1835 Next Morning

Sunny reached Bastion in the dead of night. He tied the boat to the pier, climbed ashore, and walked slowly in the direction of the Brilliant Emporium. There was a lot on his mind, so he was not in a hurry to get home.

Eventually, though, he did.

The Marvelous Mimic opened its door unprompted to welcome him back. It even retracted the terrifying fangs, which were usually out at night, back inside the door frame.

Sunny patted the lintel, walked into the dining hall absentmindedly, placed the picnic basket on a table, and sighed.

He was a bit tired, but doubted that he would be able to sleep tonight.

And indeed, Sunny wasn't able to douse the flames blazing in his mind for a long time. He tossed and turned in the bed, only falling asleep shortly before dawn.

As a result, he overslept, only waking up from the sounds of Aiko entering the shop. Since his petite assistant had showed up for work, the morning crowd wasn't far behind, either.

Sunny sat up and rubbed his face, then went about washing up for the long day ahead.

'Will she come?'

He figured that Nephis would need a long time to sort her feelings out, but still put extra effort into making himself look presentable on the off chance that she would not.

Aiko's voice resounded from downstairs while he was in the middle of his routine.

"Hey, boss! What should I do with the basket?"

Sunny swept his wet hair back and responded casually:

"... Ah there are some dirty dishes inside. Give them a rinse."

He washed them in the river yesterday, but everything still needed to be cleaned properly.

Sunny continued to get himself ready. There were no mirrors inside the Mimic, so he used the gloomy shadow to look at himself instead.

Needless to say, the shadow was not amused by having to stare at his mug first thing in the morning... or ever, really.

'That guy never changes...'

It was then that Sunny froze, opened his eyes wide, then dashed down while summoning the Nebulous Mantle.

"N0, Aiko! Wait!"

But it was too late.

The petite girl was standing in the kitchen, the picnic basket floating in the air by her side. It was open, and Aiko... was holding a beautiful white dress in her hands.

Sunny grew still.

"That..."

She looked at him with wide eyes and asked in a small voice:

"Boss... uh... why did you bring a girl's dress back from your picnic?"

Sunny stammered:

"It's n—not what you think... I didn't do anything!

She just ran off... without her dress... it happened that way..."

Aiko stared at the dress silently.

Then, a small frown appeared on her face.

"Wait a minute... these measurements..."

In the next moment, she was standing next to Sunny, poking him in the chest with a finger.

"That is Changing Star's dress! You! You debaucherous scoundrel! What did you do to Nephis? !"

Sunny softened the Onyx Shell, afraid that Aiko would bruise her finger, and pretended to reel back from her jabs.

"I didn't do anything! We were just escaping the heat in the river... and what do you mean, scoundrel? ! Weren't you the one who encouraged me to strike while the iron was hot? !"

"When did I ever? !"

"Ouch! I don't remember! But you definitely did!"

It was then that the silver bell hanging above the door rang, and they both froze.

Someone was standing at the entrance, looking at them calmly.

Tasteful white clothes, beautiful figure, lustrous silver hair...

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

It was Nephis.

She lowered her gaze and looked at the dress, which Aiko was still holding in her hand.

Nephis smiled politely.

"Oh. I've been looking for that."

Walking into the kitchen, she took it from the petite girl's hand and looked at Sunny with sparkling eyes.

"Thank you for picking it up, Master Sunless."

He inhaled slowly.

"... Ah y—yes. Sure."

Why was she acting so nonchalant? What was she thinking?

'Did she come here to... to condemn me, or to embrace me?'

He gulped and asked cautiously:

"I. . I hope everything is fine. After what happened yesterday."

Nephis nodded curtly.

"It's fine."

Then, she frowned a bit and mumbled quietly:

"No, actually, now that I think about it... after what happened last night, I'll need to replace some furniture...'

Sunny flinched.

"... What?"

At the same time, Aiko's eyes widened even more.

"What? !"

Nephis looked at them in confusion.

"Oh. Sorry. I was just talking to myself."

She paused for a moment, noticing their expressions, and then added hesitantly:

"Uh... did I say something wrong again?"

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Eventually, Sunny managed to leave stunned Aiko behind and lead Nephis to somewhere more private.

And now that they were there, he was silently cursing himself.

'No, but... am I an idiot? Why didn't I go downstairs, to the Memory shop? Why did I bring her upstairs instead? !'

Currently, there were... in his bedroom.

While Sunny was berating himself, Nephis looked around with curiosity.

"Is that where you sleep? This version of you, I mean."

Sunny forced out a smile.

"... Ah yes. At least one incarnation of me has to, from time to time. The others don't sleep, but since I am supposed to be the most human one, I do."

He silently evaluated his bedroom and thanked the dead gods for the habit of always making his bed first thing in the morning. The room was clean and cozy, with a beautiful view of the Mirror Lake beyond the window. The Castle was bathed in the golden light of dawn... and there, above it, the Ivory Island was shrouded by clouds.

Nephis stared at his bed for a few moments, as if trying to remember something, then turned away and looked out of the window.

A hint of a smile appeared on her lips.

"I think I can see my window from here."

Sunny would lie if he said that he had not spent plenty of time staring at the distant silhouette of the Ivory Tower, so he kept silent.

Instead, he gestured to a few items decorating his room.

"These are some curios that I collected in the Dream Realm over the years. They are... nothing much. But exploring the past is one of my hobbies."

Nephis studied them for a while, then turned to face him and said simply:

"I know."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"You... know?"

She hesitated for a few moments.

"The Exploration Report on the Tomb of Ariel, written by Nobody. You are Nobody... aren't you?”