1833 Honesty is the Best Policy

Days before, Sunny had been left alone on a peaceful beach.

He just stood there motionlessly for a while, holding Neph's dress awkwardly and not knowing what to do with it.

Was he supposed to just leave it here? Or return it?

What would that scene even look like? Simply imagining it was a little terrifying.

'Here... your dress. You left it behind the last time.’

His face slowly turned a beautiful shade of pink.

Eventually, Sunny sighed, folded the dress gently, and put it down.

He put his own clothes back on, summoned the Nebulous Mantle, then briefly rinsed the dirty plates in the river and placed it all back into the picnic basket. He placed the blanket there, as well, and finally put the folded dress on top of it.

By then, the velvet sky was illuminated by a scattering of bright stars, and the world was bathed in moonlight.

He pushed the boat into the water and jumped inside. Rowing it upstream was not as effortless as it had been to drift downstream... not to mention that he was all alone now.

His side felt chilly.

Moving the oars and looking at the moon, Sunny let out another sigh.

'Well... it had to be done.'

He considered just using Shadow Step to return to Bastion, but then abandoned that idea. After all, that Aspect Ability belonged to the Lord of Shadows, not to Master Sunless... and although he had told Nephis the truth, these two were entirely different people as far as the rest of the world was concerned.

Sunny wasn't quite sure how much longer Master

Sunless would be able to exist, and what role the humble shopkeeper would play, but he still wanted to remain cautious. It was not time to abandon that persona yet... hopefully, such a time would never come.

Listening to the soothing sounds of the river, he slowly savored the memories of today.

Seeing Nephis descend from the sky like a celestial fairy. Witnessing her easy smile at the docks.

Rowing the boat side by side with her, pressed tightly against each other. Listening to her laugh as she dove into the water.

Sunlight reflecting from the surface of the river as she splashed him, standing near the shore in her tantalizing bathing suit.

And the rest...

'Maybe I could have handled it better? ’

He probably could have, but she had caught him by surprise with her somewhat believable, but entirely mistaken theory of who Master Sunless really was.

Remembering Neph's subtly smug expression, Sunny couldn't help but laugh quietly.

"... Ah what will I do with her..."

In any case, he had got his point across. He confessed his secret identity, made sure to explain that deceiving her had not been his intention, and expressed the sincerity of his feelings.

The rest was up to Nephis.

And speaking of Nephis...

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, and then asked silently:

[Cassie? Are you listening? ]

There was a stretch of silence, and then, her calm voice resounded in his mind.

[I am. ]

Sunny froze, then cleared his throat in embarrassment.

'Come to think of it. I sort of threw Cassie under the bus, didn't? ’

Well... better not mention it! Ever...

Sunny pretended not to remember doing anything of the sort and asked:

[I assume you witnessed everything]

She didn't deny it.

[I did. For what it's worth... I think you did a good job. It was the right decision]

Sunny exhaled slowly.

[I hope it was. But... ]

However, before he could finish the sentence, Cassie suddenly interrupted him — which was a bit strange, since it was not at all like her.

[Oh-l

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

[What's the matter? ]

There was a long stretch of silence, and then Cassie spoke again, her voice sounding a little strange:

[Oh... oh my. ]

Sunny frowned.

[Is something wrong? ]

This time, her response came almost immediately.

[No, of course not. I just... s—sory! Can't speak right now! ]

With that, Cassie's voice grew silent, and she did not respond again.

Sunny continued to row the boat upstream in bewilderment.

After a while, thinking about something, he winced.

'Ah. I hope she survives... ’

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Far away, on a tranquil heavenly island, an ivory pagoda seemed to shimmer with reflected moonlight. On one of its higher levels, a delicate young woman was sitting behind the desk, tracing her fingers across a parchment. Her lovely face was enchantingly beautiful, and her long hair was like a cascade of pale gold.

At that moment, the young woman turned her head to the white stone of the chamber's outer wall.

Her expression changed slightly.

"Oh."

In the next moment, something crashed into the island with a resounding boom.

Cassie slowly rose from behind her desk.

"Oh... oh my."

Then, she walked out from behind the desk and faced the door.

Her movements were poised and elegant, but also... seemed a little nervous, for some reason?

She frowned slightly.

'I'm... I'm sure it‘ll be fine.'

Sunny's voice resounded in her mind:

[Is something wrong? ]

Cassie hesitated for a moment.

[No. Of course not]

But then...

The door flew open with a bang, and a tall figure appeared on the threshold, clad in an intricate suit of enchanted armor.

Cassie gulped.

"Neph. When did you get ba..."

Nephis was already inside, the door slamming shut behind her.

"Why didn't you tell me? !"

Her face was flushed, and her usually calm eyes were full of scathing intensity.

Cassie lingered for a moment.

"Tell you what?"

Neph was approaching her with wide strides.

Her office, sadly, wasn't that large...

"Don't give me that! I know that you saw everything! E—everything..."

Cassie made her best effort to flutter her eyelashes innocently. Unfortunately, her eyes were hidden behind a blindfold, so it had no effect.

She tilted her head in a flawless imitation of a confused lack of understanding, and said:

"How could I have seen anything? I'm blind..."

Her tone was soft and elegant. To illustrate her argument, she pointed at the blindfold. Instead of answering, Neph lunged at her.

Cassie made her best effort to hold in a frightened squeal and evaded the grab with a graceful step. It wasn't that hard to do, since her Awakened Ability warned her of danger in advance.

Luckily, Nephis was not using her full titanic speed.

Otherwise, Cassie might not have been able to escape even with the forewaming...

"N—now wait a minute, Neph... I can explain!"

”Sure you can! Stop dodging and come here, then. I'll let you explain..."

”... I I'd rather not... “

"Too late!"

Something crashed loudly inside the office.

”No, but when did you get so slippery? ! “

"I'm not slippery! I'm adroit and graceful!"

"Oh yes you are... for now..."

"No, wait!"

There was another loud crash.

"Ah! Stop breaking my furniture!"

"I'll buy you a new desk..."

”That's not the point! ”

"Come here, or I‘ll buy you a new shelf, too..."

... The Fire Keepers, who had gathered on the lower level of the Ivory Tower in frightful silence, looked at each other.

Eventually, one of them said:

"We didn't hear anything. Right?"

Another nodded.

"Of course. In fact, I am currently asleep in my cabin on the Chain Breaker."

"I was never even here. I am actually in the waking world right now."

"I think my Flaw made me deaf."

There were a few moments of silence.

"Let‘s just go... before she decides to buy a new door, too..."

With that, they quietly dispersed.