1773 Fake It

Sunny had been full of bitter resentment when the performance started, but by the end of it, he was in an excellent mood. Watching Nephis dance with her sword, treating her to a picnic, going for a leisurely stroll arm in arm, and enjoying a romantic play together... the day was shaping up great.

Sadly, their time together would soon come to an end. All that was left on the schedule was dinner at an upscale restaurant - after that, Nephis would disappear for a few days or a week, busy with all her other responsibilities.

So, he had to make the most of this dinner appointment.

‘I'll take the chance to seize up the competition.’

However, Sunny knew that he was fooling himself.

In truth, the Brilliant Emporium could not even be considered a competitor of the lofty restaurant his café was a place where people could enjoy delicious, but relatively simple food in a cozy atmosphere. The establishment where they were entering right now, though, was where the affluent citizens of Bastion came to waste money and show status in splendid surroundings.

He felt inclined to treat such extravagance with disdain, but found himself unable to do that after being led to a private booth by an exceedingly respectful waiter, Comparing the immaculate attire and flawless manners of the young man to how Aiko usually behaved, Sunny was suddenly unsure of his judgment.

Perhaps these rich folks were really onto something...

But then again, he was richer than all of them combined. Sunny never flaunted his wealth, but it would have been hard to remain poor after hunting Great Nightmare Creatures for years. And since he didn't really have expenditures like the need to maintain a clan, he was probably the wealthiest man in Bastion, second only to the King of Swords himself.

So, logically, it was the Brilliant Emporium that set the standard of luxury. Everyone else could only hope to imitate his unique style!

Still...

Sunny hands trembled when he sat down and saw a large, empty plate in front of him.

'A ch-ch-charger plate!’

How fancy!

And what was it made of? Was it... the famed Aegis porcelain? That porcelain could only be made from the mystical clay found in a remote region of the Sword Domain, the precise recipe kept secret by the artisans employed by the Legacy Clan presiding over those lands.

The tablecloth was made from sublime silk. The utensils were pure silver, The table itself... damnation, he recognized that wood! That was titanwood, the same as the instructor's cafeteria at the Academy!

At least his chair was, in all ways, inferior to the Shadow Chair. Otherwise, Sunny would have been quite disheartened.

Nephis sat down across from him and smiled.

"I doubt that they will serve us anything as delicious as what you make, Master Sunless. Still, please try to enjoy yourself."

Sunny looked at her with gratitude, suddenly feeling a lot better.

'Right. Who cares about how fancy the plates, silverware, and furniture are? It's the food that matters!'

Paying attention to form over substance was a silly thing to do, like valuing flowery prose over an engaging story. Sunny might have acted like a bit of an idiot at times, but at least he wasn't that misguided.

He stared at Nephis silently while the waiter was pouring fragrant wine into their glasses, enchanted by her exquisite beauty. The light of a magical chandelier was reflecting from her silver hair, and her fair face was illuminated softly. The privacy of the luxurious booth created an intimate atmosphere...

It was then that a sudden thought entered his mind, and he felt as if someone had doused him with cold water.

Sunny looked away and lowered his head a little.

The war was approaching. Which meant that he had to tell Nephis the truth soon.

There would not be many days like this one in the future... In fact, there might be none at all.

He felt a sense of deep melancholy.

When the waiter left, Nephis took a sip of wine and leaned back. She remained silent for a few moments, then asked with a hint of concern in her voice:

"I'm sorry for making you feel uncomfortable earlier, Master Sunless. Because of the subject of the play, and... well... my actions, as well."

Sunny looked at her in surprise.

"Offended? No, I wasn't offended..."

Nephis smiled.

"That's a relief."

She placed the wineglass back on the table.

The table was meant for two people to dine, so it wasn't very large. Her hand remained on the white tablecloth, close enough that Sunny could reach and hold it. Of course, he did no such thing, and just stared at it silently.

