1769 Dreams Old and New

To hide her embarrassment, Nephis left to wash off her sweat and change clothes. When she regained her composure and returned, her hair still glistening with moisture, Master Sunless gave her a peculiar glance and looked away.

She would have thought that he was uncomfortable because of being hurt by her just now... if not for the fact that she could feel his desire burning hotly deep within his soul.

The gentle enchanter was not uncomfortable. He was just trying to hide being moved by her appearance... his yearning was usually vague and subdued, as if something was obscuring it from her senses. But she knew that it was there.

Being aware of something like that would make most people feel uneasy, or at least make them act as if they were uneasy. However, Nephis did not mind too much either way.

As her ability to sense longing developed, she had come to know that humans were creatures led by their desires, and that this kind of yearning was both the most common and the one they hid most thoroughly. It had been a bit of a shock for her to learn how many men secretly felt it in her presence, but she quickly came to peace with it.

It was simply human nature. What mattered was not how they felt, but how they chose to act. Some were slaves to their desires, while some were masters of themselves, and lived their lives with clear minds.

Master Sunless was never unpleasant in his actions, and treated her with the utmost decorum. His mind was clear, and his intentions were pure. So, Nephis was not at all appalled by the hidden flames burning in his soul.

In fact, for the first time, she was a bit pleased to know that someone felt that way about her.

At least she wasn't the only one getting flustered all the time!

Now that the sword demonstration was over, there was some time left before the next item on their schedule. The schedule had been prepared by Cassie, who was in charge of maintaining the facade of their fake relationship and keeping the sword commission a secret, but it wasn't very strict. So, Nephis and Master Sunless had some freedom in what they chose to do.

Today, for example, he had prepared a picnic.

Nephis had a vague notion that picnics were usually held in nicer settings, but due to the difficulty of finding privacy in Bastion, they were forced to eat right here in the martial hall.

She sighed wistfully.

'Maybe I should invite him to the Ivory Island next time, It's peaceful there, and the lake is beautiful But then, she blushed slightly.’

Would that be considered inviting a man over? She lived on the Ivory Island, after all... what would he think?

What would she want him to think?

The charming enchanter, meanwhile, spread a beautiful tablecloth on the bench and placed various snacks on it. There was also a jar of freshly squeezed fruit juice, and some ice to keep it cool.

Smiling, he gestured to the food.

"Please enjoy, Lady Nephis."

She was quite hungry after the strenuous sword practice, so his invitation was most welcome.

Truth be told, Nephis had never paid much attention to food... but everything prepared by Master Sunless was simply too delicious. She enjoyed these meals quite a bit.

Picking up a sandwich, she took a bite. The bread was fresh and crisp, the meat had a delightful texture, and the combination of lettuce and tomatoes was just right to make the sandwich juicy without becoming soggy. The homemade sauce added enough flavor to make the ingredients shine, but not so much as to overwhelm their natural taste.

It was delectable.

One could tell a lot about an Awakened from their cooking. Nephis had tasted enough meals prepared by Master Sunless to guess a few things, as well.

His habits were very eclectic, like those of a man who had wandered a lot. There was a certain spontaneity to them, as well, hinting that his skill had developed gradually by trial and error, as opposed to having been taught by experienced tutors of a Legacy clan.

There were influences of Bastion and several other regions in the sword Domain, the efficient practicality common among the veterans of the Southern Campaign, and even hints of the Forgotten Shore in his cooking - the latter most likely picked up from working in the kitchen with Aiko.

He was a very talented cook. Nephis had tasted dishes prepared for the royal table by renowned chefs, and while Master Sunless was not nearly as sophisticated, she found herself preferring his simple cooking to those exquisite meals... by far.

She looked at him, finished her delicious sandwich, and asked with curiosity:

"Were you always good at cooking, Master Sunless?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"No, not at all. Actually, I grew up eating nothing but synthpaste. I only tasted real food after becoming a Sleeper, at the Academy. Let me tell you, Lady Nephis... it was quite a shock!"

