1705 Familiar

When Nephis returned, the courtyard seemed a little liveller than it had been before. A few people had strange expressions on their faces, and a few more seemed to be glancing at Master Sunless from time to time, their gazes full of contempt and amusement.

The charming enchanter himself was standing near the parapet of the ramparts, not paying the pointed gazes any attention. He was looking down calmly, a small smile playing on his lips.

Nephis frowned slightly.

'Has anyone bothered him?'

She had not anticipated that leaving Master Sunless alone for a few minutes would be a problem. It was only an hour or two after they had shown themselves together in public, after all... no matter what kind of rumors people wanted to spread, such things took time.

Nephis definitely did not want anything remotely unpleasant to happen to the delicate young man, so she had to be more watchful in the future.

Approaching Master Sunless, she said in her usual even tone:

"I am back. Did something happen?"

He turned and looked at her with a smile, then lowered his gaze awkwardly,

"Ah... well.., nothing too serious. There were a couple young men who wanted to have words with me. I'm afraid I falled to resolve the issue amicably. Oh, well... some people simply don't have manners. I'm rather used to such situations."

Neph's frown deepened.

Sunny, of course, was talking about himself - it was Sunny who didn't bother with basic manners unless he wanted to, and was therefore used to facing the violent consequences of running his venomous mouth.

But Nephis understood it differently.

[Cassie?]

Who were these young men, and how dare they be rude to Master Sunless?

Cassie responded a moment later, her voice deceptively smooth:

[...Tristan of Aegis Rose challenged Master Sunless to a duel.]

Nephis almost jumped. Of course, her calm expression remained the same... but her mind was suddenly awash with scorching flames.

[And you didn't warn me?! I explicitly asked you to keep an eye on him in my absence!]

Imagining the headstrong and domineering scion of the Aegis Rose clan bullying the elegant and gentle Master Sunless made her blood boil... for some reason. Feeling a degree of anger would have been both expected and reasonable, but even Nephis herself was surprised by the intensity of her reaction.

The image was simply... simply too offensive. Perhaps it was because she had just promised herself to protect the charming young man? Now, mere hours later, it had already come to this.

Nephis was on the verge of blushing again - this time, out of shame.

A sudden thought surfaced in her mind.

‘...Should I destroy the Aegis Rose clan?’

She blinked.

'No, wait, what am I thinking about?'

Luckily, at that moment, Cassie responded to her heated question:

[Neph, relax. What is with you today? Master Sunless is not entirely helpless, and Tristan of Aegis Rose is not entirely brainless. It's just that his Flaw is... well, you know how he is. In any case, he is not a malicious person, just a hot-blooded fool.

The worst that could have happened was one of them receiving a scrape...]

Nephis frowned.

[Wait, could have happened? Not could happen? The duel already took place?!]

Cassie coughed.

[About that... maybe don't mention anything to Master Sunless. It might be embarrassing for him... even though he technically didn't lose...]

Nephis studied the charming young man silently. Almost immediately, she noticed a thin vertical tear in his robe, where none had been before.

'I... I should offer to heal him...'

She imagined laying hands on his chest and infusing it with her flames. But how could she offer to heal him without hurting his pride? Cassie said not to mention the duel...

Nephis lingered for a few moments, and then reluctantly decided not to say anything. If Master Sunless wanted to keep what had happened to him a secret, she had to respect his wishes.

He was already on the losing side of their relationship... which was to say, employer and employee relationship!... so she had to be mindful of his pride.

The Aegis Rose clan, however...

Nephis usually stayed away from the internal politics of the Sword Domain, but if she wanted to exert influence, there was plenty of influence to go exert. Young Master Tristan was about to experience some hardship in his life... not enough to kill him, but plenty enough to teach him a few lessons on how to manage his Flaw better.

That will also clearly show the other clans that I favor Master Sunless, and that touching the person I favor... pretending to favor, I mean... will not go unpunished.

Which could further the deception and at the same time protect the charming enchanter going forward, thus killing two birds with one stone.

Nephis took a deep breath, still feeling guilty.

Then, she contained her emotions, nodded lightly, and said:

"Then, please, follow me. There won't be any other delays."

Master Sunless smiled and gallantly gestured forward.

"After you, my lady."

As they ascended the steps of the tall tower, Nephis remained silent and thought back to what Cassie had said.

‘...What is it with me today, indeed?'

Many people thought that Nephis was a cold and emotionless person, but they were all wrong. Her emotions, in fact, often burned with a frightening intensity... it was just that she rarely showed them, if at all.

Still, looking back, she felt like she had been too flustered in the last few hours - and even before that. Being in the company of the charming enchanter had a strange kind of effect on her...

Granted, anyone would have been flustered after what Effie had done! Just thinking about it... no, no, no. Nephis refused to think about it!

But it was an undeniable fact that she couldn't help but act unlike her usual self around Master Sunless, Usually, she would have been much more guarded around a stranger... but there was just something about the delicate young man that made her lower her guard.

It was like an odd sense of familiarity that had no reason to exist, but was deeply compelling... as if he reminded her of something, or someone, that she had been longing for without even knowing.

'How strange.’

The feeling was indeed strange... but not unwelcome. It tasted a little sweet, and a little bitter. But mostly, it was just there.

Nephis sighed.

'My behavior thus far has been nothing short of embarrassing. Considering that the two of us will be spending a lot of time together, I really need to maintain composure, and treat Master Sunless with the degree of respect he deserves.’

She glanced at him, her gaze once again lingering on his exquisite features and glistening onyx eyes for a moment too long.

Suddenly, Nephis felt that maintaining composure... would be a bit hard.