

A Day at the Beach

A Submission to the Competition:
Spring Break Vacation Time



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39 ABY

Southern Maqor, Ragnath

Reiden stood on the beach. The warm sand felt good on his bare feet as he took in everything around him. The sun shone brightly from on high, the heat it brought was a welcome change from the cooler weather they had been experiencing up until recently. But it wasn't too much; it provided just the right amount of heat without being oppressive. The air was filled with the tinkling laughter of children and people having a good time. Waves crashed, their strength ebbing as they greeted the shoreline. The smell of the salt spray was strong. It brought him back to memories of his own childhood when he would vacation with his parents. But he didn't dwell there for long – something in the present was calling for his attention.

“Help! Uncle Rei,” he heard coming from beside him.

He turned his head and saw Shadow's two boys, Artorias and Deus, playing in the sand. Just barely out of the toddler stage, the boys were always wanting to have some fun and prone to causing mischief for their mother. He had told Shadow that he would take advantage of the nice weather and bring them to the beach so that she could get some rest. They had ventured outside of the capital to the western prong of the southern edge of Maqor, where some of the best beaches were. Given its more sheltered location, the waves from the ocean weren't too big, which was perfect for children. Lyra had joined them on the outing, finally getting a chance to meet his “nephews” that he talked about so much. After all the time she had been spending Caelestis, Reiden only thought it was fair – of course he made sure it was okay with Shadow first.

Artorias and Deus had been building something out of sand with Lyra, but from the look of things, it wasn't going well. Deus's little feet and hands were coated in the damp sand. The castle was half-destroyed. Artorias, the younger of the twins, had been the one to call out for help. His pointed ears drooped ever so slightly and his amber eyes, which were almost a mirror to his mother's, looked ready to cry at a moment's notice.

Reiden frowned and stepped over, dropping into a crouch. “What's wrong, Arty?”

“Deus,” the boy said sullenly.

Reiden looked at the older twin and saw the ghostly hint of a smile on his lips. *Now the sandy hands and feet make more sense.* He motioned for the boy to come over and he obeyed.

“Deus, did you do this?” he asked, pointing to the castle. But he was met with silence. “Deus?”

The boy looked down, giving a small nod of his head. He knew what he did was wrong. Artorias sniffled. Deus looked up at the sound, an apologetic expression on his face, and went over to hug his brother.

Reiden smiled softly. "See, it's okay, Arty. I'm sure he didn't mean it." A thought crossed his mind and he nodded, more to himself than anyone in particular. "I think I can help with this."

He ruffled the boys' hair gently and looked at the sand, holding out his hand. His eyes closed for a moment as he focused. When he opened them, the toppled mound of sand that used to be part of the castle moved back into place. He was glad the sand was damp and the shape was still more or less intact, otherwise this little trick might not have worked.

The twins watched in wide-eyed wonder. Their little heads whipped around to look at Reiden and little Arty rushed over to hug him. He smiled, embracing the boy before turning him around again. He gave both of them a gentle, encouraging push toward what they had been working on before.

"Go on, see what you can build now."

The two eagerly rushed to their toys and began building anew. They talked quietly as they planned. One would fill a bucket with sand and dump it while the other worked on shaping the sand into little buildings.

Lyra had gotten up and moved to his side, giggling softly. "You know, you're pretty good with them."

"I've always liked children, and these two make it easy. The fact that they're Shadow's kids doesn't hurt."

"Family is a pretty special thing, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," he looked at her and smiled. "It's how I was raised and, given what I've been through, that belief has only been strengthened over time. It was nice that Shadow trusted me enough to tell me about them and let me help take care of them when I can."

She was about to say something else, but a call from the boys cut her off. "Lya! Come help!" It was no cry of alarm this time, but a voice full of joy and laughter. She smiled as she made her way over to the boys, sitting down to join them.

Deus flashed him a mischievous little grin - one he had seen plenty of times before and that meant the boy was up to no good - as he started heading towards Reiden. "Rawr!" came the boy's imitation of a fierce roar as he trudged through the sand. Reiden

suppressed a smile at the awkward movements as Deus navigated the shifting sands, instead feigning fear.

But soon the look of mock terror vanished. Reiden quickly crossed the distance to meet him and scooped the boy up, tossing him into the air – but not too high – before catching him. Deus laughed loudly and tried to wriggle free, growling more. Reiden tossed him up again, this time setting the boy down after catching him and moving to rejoin Artorias at the sand castle beginning to take shape with Lyra's help.

He watched as the three of them worked. The boys bickered a little over how it should look, but Lyra gently reminded them to help each other out instead and that they could both build what they wanted. They looked confused at first, like the thought hadn't occurred to them, then they both grinned and worked even harder.

Reiden's comlink chirped, alerting him to a call. The twins stopped what they were doing, looking at each other before turning expectantly to Reiden.

He sighed softly and raised the device to his lips. "Go ahead."

"Rei, it's Orion. We've got a bit of a situation with a couple of our contacts. Things got a little violent already but at least there's a ceasefire in place now. They're not happy and we need to talk them down somehow."

Artorias and Deus looked sad, and Reiden could swear he saw a lip wobbling slightly. He knew this likely wasn't the first time that play had been interrupted by a call. His once-happy mood had been dragged down, but he wouldn't let that happen. "Sorry, I can't make it," he explained. "I'm sure you can handle it on your own. Bring Captain Sloane if you need someone else. Lyra and I have the twins for the day while Shadow rests and I can't just leave them."

"Hey, no worries," his bounty hunter friend replied, laughing. "I understand completely. Say hi to them for me, will ya?"

"You got it. Thanks for handling this for me. We'll get drinks when you're back."

"I'm gonna hold you to that. Later!"

Reiden pocketed his comlink and smiled at the boys. "Okay, have you two finished yet? What do you have to show me?"

He sat down and pointed out different things, listening to them explain what they were. The sand castle was bigger than he thought it would be, but it was nice to see them having so much fun. There were multiple parts to it, one of which was dedicated to their mother's anooba, Loki. He knew from past visits with them that they really liked Loki, so that made sense. They each had their own area, but they kept mentioning a tunnel, so he

assumed that meant the areas were connected somehow. Plenty of opportunities there for them to plan all their mischief.

He watched them explain things to Lyra as well. She played along with them, smiling and laughing. She was good with them, too. He thought about everything he had been through lately, and even things from his past. Today was a great change of pace from what he was used to. No fighting, no killing, no battles of any kind – not in the same sense at least. Just relaxing and having fun, spending time with the people that matter most.

I think I could get used to this, Reiden thought to himself.