2336 A Strange Truth  
  
The sun was rising above the wine - dark sea. Its gentle rays caressed an island where white stones were drowning in the verdant grass, and colorful flowers blossomed in the pleasant heat.  
A forest covered the slopes of the island like a carpet, and at its highest point, a woman was resting in the shade of an olive tree.  
  
She wore a knee - length chiton, its pristine fabric as white as snow, with a deer's skin tied around her shoulders. Her hair was cut short, held back by a simple leather band. Her gaze was calm and sober.  
  
As the woman rested, a doe emerged from the forest. Instead of being scared of the human, it approached her tentatively and lowered itself to the ground, resting its head on her lap. The woman lowered her hand to caress the wild doe gently, her fingers drowning in the soft fur.  
Then, she suddenly turned her head and glanced at the sea, its surface rising and falling tumultuously.  
  
Far away, a sail appeared from beyond the horizon. A ship was approaching the island, struggling against the waves. The wind had brought a storm, and with it came the guests.  
  
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Three people disembarked from the ship - an old man, a warrior carrying a round shield, and a child with red hair. They made their way along the winding path and approached an old shrine.  
The shrine was neither grand nor magnificent, but it emanated a feeling of solemn holiness.  
Its walls were built of white marble, with rose vines covering them like a cloak. An altar stood in front of the shrine, with fire burning in a stone bowl.  
  
The old man made an offering to the altar, placing fresh grapes, leaves of laurel, and hawk feathers on its weathered surface. Finally, he burned incense in the bowl and stepped back, kneeling reverently on the ground.  
The warrior stood behind him, leaning on his spear. The child, meanwhile, furtively reached his little hand to snatch the grapes. Shocked, the old man slapped the boy's hand away.  
'Auro!' The boy flinched away and stumbled, his lips trembling.  
'Let him have it.'  
  
The woman's voice resounded from the other side of the altar. She appeared without making any noise, as if by magic.  
The forest seemed more alive in her presence, and roses suddenly bloomed on the vines behind her.  
The boy froze, looking at her with wide eyes. The old man lowered himself to the ground, while the warrior bowed deeply.  
'Why are you here?'  
The old man straightened and glanced at the woman with awe.  
'My lady… I bring news of woe.' She regarded him silently, making the old man continue:  
'A Supreme Beast is rampaging on the northern borders of our kingdom. The Mountain Gate is no more, and several cities have already been ravaged. We've come to beseech you, as a hero, to defend our lands once more.'  
The woman's gorgeous face remained expressionless.  
'Is there no warrior left in the kingdom to defeat a rampaging beast?'  
The warrior glanced away in shame.  
  
The old man, meanwhile, smiled wistfully.  
'There are those who can kill the beast, my lady. However, only you can stop its rampage without spilling blood.' The woman remained silent for a while, then turned away without saying a word and disappeared into the shrine.  
  
A few minutes later, she returned carrying a bow and a quiver of arrows, a leather bracer fastened on her forearm. The old man shifted and glanced at her with glee.  
'Our ship…'  
But she simply shook her head.  
'No need.' She picked up a hawk's feather from the altar, glanced at it silently, and then threw it into the fire. A moment later, two wings like those of a hawk unfolded from her back, sunlight pouring through the brown feathers.  
  
The woman fastened the quiver to her belt and stretched her wings, preparing to take flight. Before that, however, she lingered for a few seconds.  
Taking the grapes from the altar, she offered them to the boy, and then awkwardly patted him on the head.  
'Don't let your elders kneel in your stead, boy.' A second later, her graceful figure soared into the air. The boy was left on the ground, looking at the sky with wonder in his eyes.  
  
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A mountain chain lay in ruins.  
Beyond the broken cliffs and fractured land, pillars of smoke were rising into the sky from a devastated city.  
And on the plain in front of it…  
  
A huge boar lay on the ground, dead, a flood of crimson blood flowing from its wounds like a river. Its carcass was like a towering hill, and the woman who stood below it glanced like an ant in its shadow.  
Her quiver was empty, and her face was concerned.  
She inhaled deeply, then grimaced, as if appalled by something.  
'Poison…'  
  
The woman crouched faintly and leapt high into the air, landing on the dead beast's snout. She ascended its corpse like one would a mountain, eventually reaching the huge boar's vast back. There, hidden by the coarse fur, hundreds of great javelins bristled like a palisade, their metal corroded and covered in rust.  
  
The woman grasped one of the javelins and pulled it out of the dеad beast's flesh, then studied it with a frown. A few seconds later, she frowned.  
'Imperial steel?'  
Her expression darkened.  
  
Turning north, she glanced at the crumbled mountains. Where a narrow mountain pass had been, now there was a wide valley. An impregnable gorge had turned into an open road.  
A shadow fell on the woman's clear eyes…  
  
And with that, Sunny found himself back in the Ash Castle. He gasped, then swayed faintly, disoriented for a moment.  
'What? What the…'  
Which of his questions was this truth supposed to answer? He wanted to know how the world had ended, not how a strange woman had slain a rampaging Supreme Beast.  
  
And more than that…  
'Auro?! Auro of the damn Nine?!'  
Now that was a blast from the past.  
As Sunny spat the name of the young imperial soldier he had killed once, in his First Nightmare, Slayer shifted faintly behind him. Turning around, he glanced at her veiled face, then studied her graceful figure.  
'That… that was a scene from your past, wasn't it?'  
Slayer tilted her head, looking at him expressionlessly.  
  
Sunny stared at his Shadow for a few seconds, then glanced away.  
'Right. She doesn't know what truth was revealed to me, and on top of that, she doesn't even remember her own past.' And even if the truth Ariel's Game had shown him was about Slayer… technically, it was not her past. Because Slayer was not the woman from the vision he had been shown, but a Shadow Creature born from the woman's shadow instead, long after the woman died.  
Still…  
  
There must have been a reason why Ariel's Vision had given him this truth, and not any other.  
The scene must have been important, somehow.  
As important as two daemons meeting in the middle of the Doom War.  
…If it was, however, Sunny had no idea why.  
  
He took a few deep breaths, trying to suppress his frustration, then slowly regained his composure.  
'No… it's fine.' There were twelve more Snow Abominations for him to slay, and twelve more truths for him to uncover. One of those should hold the answer he sought.