1774 Till You Make It

Sunny went ahead and expressed his real feelings without thinking about the consequences. Which could be quite heartbreaking, one way or the other... but, really, he didn't have much to lose.

Nephis did not react immediately. Her face remained composed and impassive.

After a while, she said evenly:

"It's not."

Sunny sighed and leaned back.

What was he doing?

Cassie had been right. By keeping his true identity from Nephis, he was being truly unfair. What kind of relationship did he hope to build on the foundation of deceit?

And that was what he was doing - deceiving her.

But... despite that, Cassie had also been wrong. She wanted to avoid a predicament that was merely the result of a larger and entirely unsolvable problem.

Because Sunny simply could not be honest with Nephis. It was impossible, because even if he told her the actual truth, she would forget it a few moments later.

So what if he admitted to being the Lord of Shadows? Compared to the other things he was keeping from her, that detail was all but I insignificant.

She could never know that he had loved her for a long, long time... and that she had loved him. That they had spent years thinking about each other, fighting side by side with each other, and surviving the horrors of the Nightmare Spell together. That they had met when they were young and inexperienced, each spending their tumultuous youth being shaped by the other. That the troubled adults they had grown into were the result of them having met all those years ago, in front of the gates of the Academy.

That she was his person, and he was hers.

These were the things Nephis would never know, and therefore... any relationship Sunny could build with her would inevitably be built on deceit. It would inevitably be unfair.

The only honest thing he could do for Nephis was leave and have no contact with her whatsoever.

But he...

Was unwilling to.

He had made a choice and lost her, but he selfishly wanted to be found by her.

And so, the only thing he could do was lie.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then leaned forward and placed his hand on hers.

Raising his head, he looked into her eyes and asked, his voice even:

"Lady Nephis... will you go on a date with me?"

She met his gaze silently.

Her silence felt quite terrifying... but Sunny couldn't help but notice something.

It was that she made no attempt to pull back her hand.

There was hope.

Eventually, the corners of Neph's mouth curled upward.

"...Alright."

Sunny blinked.

He couldn't quite process that answer just yet. Failing to hide his surprise, he squeezed her hand lightly.

"Just... just like that?"

Nephis smiled and shrugged.

"Why not? I am... not that experienced in these matters, but we are both adults. We both know what we want. So why not?"

Why did she agree?

Because she wanted to...

Sunny took a deep breath, then let go of her hand and leaned back.

His heart was beating wildly, but he forcefully suppressed his excitement.

He remained silent for a while, looking away, then said neutrally:

"Actually, there are a lot of reasons why not."

He glanced at the untouched food, considered his next words carefully, and looked at her again.

This time, there was no smile on his face.

"Lady Nephis... before we go any further, I must admit something. Actually, I am not an honest person. In fact, I am a habitual liar... I am keeping many things from you, and might never reveal these secrets. This kind and harmless persona of mine is just a facade I wear because it's convenient. In truth, I am not that harmless. I am not very kind, either."

She stared at him silently for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I know."

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

"You... know?"

Nephis watched him for a few moments and sighed.

"You are a Master and a veteran of the Southern Campaign. A person like you can't be harmless, really. There was that duel, as well... I figured that you were putting up a front at some point. But I don't mind."

She looked at him without a smile and added, her voice revealing a hint of vulnerability:

"Actually... I'm not an honest person either, I am keeping many secrets from you, as well. This valiant and noble persona of a selfless hero you see is just a facade I wear because it's convenient. 1 am neither noble nor a hero. Most of all, 1 am not selfless at all. In truth, I might be the most selfish person in the world."

Nephis looked down and added quietly:

"So, I don't mind. As long as you don't."

Sunny stared at her in a daze.

"But... I might never be entirely honest with you. Aren't you wary of a liar?"

She looked up at him and smiled.

"Do you harbor secret malice toward me?"

He silently shook his head.

"Do you serve one of my enemies?"

Sunny shook his head once again.

"Are you planning to betray me?"

He frowned.

"Not really. Not at all."

Nephis shrugged.

"Then I don't care."

However, a moment later, her eyes suddenly widened.

"Wait! You..., you don't have a wife and children somewhere out there already, do you? If you do... I'm afraid that is one thing I do have to know!”

Sunny flinched and looked at her in dismay.

"What?! No... no, I don't!"

Nephis visibly relaxed.

"That is... good. Then, as I was saying. 1 don't care! She hesitated for a moment, and then added:

"Everyone has secrets. I have my share, as well... much more secrets than most people do, and more dire ones as well. So, I also must admit something before you decide if you want to go any further, Master Sunless."

Sunny was still a little dazed. This conversation... was not going how he had expected it to go, at all! It was all too unexpected.

He looked at Nephis, composed himself, and asked calmly:

"What's that?"

She inhaled deeply.

"First of all... it might be premature to speak of this right now, but I feel like I should let you know before anything more meaningful has a chance to happen. I am... a very ambitious woman, Master Sunless. My heart is full of ambition, so much so that there's little space for anything - or anyone left in it. We might spend a few days together and part ways, or we might end up deciding to enjoy each other's company for much longer. But you... you will never own my heart, Master Sunless, or even most of my heart. It's only fair to warn you in advance”

Sunny had long known about Neph's insane goal, so he didn't react strongly to her words.

Instead, he nodded simply.

"I figured as much."

Nephis studied his face, hesitated for a few moments, and sighed.

"That is good. I see. Well, then, the second thing. You might not know, but my Aspect is closely tied to longing and passion. In fact, one of the reasons I was willing to indulge in this pretense relationship with you, at the beginning, was that I wanted to understand passion better. Later, I found myself sincerely enjoying your company, so... well, that is beside the point. What I wanted to say is that I am sensitive to yearning, desire, and passion. I can perceive what other people want, and how much they want it."

She looked away with a hint of embarrassment on her beautiful face and added evenly:

"It's one of the reasons why I am saying yes. Because I can feel the nature and sincerity of your

desire." Sunny stared at her silently for a long time.

His eyes were a little glassy. Then, he slowly picked up his wine.

"Lady Nephis... that... what kind of desire are we talking about, exactly?"

She kept looking at the wall, as if incredibly interested in the artwork.

"...All kinds. I can sense it all. Especially if it's aimed at me."

The glass cracked slightly in Sunny's hand.

His face remained absolutely impassive.

‘So... earlier, when I was staring at her body... she knew exactly...'

Nephis turned his way and added with a hint of urgency in her voice:

"But... but you don't have to be embarrassed! It's perfectly normal. You... you are a healthy man, after all."

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

"Lady Nephis..."

She blinked a couple of times.

"Yes?"

His voice was a little somber when he responded:

"Please don't speak for a few moments..."

With that, Sunny brought the cracked glass to his lips and gulped all the remaining wine down in one go.

Then, maintaining perfect composure, he reached for the wine bottle with a trembling hand.

Nephis observed his actions helplessly.

She sighed, then said in a placid tone:

"In short.., yes, I will go on a real date with you, Master Sunless, I'll be delighted to.”