1808 Down the River

Sunny held Neph's hand to help her step into the boat, then untied it, pushed it away from the berth, and jumped inside nimbly. His movements were so light that the boat did not rock at all.

Nephis sat down on the bench at the front, while he took his place on the bench at the stern. They were facing each other, with only the picnic basket between them.

He took the oars and moved them gently, guiding the boat to the middle of the river. It floated smoothly, cutting the water with a pleasant sound. The lively streets of Bastion crawled past them, with plenty of interesting scenes to be seen. The further from the shore they moved, the quieter it became, until the bustle of the city had turned into a quiet hum.

Sunny was not looking around, though. He was looking at Nephis, and in turn, she was looking at him.

Both were smiling.

Nephis leaned to the side and lowered a hand into the water. Watching her fingers cut its surface, she sighed deeply, and then closed her eyes for a moment. Her features relaxed.

"How peaceful."

Hearing her say that made him happy.

Sunny extended his shadow sense in all directions, so he knew that there were no Nightmare Creatures hiding under the water. He did not spoil the mood by telling her to be careful. Instead, he used the few moments she had her eyes closed to stare at her with an unabashed craving.

Then, he averted his eyes and concentrated on rowing.

After a while, Nephis looked at him with a subtle smile. The city was behind them by then - there were no other boats on the river, and no ships in sight. The only sounds breaking the silence were the rustle of water and the soft splashes produced by the oars.

She leaned back a little and asked in a leisurely tone:

"Won't you grow tired from rowing?"

Sunny chuckled. It was obviously a question asked for the sake of being polite. He was supposed to be a Master, after all - guiding a small boat downriver would not tire him. He could have used a measure of strength suitable for an Ascended and sent the boat flying at great speed to strain himself, but then the oars would probably explode into splinters.

That wouldn't be nice at all.

"Oh, I might not look it, but actually, I'm quite strong."

He let go of one of the oars for a moment and showed her his hand.

"These hands of mine can crush mountains."

Nephis laughed.

"I'm sure. Still, I feel guilty watching you do all the work."

Sunny remained silent for a moment. Then, his smile turned a little daring.

"Why don't you come here and help me, then?"

She looked at him, then rose with a smile and moved to the rear bench. Sunny shifted to the side to give her some room. A few moments later, they were sitting side by side, each holding one oar.

The bench wasn't quite wide enough to fit two people, so their bodies were pressed tightly against each other.

The cool breeze was caressing them gently, and the sun reflected beautifully from the surface of the water. The river was peaceful and quiet. Sunny could feel the heat of her body through his clothes, and she could undoubtedly feel his.

He inhaled deeply.

Rowing a boat in this manner was a little tricky. The oars had to move both simultaneously and with equal amounts of force - otherwise, the small vessel would either turn to the shore or start spinning in place.

But Sunny and Nephis easily fell into a comfortable rhythm. They were perfectly in syne - the oars rose and fell in tandem with each other, and the boat remained perfectly straight.

It was rocking a little, though, and due to the fact that they were so close, each holding an oar with one hand, maintaining balance was a little tedious,

Sunny moved his free arm and wrapped it around Neph's waist, firmly holding her in place. She glanced at him with a smile, then did the same.

Just like that, they remained silent for a while, rowing in harmony while enjoying the breeze, the peaceful quiet of the river, and each other's warmth.

The silence between them wasn't awkward or tense. Instead, it was comfortable and soothing, easing their tired minds.

After a while, Nephis looked at him and asked:

"What are you thinking about?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then shrugged slightly.

"Just... life, I guess. How it is sometimes full of sorrow, and sometimes full of joy."

She studied his face carefully, then turned to enjoy the view of the river.

"Interesting... my life is quite different, I think. I am content at times, and at other times I am resentful. But I don't really feel joy or sorrow that much. Mostly, I am just... focused. Actually, I feel a little guilty if I am too happy or too sad. It makes me feel that I have allowed myself to become distracted."

He looked at her curiously.

That was how Nephis was. She lived in service of her goal... which didn't mean that she was miserable. It just meant that her mind was preoccupied with practical matters, and she mostly drew both satisfaction and discontent from the actions undertaken to realize her aspiration.

That was a valid way to live a life. Still... Sunny felt that she was being too harsh on herself.

He hesitated for a moment.

"Really? Then, when was the last time you felt joy? And when was the last time you felt sorrow?"

Nephis looked at the river with a faint smile. She remained silent for a bit, then answered in an easy tone:

"I don't quite remember."

Sunny kept looking at her, not saying anything.

Was it because it was not important to her, so she had forgotten?

Or was it because her joys and sorrows had all been connected to him?

He hugged her tighter.

Sensing it, she turned to face him and smiled.

"What about you?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times and answered honestly:

"Why, I am full of joy right now."

Hearing Neph laugh, he smiled brightly.

"As for sorrow... I had to throw out a batch of strawberries because there were too few customers in the café as of late. That was really sad."

Her laugh grew a little louder. That made him happy, as well.

After a while, Nephis looked at him, lingered for a few moments, and then said neutrally:

"This... was a really great idea. I have a bit of history with boats, you know."

Sunny knew, of course. From the boat she had built from the bones of a demon to cross the Dark Sea to Ananke's ketch, the two of them had shared many poignant moments while rocking on the water.

Nephis sighed.

"I once sailed down a great river with a dear person. That person is gone, but the fondness remains."

He couldn't do anything but hold her close.

Sunny knew that she was talking about Ananke. But even though she could not remember him, these words described the two of them, too.

Looking ahead, he smiled and said:

"Then, it's good to forge new memories, To remember them fondly as well, one day in the future."

Eventually, the beach he had wanted to take her to appeared in sight.

By then, basked in her warmth, Sunny felt a bit regretful that it did.