1966 Fragile Flowers

Once again, Sunny felt Neph's gentle touch, and a pleasant warmth enveloped his body, washing all his pain away.

The relief was palpable and exhilarating, dazing him for a short moment.

Of course, it was darkened by the knowledge that the pain he was liberated from was at least equal, and very likely much inferior, to the pain Nephis endured for his sake in return.

As the soft radiance enveloping her hands dimmed and was extinguished, she supported the avatar and looked at Master Sunless, who was still sitting at the table.

Her expression was strangely dark for a moment, and then turned stern.

"...No more of that nonsense."

Confused, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

Nephis remained silent for a moment, then sighed deeply and let go of the avatar.

Patting him on the shoulder, she rose from the floor and walked back to her chair.

"The sparing me the pain nonsense."

Nephis took a glass filled with fragrant wine, drank deeply from it, and then carefully placed it down.

"If I were wounded and in pain right in front of you, and you had the power to stop my suffering, would you have hesitated to help me because of a few fleeting moments of agony?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. I mean... seeing someone I care about suffer would have been quite agonizing, anyway."

Nephis nodded slowly.

"Exactly. So, never hesitate to ask me for help... if you will."

Sunny did not say anything for a while. Then, he dismissed the avatar and smiled mischievously.

"...Is this your roundabout way of saying that you care about me, Lady Nephis?"

She scoffed.

"Seriously... how come I am only ever surrounded by such people?"

Nephis sighed and shook her head in resignation.

"Both you and Cassie. She has this infuriating habit of bottling things up, suffering in silence, and treating me like some kind of fragile flower. I watched her retreat into herself for four entire years, never admitting what was wrong..."

Sunny's eyes glistened.

He knew that Cassie could have been very well hearing this conversation, but could not endure the temptation to share his grievances with a fellow victim of the blind seer's cagey nature.

"Right? She's so secretive! Like, who in their right mind would keep so much to themselves? For years! Vital information, too!"

Of course, he knew that Cassie had most likely only been withdrawn in the last four years because she simply couldn't make Nephis — or anyone, really, except for Sunny himself —remember what she had to say.

And he knew that Cassie's habit of keeping secrets close to her chest was because of the trauma of watching her visions become self-fulfilling prophecies in the most horrible way — Sunny was personally responsible for cementing that trauma in her heart, after all.

But still. Was there anyone who could pass on the chance to complain about a friend to someone who knew them as well?

Neph's eyes glistened with fervor.

"Right! She didn't even tell me that you were the Lord of Shadows! So despicable!"

Sunny opened his mouth to agree, then closed it and coughed.

"Well, that... was my fault, really..."

Nephis looked at him with an appalled expression, but couldn't maintain it for long and laughed.

"Oh, I know."

Then, she lowered her head and gave him a curious glance.

It seemed like she wanted to ask something, but in the end, she did not.

It was only then that Sunny realized that he had let more than he wanted to slip. His words implied that he had known Cassie for a long, long time.

Nephis must have noticed that, but decided to remain silent.

By now, she had to know that there was a strange connection between her and Sunny. But, perhaps because of the conversation they had had once in Bastion, she never pressed him to share the truth.

Sunny was thankful for that, because he knew that he would not be able to answer.

...But at the same time, it pained him, because he wanted for her to ask the question so badly.

It was a strange thing.

Nephis studied his face for a bit, then leaned back and let out a sigh.

Then, she raised an eyebrow.

"So... what was it about visiting the Shadow Realm and being shot through the heart by an arrow?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"...Who dared?"

Sunny spent some time telling Nephis about the breakthrough he had made during the battle against Revel, the subsequent experiments he performed, and his brief visit to the Shadow Realm.

The conversation had taken longer than he expected because he had to be very careful with his words. Some things, he could share freely. Some, he had to be very vague about to avoid watching Nephis forget everything he said.

In the end, though, she understood most of what had happened.

Sunny then proceeded to boast about the Memories he had crafted.

"...And this is the [Green Canteen]. At its core, it is a spatial storage Memory — but not a simple one! Of course, I had to manage its weight first and foremost, just like the Bag of Withholding. But that's not all. I was also able to weave an enchantment that allows it to purify water — it can even desalinate it, albeit slowly. Now, that created a problem of its own — how to separate the purified water, the polluted water, and the byproducts of purification, including salt..."

Noticing that Nephis was looking at him with an amused smile, Sunny stopped.

"...What?"

She shook her head lightly.

"It's nothing, Sunny. I'm just seeing another one of your many faces. I've never seen you so enthused about anything, I think."

Sunny's gaze slipped to her lips. He lingered for a moment.

"I'm sure there was something I was more enthused about."

Nephis laughed.

"Oh, yes... I felt your enthusiasm quite clearly..."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Then, he shook his head.

"Well, you're not wrong. We are different, after all, you and I."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"Different? How so?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, looking at the enchanted canteen in his hand. Then, he offered her a faint smile.

"You were born to a family of warriors. You have inherited swordsmanship from your father, and wielding a sword is both your passion and your calling. I, however... only picked up the sword out of necessity. I've gotten quite good at wielding it, true. But if left alone, I would have much preferred to do something else. Like running a Memory store, writing academic papers, or managing a small restaurant."

Nephis seemed surprised by his words.

"Really?"

Once again, it looked like she wanted to ask more. But she held herself back, sensing that he wouldn't answer.

Sunny tried to ignore the awkward pause and nodded.

"Sure. I am not a very brave and virtuous person by nature. If anything, my true nature is fifty percent greed and fifty percent hedonism. Oh, and a little bit of spite."

Neph smiled gently.

"It seemed that you are more remarkable than I thought, then, Master Sunless. Because it takes much more effort to become who you are now while going against your nature."

She sighed.

"It even makes me feel insecure about my own swordsmanship. After all, as you said, it is not only my calling, but also my inheritance."

Hearing that, Sunny froze for a moment.

'Right.'

Her inheritance...

He wanted to spend more time with Nephis, but there was something more important than their reunion.

Sunny hesitated a little, then dismissed the [Green Canteen] and said tentatively:

"About that... I think you should talk to Cassie soon. We have discovered something important. As well as something that might be of great value to you, and only you."