1834 As Simple as That

Some time later, Cassie's office was a mess. The actual damage wasn't that severe, but there were parchments and sheets of paper scattered everywhere.

The two young women were sitting on the floor, breathing heavily. Cassie's blindfold was a little crooked.

Nephis glared at her for a while, then groaned and hid her face between her knees.

Eventually, her muffled voice resounded in the stone chamber:

"I... I forgot to retrieve my damned dress..."

Hearing that, Cassie livened up a little, as if feeling a chance to redeem herself.

"Oh! Don't worry. He picked it up."

Instead of answering, Nephis slowly raised her hands and silently grabbed her head.

After a few moments of silence, she said:

"When is the war starting? Let‘s go to war, Gas..."

The blind seer smiled.

"Of course. I'll go with you."

She paused for a moment, then added softly:

"But honestly, I don't know why you are reacting so strongly."

Nephis raised her head and looked at the other young woman in astonishment.

"Why? I‘m embarrassed! Embarrassed! I'm so embarrassed that I want to fall through the earth."

Cassie smiled slightly.

"Really? Well... embarrassed is better than angry, I think."

She paused for a moment, then asked cautiously:

"Are you disappointed?"

Nephis remained silent for a while, then sighed and leaned tiredly on the wall.

"No. Yes? Maybe."

She gritted her teeth.

"I am disappointed, but I am also excited. Ah, I don't know..."

She hesitated for a while.

"I liked many things about Master Sunless, and some of those things were how soft and... safe he was. Unlike me, and everything around me. I'm sad that these qualities of him were a deception."

Nephis frowned.

"But then, they weren't, really? The man I've come to know... and like... is not an illusion. It's just that I‘ve only been exposed to a part of him. That part is still real, though... it's so confusing."

Her voice grew a little heated:

"And then there is his other part. The Lord of Shadows. He is someone I... appreciate. Someone whom I might have wondered about — what would it be like, if he stood by my side? That was a nice thought."

She leaned her head on the wall.

"So do I think that I lost something? I did I unexpectedly gain the best of the both worlds? Or is it both? I'm confused."

Then, Nephis hid her face in her knees again and let out another groan.

"But that is not even what matters!"

Cassie, who had been listening to her tirade silently, raised an eyebrow.

There were very few people in the world that Nephis felt comfortable with enough to let herself be so open and frank. In fact, there was probably no one except for Cassie — so, she did not want to interrupt.

But now, she had to.

"It's not? What matters, then?"

Nephis raised her head and glared at her silently.

After a while, she opened her mouth and said:

"It's just... it's just... is not how it was supposed to be!"

Cassie touched her hair awkwardly.

"How was it supposed to be?"

Nephis let out a heavy sigh.

"I just thought... that I will spend some time with Master Sunless and try to enjoy myself. Maybe something would come out of it, and maybe not. In any case, it was supposed to be a timed entanglement. Soon enough... before anything too serious might have happened... I would have left Bastion and gone to war. And then, by the time it was over, a year or several years later, I would have been able to decide what to do then."

She looked at Cassie intently.

"Do you see the problem here, Cas? There is no

"then" anymore! Because even if I leave Bastion, he'll still be with me!"

Cassie pretended to study her expression. She wished dearly to be able to see Neph‘s face right now, but she couldn‘t. It was just the two of them in the room, so she could only see herself.

Eventually, Cassie chuckled lightly.

"I see."

She took a deep breath and lingered for a while.

"Actually... I knew that Master Sunless and the Lord of Shadows were the same person for a while now. I trusted that he had no ill intentions toward you, and he asked me to keep his secret until he found an opportunity to tell you himself. That was why I kept quiet. But, honestly... I wanted you to enjoy yourself, as well. I knew that you would go into the Changing Star of the Immortal Flame mode as soon as you learned that he was a powerful Saint. You tend to forget that you are a human, too, Neph. And humans need repose, sometimes."

Cassie paused, the light smile disappearing from her lips.

"There were some other reasons, as well, but there is no point in talking about it. In any case, he promised me that he would tell you before the war, and now, he did. So, that secret is in the open."

Cassie remained silent for a while, and then sighed.

"So, you need to make a decision now."

Nephis looked at her somberly.

Eventually, she asked in a quiet tone:

"But how do I decide what to do? You know that I am... not good with these things. Feelings, bonds, and distractions."

Cassie couldn't help but laugh.

"Yes, I know... the fact that you used the word "distractions" is proof enough. But, actually, it is very simple. I'll help you make the right decision."

Nephis looked at her with subtle hope.

Cassie spoke softly:

"Follow my lead. Close your eyes. Now, imagine meeting Master Sunless tomorrow... and telling him that whatever there is between you two cannot continue, and you are ending it immediately. That you will be nothing but colleagues in the future, fighting side by side as allies. And nothing more."

Nephis followed her advice. Cassie could not see, but she felt her friend's shoulder slump a little.

She smiled.

"How does it feel?"

Nephis remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she said with a hint of reluctance in her voice:

"... Terrible."

Cassie sighed in satisfaction.

"Then, don't do that. Instead, do the opposite.

There, it's as simple as that."

Nephis opened her eyes and looked at the blind seer silently.

Her expression must have been a little startled.

Cassie shrugged with a smile.

"Feelings, bonds, and distractions are not that complicated. Haven't you been studying passions recently? Just follow your passion, and things will work out. Even if they don't, you won't regret making the effort. The only thing you'll regret is never giving it your best."

Nephis blinked a couple of times, staring at her strangely.

Cassie frowned.

"What?"

Her friend shook her head.

"No, nothing. It's just that... how are you so good at this? You've never had a boyfriend, either."

Cassie faced her with an expression of horror.

"What? What do you mean, never had a boyfriend?

I was very popular in school, you know!"

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. But did you have a boyfriend?"

Cassie opened her mouth.

"That's beside the point! And, by the way... when are you going to buy me a new desk? !"

Nephis rose to her feet, patted down her armor, and headed for the door.

"No, really! I need a desk!"

Neph paused at the threshold, looked back for a moment, and said before disappearing in a subtly rushed manner:

"I mean, you are in charge of finances. Put a request for a new desk... on my behalf... anyway, see you later. I think I know what to do now."

A moment later, her receding voice resounded from the corridor:

"Good night!"