then, a small smile slowly crept onto his face.

"Ah, yes. I guess there's no helping it."

He placed his head on her shoulder in an intimate display.

Whoever was watching them should be able to confirm the nature of their relationship from that scene. What could he do? There was no choice... he had to cooperate earnestly.

Held comfortably in Neph's embrace, Sunny smiled with satisfaction.

'I must admit…’

The second part of the play was much better than the first.

It was actually not bad at all.

The director really knew what they were doing!