Wonder City Stories

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Trust No. #1
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Episode #82

Believe to Understand

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Nereid took a deep breath and walked into Sophie's lab.

Sophie, sitting amidst a circle of junk and parts, barely looked up at her. "Hey," she said.

Nereid walked around the bench and took hold of Sophie by her heavy leather belt with its many hooks and compartments. "Come with me."

"I'm working," Sophie said.

Nereid pulled her backward on her rolling stool, drawing a squawk out of Sophie as she did so. "No, you're coming with me right now."

"What the *actual fuck*, Pacifica?" Sophie said, trying to stand up, pull away, and turn around at the same time.

Nereid kept her grip, bracing herself to catch Sophie when the stool inevitably tottered over and Sophie fell. "I am removing you from your laboratory because we have to talk."

"We can fucking talk *here*," Sophie said, stumbling over the stool and barely managing to keep her feet under her as Nereid towed her toward the door.

"No, we can't," Nereid said. "I've tried. I talk, you don't listen, lather, rinse, fucking *repeat*." Her voice broke and she gave up trying to keep from crying. "You're coming with me *right the fuck now* and we are *going to talk* somewhere that it's harder for you to ignore me."

"What?" Sophie said, stumbling again, since she was trying to walk backwards. Nereid caught her with her free hand, lifted her, and bodily carried her out of the room. Fortunately, the doors were Star Trek slidy doors and Nereid didn't need to manage that somehow.

"Put me DOWN!" Sophie bellowed, struggling.

Nereid noticed that Sophie neither used a single move that would have hurt her, nor any of the nearly failproof escapes of which she was capable. Nereid kept walking, tightening her grip.

Sophie finally stopped struggling when Nereid deposited her on the sofa in her own apartment. Nereid snapped, "Sit there. Don't move," and went into the kitchen for two glasses of soda. She mopped her hands off on the dishtowel before carrying the glasses back to the sofa.

"What is it you want to talk about?" Sophie said sullenly, taking the glass but not drinking.

Nereid set her jaw. "Us. You. Whether you're still interested in a relationship with me."

Sophie blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you've spent the last month and a half in your lab," Nereid said. "The only reason you've eaten, as far as I can tell, is because I've brought you food. The only reason you've showered is because I reminded you to. You've been sleeping in there for three weeks. You haven't come out at all for more than a week. I only see you if I come to the lab and beg you to talk to me. We only sleep together if I beg you to."

Sophie looked away, flushing. "Working," she muttered.

"No, you're not," Nereid said. "You're punishing yourself."

Sophie's lower jaw jutted out stubbornly, even though she still wouldn't look at Nereid.

"You're not only punishing yourself," Nereid said, "but you're punishing me. You're punishing all your friends. You're punishing your mother. You feel guilty, and you're pissed at all of us for existing so you have to feel guilty."

"When the fuck did you become an armchair shrink?" Sophie snarled.

"The moment I realized that I *hadn't done a damn thing* to deserve being punished," Nereid snarled back.

Sophie's head snapped around, her mouth open.

"I'm not buying this 'working' excuse any more," Nereid said, and cursed herself for the tears that started, that she couldn't stop. "Either you are in a relationship with me and you start figuring out how to live with yourself, or I have to assume that you're purposely doing this to manipulate me, and that this relationship has gone to fucking hell."

Nereid had to admit to herself, despite how angry and upset she was, that she enjoyed seeing Sophie speechless.

Still, she had to steel herself for the words she'd promised herself that she'd say. "You need to give me one good reason not to walk out the door right now. And if you don't, I'm not only leaving you, I'm leaving the Cosmics, because I can't be here with you like this. I won't sit and watch you destroy yourself, and I won't let myself be pulled further into your spiral of making the world around you shittier. I'm at the end of my rope. I keep giving but there's nothing coming back."

Sophie's mouth worked for a moment, her eyes wide, and then Nereid watched her face change as she mentally played through everything Nereid had just said again. Her jaw closed with a clack of teeth.

They watched each other in silence. Nereid prepared herself to wait through the silence, as her therapist had suggested.

Sophie was good at waiting too, but apparently Nereid had pushed some buttons.

"Look, I nearly destroyed the goddamn WORLD," Sophie said, bouncing to her feet. "I need to help put it back TOGETHER."

Nereid set her glass down. "Okay then," she said. She gritted her teeth and stood up.

Sophie had clearly been about to continue, but stopped and stared. "Okay… what?"

"You gave me your answer," Nereid said. The damn tears just kept coming, and the pain in her chest didn't help it.

"Wait, what? No I didn't…"

"Yes, you did," Nereid said, working just to keep her voice steady. "Your guilt is more important than me. Okay. I understand. But I'm not going to stick around to watch."

"You didn't let me finish!" Sophie looked completely off-balance at this point, and Nereid felt sorry for her.

"Look," Nereid said, unable to keep her voice from squeaking, "your first reaction when I basically said that you needed to figure your shit out or I have to assume that you're purposely driving me away and we're over was to tell me that the world needs you."

"I… what? Wha…?" Sophie reeled back onto the couch.

"Sophie," Nereid said sadly, "this whole cycle is abusive. To both of us. I want you to break out of it and come back to me. But you have to want to, and if you don't want to, there's nothing I can do to make you. If you're depressed, then tell me. If you just can't cope with life, then tell me. But also *try* to do something about it, because I can't *save* you this time around."

Sophie stared at her, then tried to say something, but her voice failed.

Nereid felt like she'd lost the thread of her argument. It didn't feel like it was coming out right, or anything like how she'd rehearsed it with her therapist. It had gotten all mushy. "Two years ago," Nereid said, "you sat me down and told me you loved me." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "I need to know if that has changed."

Sophie took her glasses off and scrubbed at her eyes. She said, "No."

"Then will you try to get out of this?" Nereid said. "Will you find someone to talk to if you need them to help?"

"Will you leave if I don't?" Sophie said.

"Yes," Nereid said, choking on the word. "I would have to. I can't live like this."

Sophie put her glasses back on and looked up at Nereid. "Please don't go."

Nereid knelt in front of Sophie, taking her hands. "Then please come back."

Sophie swallowed hard. "I'll try."

Nereid pulled her into her arms, which were regrettably damp with emotion, but Sophie slid off the sofa onto her knees with her.

Nereid said, "Thank you," into Sophie's neck.