1698 Auntie Effie's Lessons

'I've... made a terrible mistake.'

In hindsight, Sunny should have known that he was digging his own grave. It was just that he did not see Effie often these days, and so, he had forgotten...

That Effie's corrupting influence was just as terrible as the Corruption of the Void itself.

No, was it even more terrible?

In any case, the opportunities to stump the boisterous huntress were too rare! He simply could not pass on the chance to fluster her. More importantly... while Sunny knew that Nephis and Effie were close, Master Sunless had no way of knowing that. So, based on what he was supposed to know, the correct course of action had to be furthering the agreed-upon deception.

Therefore, Sunny passed the wine to Nephis. And then took her hand.

Why did he do that?

Well, simply put... because he could.

If there was an opportunity to hold Neph's hand, why would he not? Effie had accidentally provided him with a convenient reason, as well. It was all working out great...

Sunny had promised himself to enjoy the odd situation, and he was going to enjoy it as much as he could.

...Neph's hand felt soft and cool in his grasp.

He remained comparatively calm. That was not the first time the two of them held hands, after all, so there was no reason for him to lose composure. Sunny enjoyed the feeling silently, a small smile finding its way onto his face.

Of course, it was only a familiar situation from his point of view. For Nephis, suddenly holding hands with a stranger must have been surprising. Her expression did not really change, but he could feel a subtle tension in her shoulders. It seemed that she was a bit uncomfortable with his bold action... maybe even dismayed by it?

'Ah... did I mess up?

It was then that Effie's rattled expression slowly turned into a mischievous grin, and Sunny's eyes widened slightly. He had realized his mistake.

But by then, it was already too late.

'Oh, gods...'

Soon, he found himself sitting on a sofa side by side with Nephis, listening to Effie explain contraception to them... in gruesome detail...

What the hell? Weren't you the one who got pregnant in the middle of a disastrous military campaign?! Why are you, of all people, telling me this stuff?!'

On the other hand... perhaps Effie was the best person to teach people about safety, considering that she knew the consequences of carelessness better than most. Not that Sunny needed any teaching!

Although... truth be told, his knowledge on the topic was mostly limited to the precautions meant for mundane people, Awakened at most. At higher Ranks of power, things progressively became much more complicated.

Nephis remained silent and nonchalant, but he found himself listening with interest. There was business to be made there, as well!

That... that was definitely the reason why he was paying attention...

'Wait... why I am acting this way?'

He frowned slightly.

Truth be told, while his actions earlier were very much in line with his personality, Sunny felt strangely... extra, at the moment. After thinking for a while, he took a deep breath.

'Ah.'

He was being affected by Effie's presence. No... actually, his mood had been a bit strange ever since he met Nephis in the Nameless Temple. Was there such an element to her presence, as well? If so, there were two different sources influencing him, mixing and fusing in a chaotic manner.

The influence was in no way strong, and he could easily suppress it if he wanted to. But it did seem to release his natural inhibitions, a little.

'What a mess.'

Spending time in the company of powerful Saints was a strange affair.

Getting himself under control, Sunny decided that he had enough of Effie's teasing.

He smiled politely at her, waited for her to pause, and then asked leisurely:

"Oh, by the way, Saint Athena. I couldn't help but overhear... did you mention wanting to gobble up something tasty earlier? Was it something we serve in the Brilliant Emporium?"

Effie, who was taking a sip of wine, suddenly spat it out.

Sunny elegantly raised an arm, shielding Neph's white trousers from the rain of wine droplets with the folds of the Nebulous Mantle.

"I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?"

Effie coughed a few times and shook her head.

"No, no... it's alright. And thank you, but no! I have a husband!"

'Now you remember!'

He smiled.

"How is Ling's dad doing, by the way?"

Sunny did not have a lot of friends in Bastion, and apart from Aiko, that nameless guy was the closest thing he had to a buddy. They often shared stories about managing the Beast Farm and the Brilliant Emporium, exchanging ideas and the like. However, Ling's dad seemed to be busy lately, so they had not had time to catch up in a while.

Nephis was looking at them with a hint of curiosity... and a hint of relief? She had seemed utterly unaffected by Effie's graphic tirade before, but maybe Sunny was simply underestimating her poker face.

She raised an eyebrow and asked:

"You know each other?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes."

Effie wiped her chin and smiled.

"Ah, yes. We've had a surplus of produce at the farm for some time now, and the Brilliant Emporium is our main buyer. I haven't had the pleasure of dining there often, though. Still, Master Sunless is an incredible chef! Oh, and he also helped us a lot by enchanting a few items for the farm."

She hesitated for a moment, and then gave Nephis a bright smile and a thumbs up.

"Princess, I approve! Handsome, cooks well... and is great with his hands..."

The last part was said with emphasis, and accompanied by a wink. Nephis tilted her head in confusion.

"Well, yes. That is why I approached him."

Effie choked on her wine again.

Sunny, meanwhile, closed his eyes for a moment.

He knew that Nephis failed to understand the double meaning in Effie's words, and was referring to his skill as an enchanter. However... did she forget that they had not shared the details about the sword commission with the huntress, yet?!

He let go of her hand, afraid that his palms would become sweaty.

"A Memory commission. That is what she meant."

Nephis looked at him strangely.

"...Of course. What else would I have meant?"

Effie waved a hand in the air.

"Sure, sure. I belive you."

Followed by another wink.

'Damnation!'

Effie laughed, then put down her wine and looked at them, her eyes glistening with curiosity.

"Was that how the two of you first met?"

Nephis nodded.

"Yes."

But Sunny, compelled by his Flaw, answered at the same time:

"No."

Both Nephis and Effie looked at him with surprise.

Sunny forced out a smile.

'Crap.'