1260 Leisure Cruise

Time flowed lazily.

...Both literally and figuratively.

The current of the Great River was pulling the corpse of the Black Turtle into the past, and several days passed in a strange, but pleasant idleness. The seven suns rose and fell, drowning in the shimmering waters. The sky was like a dreamlike painting of lilac, azure, crimson, and jet black.

The ancient serpent continued to circle the dark island, slowly consuming the bleeding meat of the Great Monster it had killed, and watching Sunny and Nephis enjoy their unexpected respite.

The two of them were spending their time leisurely. Feeling the need to rest and recuperate after the nightmarish gauntlet of the white desert, they were not in a hurry to strain themselves too much.

They slept peacefully through the nights, rising when warm sunlight flowed into the narrow fissure, and spent most of the days together. Sometimes, they would lay on the soft moss side by side and look at the sky in comfortable silence. Sometimes, they would train, sparring with each other until sweat covered their bodies.

Sometimes, they would talk, discussing their experiences in the past year and various pieces of knowledge they had picked up along the way.

They also spent some time apart. Nephis was busy practicing her swordsmanship, often requesting Saint to aid her as a training partner. After sending her and his Shadow off, Sunny would get busy with his own endeavors.

He spent a lot of time studying the strange and hauntingly complex weave of the Key of the Estuary. This Memory was a great mystery that had to be solved... even after showing it to Nephis, Sunny had not a single inkling of what it was supposed to do, and where it had come from.

So, he settled for the slow approach of meticulously examining each and every thread of its somber tapestry. Depending on luck, this task could take him many months to complete, but there was no harm in starting early.

Once his head started to ache from studying the black weave, Sunny would sit silently near the slopes of the island and watch the Azure Serpent prowl. He would close his eyes and sense the Great Beast's shadow. He would try to memorize its every scale, scar, and movement.

Even though their situation was peaceful right now, he knew that the peace would not last indefinitely. The chances were that they would have to battle the abomination eventually. And so, Sunny wanted to gleam its essence and commit it to his memory.

Training his swordsmanship with Nephis, studying the Estuary Key, observing the Azure Serpent, and resting idly... these were the things that filled his days.

Of course, other things were happening on the dark island, as well.

Imp was still busy devouring the bands of tarnished silver that encased the Black Turtle's body. His progress was slow, but the gluttonous goblin seemed beyond himself with delight. His scrawny figure could often be seen sprawled on the black rocks, utterly engorged.

The Sin of Solace was still there, following Sunny like a jaded wraith. Its litany of snide comments and contemptuous remarks never lessened, slowly driving him mad. Sunny endured as best as he could, and luckily, the spirit of the cursed sword was not nearly as talkative as it had been before. Nevertheless, the apparition put him in many awkward situations with Nephis.

Nightmare was slowly subjugating new dreams into his unseen army. Almost every night, the counter of the Dream Curse would go up by at least one or two. The source of these defeated nightmares were, of course, Sunny and Nephis... it seemed that their minds were still haunted by the events of the past.

Or maybe it was just the nature of the Tomb of Ariel. Despite its breathtaking facade, it was a land worthy of its architect... a land of dread.

It was also as desolate and empty as it was beautiful. Every day, Sunny and Nephis would study the northern horizon, hoping to see the signs of land — or anything at all — far in the distance. But each time, all that met them was an endless expanse of flowing water.

Their hunger slowly grew. Although Masters were much more resilient than mundane humans, they were still the same... they needed sustenance to survive, just like any human would.

Their bodies were still strong, but they would start to wither before too long. Before that happened, Sunny and Nephis were going to have to find a way to harvest some of the Black Turtle's meat.

The Azure Serpent raised its head from the water every time it devoured more, as if to mock them.

'Ah... I'm hungry.'

Sunny was sitting on a luxurious wooden chair, which was positioned near the slopes of the Black Turtle's carapace, facing north. His shadows surrounded him, lazily sprawled on the black rocks and enjoying the dreamlike vista of the Great River —only the naughty one had wandered off to enjoy the view of Nephis training instead.

Dismissing the Estuary Key, Sunny rubbed his temples and stretched his legs.

'I don't get it... I just don't get it. I don't recognize any of these weave elements. Not even their vague purpose. The more I look at it, the more sure I am that it wasn't... won't be?... created by me.'

Whoever had created the Key of the Estuary was a far greater sorcerer than Sunny was, or could ever dream to be. At least that was how it seemed.

'Alright... that's enough for today. The old snake should be showing its ugly mug any minute now. I really hope that it's as tired of staring at me as I am tired of staring at it...

Sunny glanced at the wide patch of bloody water surrounding the shell of the Great Turtle in anticipation, lingered for a few moments, and then frowned.

Something... something was wrong with that picture. He stared at the water for a while, his scowl deepening.

Then, Sunny slowly raised his eyes and looked at the sky. His pupils widened slightly.

There, in the boundless blue expanse, far away... A black dot had appeared at some point.