1965 Slow Burn

Eventually, they ended up sitting at a table across from each other. Nephis was delighting in the meal Sunny had prepared, savoring it with a satisfied smile on her captivating lips. She acted calm and composed, but her face was still a little flushed. Her eyes glistened in the sunlit expanse of the spacious stone chamber.

Sunny, meanwhile, was savoring watching Nephis eat. He just sat quietly, following her movements with his gaze, smiling faintly. He felt content, and his heart was at peace...

Actually, no. It was very much not at peace —instead, it was beating wildly, and he felt as if his entire body was on fire. It took all his willpower to stay still, maintain his composure, and keep the deep, carnal hunger from reaching his eyes.

He really needed a cold shower... a very, very cold shower.

Honestly, it was too cruel. Nephis was inexperienced, and therefore irresponsible with showing him physical affection... did she really expect him to just go and cool down after being set on fire so thoroughly by her touch, her scent, and her lips? Sure, they tasted sweeter that he could describe — but Sunny was a man, and men were not usually satiated by a little taste. In fact, he felt quite insatiable at the moment.

Her presence, which naturally inspired and impassioned desires, was not helping the situation one bit.

Sunny was ready to devour her like a beast. But, he couldn't.

'Curse it. Why did I cultivate this soft and gallant image? I should have pretended to be a wild and unrestrained shopkeeper instead!'

A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.

'What is this sweet torture?'

Still, he was not in a hurry. He was enjoying the slow burn of their strange romance very much. The flirting, the tender moments of mundane closeness, the exhilarating rush of physical passion... he wanted to savor every second of it.

And, deep down, he was a little reluctant to take the next step already.

Sunny and Nephis were adults, and they both knew what they wanted. However... he was very aware of how differently they viewed each other. Nephis was fond of him, sure. She enjoyed his company greatly, and there was undeniable physical attraction between them.

She might have even begun to develop an emotional connection, learning to care for and depend on him. She certainly trusted him a great deal.

But at the end of the day, Sunny was still a stranger to Nephis. She had only known him for a few months, after all... and while some of the experiences the two of them had shared were quite intense, they could never compare to the lifetime bond that still dwelled in his heart.

A bond that Nephis did not remember.

So... deep down, Sunny hoped that she would at least learn to value him more before their relationship evolved into something more meaningful and irreversible.

Before that happened, he would have to be satisfied with what existed between them now. It was fine... he had waited to be with her for many years, and he could wait a little longer. These little sweet moments were precious enough, and he wasn't going to rush.

As Sunny was thinking about that, Nephis glanced at him with a smile and... and winked innocently.

His body shivered.

'...No, I take it back.'

What was the point of being slow and steady? Fortune favored the bold! He had waited for almost ten years, already, so there was no harm in rushing at all!

If Nephis beckoned him with a finger, he would not hesitate to rush across the finish line right there and then.

The furniture in Neph's chamber might not survive.

Watching his eyes grow a few shades darker, Nephis chuckled.

"You look really funny."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then asked in a slightly hoarse voice:

"Oh? How so?"

She put a grape into her mouth, enjoyed it thoroughly, and then shrugged with a smile.

"It's just that... you're so intense, but also can't stop yawning. It is so cute... I mean, such a contrast!"

She reached for another grape, then seemed to change her mind.

"Have you not gotten any rest lately?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Have I been yawning?'

He hadn't noticed at all.

Suddenly, he was embarrassed.

'I wasn't yawning... before... right?'

Not just embarrassed, mortified!

Sunny coughed.

"Oh... yeah. To be honest, I haven't slept for a couple of weeks. I've been busy working on my sorcery ever since the battle at Vanishing Lake. Right! I created quite a few Memories as practice. Let me show you..."

He was about to summon the Bag of Withholding, but then froze for a few moments.

"Uh... before that..."

With that, he manifested the gloomy shadow into an avatar.

A second later, a second Sunny was standing near the table, wrapped in clothes made from shadows. Nephis looked at him in surprise, and at that moment, the avatar swayed, clutched at his chest with a grimace, and fell to one knee.

The wound dealt to him by the black arrow was refusing to heal. Usually, a Saint would be able to recover from a non-lethal injury quite swiftly, but this one had turned out to be unusually stubborn. Even though it wasn't getting worse, it wasn't getting any better, either.

Which was a real shame, because Sunny would have been able to weave much faster with the help of an additional avatar.

"What happened?"

Neph's voice was full of alarm.

Sunny endured the pain, looked up at her with a pale face, and smiled weakly.

"Well. How do I say this... I visited the Shadow Realm and was shot by an arrow through the heart?"

Her eyes widened.

Nephis remained still for a short moment, and then pushed the grapes away.

"And you are only telling me this now?!"

As a soft white radiance enveloped her hands, Sunny coughed — this time because he was drowning in blood, as opposed to out of embarrassment — and gave her an apologetic smile.

"I just... didn't want... to cause you pain..."