1775 Knight Commander

It was already getting dark when Sunny and Nephis returned to the Brilliant Emporium.

The rest of the dinner in the upscale restaurant had been uneventful. They had agreed to turn their pretend relationship into a real one - or at least try to. However, neither of them wanted for their first actual date to happen right there and then, in a place carefully prepared by someone else to create a false impression of how they felt about each other.

Sunny wanted to be the one making plans, at least, considering that he was the person who had invited Nephis on a date.

So, they enjoyed the food and discussed the play, both failing to hold back an occasional smile. Then, Nephis walked him home. Neither talked much on the way, but the silence wasn't awkward. Instead, it was comfortable and pleasant, full of unspoken potential.

Finally, they reached the quiet street where the Brilliant Emporium was located. The lake was just beyond the cottage.

Sunny and Nephis stopped near the porch. The sun was rolling behind the horizon, washing the world in the fiery blaze of its last rays. All throughout Bastion, shadows crawled from the dark corners, shrouding the city in twilight. Sunny was standing in the shade cast by the walls of the cottage, while Nephis was in the light, her striking grey eyes reflecting the splendor of the sunset.

She smiled faintly.

I will see you soon, then. Thank you for today, Master Sunless."

He bowed elegantly and answered with a smile of his own:

"I'll be counting the days until our next meeting, Lady Nephis."

She hesitated for a moment, then took a step back. The cascading sunlight shone radiantly behind her, forming into two beautiful white wings.

Nephis was ready to return to her heavenly palace.

Before that, however...

She lingered, then suddenly took a step forward and stopped right in front of Sunny. Before he could understand what was happening, Nephis raised her hands, placed them on his shoulders, and pulled him into a tight hug.

Sunny's eyes widened. He was so startled by her actions that his mind refused to process what was happening. He just knew that he felt a lot of things... the warmth of her touch, the firmness of her embrace, the softness of her body...

A few moments later, Nephis let him go and drew back.

Sunny looked at her dazedly.

"What... was that for?"

She met his gaze and smiled slightly,

"Just something I've been wanting to do!

With that, she bent down a little.

Her soft lips touched his cheek lightly, which made Sunny's whole body shudder. The spot where she had kissed him seemed to be on fire. No, his entire being was.

'Damn it... she can sense exactly what kind of reaction she's having on me, can't she? That's... that's unfair!'

Nephis looked him in the eyes for a moment, then chuckled.

"And that is just something for you to think about while you are counting days!"

She backed away, then turned and pushed herself off the ground. Soon, her graceful figure disappeared in the radiance of the setting sun.

Sunny belatedly raised a hand and covered his

burning cheek.

Some time later, a heavy sigh escaped from his lips,

'She's either very cruel... or doesn't understand passion nearly as well as she thinks she does…’

A cold shower, That was what he needed now!

Turning around, Sunny hid a wide smile behind his hand and walked toward the door.

That... had been really unexpected.

'No, but when did she become so cool?’

Humming a simple melody, he entered the Brilliant Emporium. Sunny was so lost in thought that he didn't notice someone standing there, looking at him with wide eyes.

He only came to his senses when he heard them speak.

“...Wow."

Startled, Sunny finally noticed Aiko, who had been wiping the tables near the street side windows.

'Crap.'

Had she seen it all?

The petite girl stared at Sunny for a few moments, then slowly extended a tiny fist and raised her thumb.

"Boss... I admire you, boss! Good job! You work so fast!"

Sunny's expression collapsed.

He remained silent for a split second, then said in an even tone:

"Aiko, come here. Don't worry, I'll make it quick. It won't hurt at all..."

Soon, the sounds of something overturning and falling to the floor could be heard inside the Brilliant Emporium.

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Nephis landed gracefully on the emerald grass of the Ivory Island. Her wings disappeared, and with them, the pain tormenting her receded, as well.

She took a deep breath, raised her head slightly, and headed to the tower. There were Fire Keepers busy with various errands here and there, and even more of them inside the great pagoda.

She answered to their greetings with curt nods, her face the usual inexpressive mask of steady confidence.

Just like that, she reached her personal quarters on the highest level of the Ivory Tower, entered them, and closed the door behind her.

A moment later, Nephis let out a shaky breath, leaned on the door, and covered her face with both hands.

Her cheeks turned an alarming shade of red all of a sudden.

"Ah! What did I do?! I'm crazy! I've actually lost my mind!"

Her voice was full of torment.

She was in the middle of having a miniature breakdown when a soft hand patted her reassuringly on the shoulder.

Nephis flinched and looked up, finally noticing Cassie, who was standing there with a bright smile on the delicate face.

The smile slowly turned into a grin.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Neph. I think you did great!"

'Oh, gods... Cassie saw it all, didn't she?’

Nephis was suddenly mortified.

The blind seer remained mercifully quiet for a few moments, then added in a familiar deadpan tone:

"And that is just something for you to think about while you are counting days... ah, what a line! Even I was almost seduced, poor Master Sunless must have collapsed into a puddle as soon as you left... 1 didn't know you had it in you..."

A low groan escaped from Neph's mouth.

"It's... It's all your fault, you wicked woman! If you hadn't been whispering into my ear, I would not have... I would have... it wouldn't have happened this way!"

Cassie squeezed her shoulder one more time and laughed.

"What? What are you blaming me for? I think it all went well....

Nephis closed her eyes.

'Why am I reacting so strongly? There's a damn war approaching. There are more important things to worry about!’

She had been glad to be distracted from her burdensome responsibilities in the morning.

Who knew she would be a little bit too distracted by evening?

‘Ah... I'm in trouble…’

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Unbeknownst to Sunny and Nephis, there were more repercussions to their actions that day.

Across the lake from the Brilliant Emporium, in the depths of the Castle, the elders of Clan Valor were having a strategic meeting. They, too, were preparing for war.

At some point, the door opened, and a short report was placed in front of a regal middle-aged woman. She read it briefly and sighed.

An old man with harsh eyes and a grey beard looked at her sternly.

"What is it?"

The woman pursed her lips.

"There is another report on Changing Star and that... Mongrel person. It appears that the girl is truly taken with him."

The rest of the elders all showed a reaction, most of them displaying some sign of displeasure.

The stern old man shook his head.

"That won't do, She doesn't have to offer herself for a strategic marriage, but spending time frivolously with some nobody... a princess of Valor can't be tied to a person with no background. This concerns the prestige of our great clan."

The woman raised an eyebrow.

"What do you suggest we do? Reprimand her? Or remove the man from the picture? These are delicate matters. Will you take responsibility?"

There was a long silence in the chamber, with no one daring to speak.

Eventually, the silence was broken by a frustrated sigh.

Everyone turned to look at a beautiful young woman with striking vermilion eyes who sat at the head of the table.

Morgan looked at the elders with a frown, then shook her head dejectedly and said:

"Why are you creating a problem out of nothing? Do you have a lot of time to waste?"

She glared at them for a few moments, then leaned back.

"I agree, Nephis can't be seen dating a nobody. So, what's the problem? Let's just knight that guy and be done with it. He won't be a nobody if we make him a Knight of Valor, will he? Hell, we can even put him in charge of some soldiers. There, problem solved."

The elders simply stared at her incredulously. Morgan smiled.

"I see there are no objections. Let's proceed with this plan, then. Now, about the issue with Saint Thane, he'll be arriving soon..."

And that...

Was how Sunny became an honorary Knight Commander of the Great Clan Valor.

Even if he did not know it yet.