1693 Convincing Lie

Very soon, Sunny personally delivered a portion of his nearly immaculate waffles to Nephis, complete with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and some freshly cut strawberries.

'I think I've outdone myself this time! if I do say so myself...'

He was in a great mood. Sunny wasn't sure what had come over him, but he was especially inspired today while making the waffles. It almost felt like he was on the verge of breaking through the bottleneck of his culinary skill.

Perhaps the missing ingredient was not the waffles themselves, but the customer for whom he was making them?

Contemplating these profound issues, he sat across from Nephis and smiled.

She wasn't wearing that clumsy disguise of hers today, so he could enjoy the sight of her lustrous silver locks. The few customers present in the dining hall were frozen in stunned awe, the name Changing Star ready to fall from their lips. Sunlight seemed especially radiant in her presence, bathing the Brilliant Emporium in a warm glow.

Sunny felt his heartbeat quickening.

Nephis spared him a short glance, then looked away to take a sip of tea. Finally, she picked up the spoon and took a small bite of the waffle with an aloof expression.

'She won't even look at me. Well, makes sense.’

Why would she?'

Unlike Sunny, who couldn't herp stealing glances at Nephis, she was probably preoccupied with different thoughts.

He sighed.

"I can't help but notice that you are not hiding your identity anymore, Lady Nephis. I was under the assumption that you wanted to keep the commission secret, though. What changed?"

She put the spoon down, gave the waffles a strange stare, and then finally faced him.

"I still do. However, plans had to change due to our last conversation. Considering that we will have to spend a lot of time together, trying to hide our connection from Valor is not an option. They'll discover a new person in my immediate circle sooner than later... so, we will have to resort to a bit of misdirection, instead."

A subtle smile touched her lips.

"Congratulations, Master Sunless. You are now the official Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers - an independent specialist we've hired to handle sales and acquisitions of sorcerous equipment. Of course, you will receive a generous commission for every deal you facilitate... which will pay for the actual commission."

As Sunny froze, unable to speak, she studied his face for a few moments and then returned to the waffles with a small, but seemingly pleased smile.

‘...Goddamn! We've struck it rich, Aiko!'

Signing an official contract with the Fire Keepers was not much different from receiving a government tender. The Memory Boutique side of the Brilliant Emporium was about to explode in revenue... all of that simply to bury the exchange of soul shards for the actual work Sunny was being hired to do.

'Very crafty.’

It was Cassie who had come up with that scheme, without a doubt.

However... something still did not make sense.

He frowned slightly.

"That is great news, and I am definitely delighted to hear it. But, my lady... even so, isn't it a little bit too strange for you to deliver the news personally? Surely, sending one of your subordinates would have been much more in line with such an arrangement."

Nephis was an exalted existence even among Saints. She would have never had to deal with something as mundane as hiring a procurement specialist personally. So, there was an obvious contradiction between her intention to create a cover for him and her actions, which only served to blow it.

She remained silent for a while, savoring her tea and dessert or pretending to savor them, most likely. It was hard to tell from her expression if she was really enjoying the taste of what Sunny had cooked... which, honestly speaking, was a little heartbreaking.

But that was how Nephis was. She had never really had a sweet tooth.

Still, her acting skills must have improved tremendously in the past four years. Her pretense of being engrossed in his waffles was incredibly convincing. Sunny wasn't sure that he could have put on such a performance himself.

Eventually, she put the spoon down with a masterfully acted out hint of reluctance.

"Huh? Oh. You are correct, but that would not have solved the problem. You and I are going to be seen together often, after all, and there needs to be an explanation. So, I am here to sow the seeds of that explanation. The Memory Purveyor position is an intentionally flimsy misdirection no one would really buy it, considering the circumstances."

Nephis paused for a moment.

"So, there will be a deeper layer of deception hidden beneath it."

Sunny smiled.

"A double misdirection?"

She smiled faintly in response and nodded.

"Once someone becomes suspicious of your official position and digs deeper, they'll discover the prepared explanation and come to a false conclusion, thinking that they've discovered the truth. Not knowing that what they've discovered is actually another, more convincing lie."

'Definitely Cassie's idea.’

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"And that more convincing lie is..."

Nephis shifted a little.

"Well. I mean no offense, Master Sunless, but nothing about your background suggests that you are worthy of my attention. However... how do 1 say this... you must have looked in the mirror. What do you think people will assume when they see me keeping someone like that by my side?"

He blinked a couple of times, confused.

"Actually... I avoid mirrors. I'm sorry, Lady Nephis, but I don't quite understand what you mean.”

Strangely enough, Nephis... seemed stumped.

She remained silent for a while, then took a sip of tea.

Then, she cleared her throat.

"What I mean to say... is that people will assume that I am infatuated with you. That I've arranged for you to have a position with the Fire Keepers because you are my paramour. So, I am here today to plant the seeds of that impression... Master Sunless."

'A... paramour...'

Sunny froze.

He was suddenly happy that he had not brought himself a cup of tea, as well, because he would have definitely spat it all out at that moment.

The implications of what Nephis had said slowly seeped into his mind.

It wasn't that outrageous... on the contrary, it was an ingenious lie that would perfectly explain why the two of them were spending time together. People loved nothing more than salacious rumors, after all.

But, still...

'What she's trying to say is that my cover... will be... that I'm her boy toy?!'

Sunny was mortified.

...But also, intrigued.

But also mortified.

The mix of emotions must have been apparent on his face, because Nephis suddenly picked her cup, looked away, and said evenly:

"It is just for the sake of deception, of course. I'll understand if you're uncomfortable with this arrangement."

Sunny slowly shook his head and forced out a pale smile:

"I'm... I'm not... uncomfortable."

She looked at him with a hint of concern.

"Are you sure? Come to think of it... I didn't even ask if you have a partner. I wouldn't want for your girlfriend to misunderstand..."

Sunny's smile grew brittle.

"I am sure... and there's no one like that. This arrangement works, for me. I think it's a splendid idea... very deceptive..."

Internally, though, he was imploding.

[Saint Cassia... care to explain yourself?!]