Nephis felt sad for a moment. How poor his background must have been, to only get access to palatable food after becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell? She had not known that about him. Dreams Old and New

Now that Nephis thought about it, she knew very little about the young enchanter, despite having spent time with him on many occasions.

She hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"Was that why you decided to open a restaurant?"

Master Sunless looked at her with a surprise and remained silent for a bit. It looked as if he was reminiscing.

After a while, he chuckled and shook his head again.

"No. My original dream was to own a Memory shop. I don't actually remember where I got the idea to open a restaurant, as well... must have been sometime during the Chain of Nightmares. I just figured that feeding people would feel nice. Oh, and earn me some money, as well."

Nephis was stumped by that answer.

There was nothing shameful about owning a Memory shop. She believed strongly that it was the duty of all Awakened to resist the Nightmare Spell, but that did not mean that everyone had to spill blood on the battlefield.

There were those with unsuitable dispositions or Utility Aspects who maintained the cities, grew crops, and supplied the warriors with equipment their work was no less important.

So, Master Sunless was a dutiful person, as well. The Memories he crafted helped those better suited for the battlefield defeat Nightmare Creatures and come home alive.

It was just that... Nephis herself dreamed of something so heavy and unattainable. Wasn't owning a shop too trivial of a thing to be someone's dream?

Perhaps reading something on her face, the charming enchanter smiled.

"It might be difficult for someone as accomplished as you to understand, Lady Nephis. You are a storied champion of humanity, after all... but most people never grow numb to the horrors of the Nightmare Spell. Even if they are seasoned warriors, they would still prefer living quietly away from the abominable monsters and mortal danger. Dreaming of something so mundane might seem strange to you, but in fact, these mundane things are what most people dream about."

Nephis looked at him thoughtfully.

He was right, of course. She had always been quite different from most people, and felt alienated as a result. She also knew that it was her who was abnormal, not the other way around.

For a moment, Nephis tried to imagine what it would be like, to have a mundane dream. If her life had been different, what would her heart strive for?

She looked at the training arena.

Would she have wanted to open a martial school like this one and dedicate her life to the pursuit of swordsmanship, sharing her insights with students and feeling joy every day?

Would she maybe dedicate her life to music? Playing an instrument had never been among the lessons taught to her as a Legacy, so Nephis had no such skill. But she had often fantasized about performing music as a child.

Were dreams supposed to be like that? Nephis enjoyed a piece of savory meat pie, then asked with genuine curiosity:

"What does it feel like, to accomplish your dream?"

Her own had always been so out of reach, so burdensome. It was all-consuming and overwhelming, much larger than her life... and yet, she could not quite imagine living any other way. Master Sunless remained silent for a while, then smiled wistfully.

"Who knows? I certainly don't. By the time I found myself in a position to open a shop, too many things had happened. I changed, and my dreams changed as well. Still, I guess it depends on what you used to dream about. My old dream was rather nice, so the life I've built due to its influence is also on the nicer side. It's... peaceful."

Nephis raised her eyebrow.

"What is your dream now, then?"

He looked at her intently and hesitated for a few moments.

Then, the charming enchanter chuckled.

"That... I don't really have dreams anymore. I just have goals. Having a goal is much better than having a dream, don't you think?"

She pondered his words for a few moments and asked neutrally:

"What's the difference?"

Master Sunless looked away and sighed.

"I'd say that the difference is in how you approach it. A dream is something you want to happen... a goal is something that you make happen. The difference is in having enough determination to grasp what you want, and never let it go."

He remained silent for a while, and then added with a hint of sadness in his pleasant voice:

"But I... to be honest, I've let go of a few things in my life. So if there is something I really want, it's to go back and try again. That is not a dream, though. Since it's in the past, it is just a regret."

The charming enchanter emptied his glass, then looked at her and smiled.

"Now that I think about it, I guess I do have a dream."

His onyx eyes looked into hers, glistening in the sunlight.

"It's to live my life never feeling regret again."

Nephis smiled.

It was a good dream.