Nephis suddenly asked, her voice neutral:

"What do people usually talk about in such situations?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Such situations?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then reached for the wineglass again.

"That... you know, on a date. Ours is a fake one, but we should probably make an effort to make it look real."

Sunny felt bewildered for a moment.

Eventually, she smiled and shrugged slowly.

"Lady Nephis... I'm afraid I have no idea. I don't think I've ever been on a proper date myself."

She looked at him with a visible expression of surprise, which was quite rare for the usually composed Nephis.

Her eyes widened a little.

"R-really? I thought you... a man like you..."

Sunny chuckled.

"I'm not sure what kind of man you think I am, but your impression of me is probably wrong. In fact..."

He hesitated for a moment, and then added wistfully:

"It most definitely is."

Sunny took a sip of wine and said in a neutral tone:

"Well, I assume that people talk about the usual things that one ought to know about a potential partner, romantic or not. You know... background, views, aspirations. Who they are, what they want. Things like that.”

Nephis studied his face for a while, then nodded,

"Let's do that, then. That play earlier... 1 was afraid that you would be uncomfortable because of your experiences in Antarctica. What was why 1... actually, never mind! What I wanted to say is that 1 don't really know a lot about what you went through there, Master Sunless. Were you part of the Second Evacuation Army? Or of the local forces?"

He smiled and shook his head lightly.

"First Evacuation Army, actually."

She seemed surprised.

"Then..."

The Second Evacuation Army was mostly composed of volunteers, while the local Awakened had no choice but to join the Southern Campaign. The members of the First Army, however, were all from the core government forces.

Sunny chuckled.

"No, no. I was never a government grunt. It's just that I had a friend in the chain of command, and was invited to join the effort before the news broke. It's a bit shameful to admit, but... I threw a big tantrum back then and accepted the invitation for quite an immature reason."

Nephis looked at him intently, as if trying to picture him throwing a tantrum in her mind. Eventually, she shook her head and said:

"I can't quite imagine you doing something like that. Immature reason... really?"

He smiled and took another sip of wine.

"Yes. It was mostly to spite someone... a very childish reaction, in hindsight. Well, there were other reasons, of course, some better than others. You know - finding conviction, pursuing strength. It all seemed very important before the Chain of Nightmares started, and very meaningless pretty much immediately after it did."

At that moment, the waiter arrived to serve the first course. Sunny stared at the elaborate appetizers for a bit, but he did not really have an appetite anymore.

Looking at Nephis, he said:

"I think it's a bit unfair on you to have a conversation about background, views, and aspirations with someone, Lady Nephis. It is bound to be one-sided. You are exceedingly famous, after all... everyone knows these things about you."

The waiter left.

She also ignored the food, taking a sip of wine in silence.

Then, she placed the glass down and smiled faintly.

"You of all people should know that what people say about me and what is true are not the same, Master Sunless, After all, one of the things they say is that I am indulging you because we are lovers."

He laughed quietly.

"Indeed."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked in a pleasant tone:

"In that case, let me ask you something. What are your aspirations, Lady Nephis? What do you want?"

She considered his words and answered with a careless shrug:

"It's nothing unexpected, I guess. Keep my soldiers alive, safeguard the Sword Domain. Watch cities like Bastion thrive."

Sunny shook his glass a little, watching the light reflect from the red wine.

...He wasn't the only one hiding the truth.

Lies. It was all lies.

He wasn't telling the truth, and Nephis wasn't being honest either.

Their date was truly a fake one.

Since he was not saying anyting, she went forward and asked:

"What about you, Master Sunless? What do you want?"

Sunny shifted his gaze and looked at her hand once again. There was a hint of a deep longing in his dark eyes,

He did not speak until the pain of the Flaw made it impossible to remain silent.

‘To hell with it…’

Looking up at Nephis, Sunny lingered for a moment, and then smiled faintly.

"I... find myself wishing that our date wasn't a fake one. I want it to be real instead. Is that too forward?”