1809 Beach Date

Bastion used to be surrounded by a vast, lush forest. Sadly, the entire forest had been one giant, dreadful abomination - a Fallen Titan that possessed Immense power and almost Inexhaustible vitality.

The Knights of Valor had risen to become one of the deadliest forces among the early carriers of the Nightmare Spell precisely because the warriors of the future Great Clan had spent decades fighting against the titanic forest and its horrid spawns. There were no Masters and no Saints back then - and yet, they managed to push it back from the shores of the Mirror Lake.

Nevertheless, Bastion had still been besieged by the hungry woods from all sides, and it was only after the Second Generation of Awakened came of age that the situation changed. One of the sons of the famed founder of Clan Valor took command of the Knights and waged a ruthless war against the vast Titan.

Today, everyone knew the name of that son, for he had become the King of Swords. As for the abominable forest, it was long gone - burned to the ground, the ashes scattered by the winds.

A bustling city and fertile fields now stretched where impenetrable woods once stood, blocking the light of the sun and drowning the land in darkness, Sunny and Nephis had travelled far enough downstream to leave the settled parts behind, though.

Now, tall trees crowded the shore - these ones quite docile and not dangerous at all... unless one went digging for their roots or tried to cut them down, at least. There was a river bend not too far away, and the trees retreated a little along its curve, forming a sequestered beach.

Emerald leaves were rustling like a vast sea, and sunlight poured from the pure azure sky. The air was shimmering from the sweltering heat. Further away from shore, the ground was covered by moss and swaying grass, but there was a wide strip of golden sand near the water.

It was beautiful and peaceful, like a picture out of a book.

Sunny smiled when he saw the picturesque view.

"We're here."

The two of them carefully guided the boat to the shore. Nephis jumped down onto the sand, looked around, and inhaled deeply. She seemed at ease and relaxed, which was a rare sight. Sunny, at least, did not remember when was the last time he had seen her in such a serene mood.

Perhaps it was never.

Picking up the picnic basket, he jumped to the beach, then grabbed the bow of the boat with his free hand and pulled it ashore as if it did not weigh anything. Then, he studied their surroundings with a curious expression.

‘How nice.’

Suffice it to say, Sunny wasn't a big fan of getting wet- simply because the Spell had never missed a chance to drop him into some damnable body of water. Nevertheless, now that he was on an actual beach, the idea of spending a pleasant day playing in the water and basking in the sun did not seem terrible at all.

Especially in the present company.

Nephis glanced at him curiously.

"Well, what do you think? Is it everything you dreamed of?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Ah... it's not bad, I guess. We'll see how things go."

This outing of theirs was entirely spontaneous, and they had spent quite a while getting here. Needless to say, Sunny had not had a chance to eat before due to being summoned to the Castle and running around to prepare the date - so, he had worked up an appetite.

Nephis was most likely the same.

He found a good spot near the water and placed the basket down. Opening it, Sunny produced a beautifully embroidered blanket, laid it on the sand, and then moved the basket to its middle.

Looking at Neph, he asked:

"Would you like to eat something, Lady Nephis?"

She studied him for a few moments, then shook her head with a smile.

"Actually, I think I want to cool down a little first."

He nodded.

"Oh”

Then, his expression changed a little.

‘Oh!’

Before Sunny could react, Nephis took a step back and pulled her dress off. She was wearing a white swimming suit beneath - it was not too modest and not too revealing, hiding everything that needed to be hidden just well enough to set his imagination ablaze.

He barely managed not to gulp.

Her alabaster skin, her glistening silver hair, her striking eyes, the smooth lines of her supple body... it was a lot to take in.

Her figure was slender and athletic, with a flat stomach and perfectly defined muscles... as expected from a person who spent most of her time either in battle or practicing the sword. However, it wasn't harsh and cumbersome. Instead, it was beautiful and soft in all the right...

'I should probably... look away'

Sunny struggled to maintain his mental composure, knowing that she could sense the intensity of his longing.

...His struggles had limited success.

Nephis chuckled, then turned around and stepped into the water. Then, she looked at him over the shoulder.

"Are you coming?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

He wanted to. And he was going to, eventually... but doing so meant that there was no way back. Because he would have to dismiss the Nebulous Mantle to take a dive into the cool water.

The Mantle protected him from prying eyes and suppressed his presence. Once his presence was released, Nephis would get a better measure of his power. She might not realize that he was a Saint immediately - some Masters had one too, after all. Sunny himself had emanated a subtle presence as an Ascended, for example.

Plus, five of his shadows were far away, which diminished the ferocity of his presence a lot.

But, still... Nephis would be able to realize the truth eventually.

He wasn't quite ready to let that happen, yet. Sunny smiled easily.

"Go ahead first. I'll prepare things here and join you soon."

She studied his face for a moment, then smiled and turned away.

"Suit yourself!"

Not wasting any time, Nephis dove into the cool water, escaping the summer heat with a splash. She moved away from shore with powerful strokes, then turned onto her back and continued swimming while looking at the vivid blue sky. Her tranquil gaze was full of joy.