1268 Azure Serpent

There were a lot of things Sunny desperately wished for. However, the ominous words carved into a random piece of flotsam he had encountered by chance weighed heavily on his heart.

So, he held himself back and made a point of not wishing for anything. 'A pity...'

Sunny blew out the improvised candle and hungrily sunk his teeth into the juicy meat. The taste of it... was indescribable.

"Uh!"

'So delicious!'

Nephis had really outdone herself this time. To think that she could cook up something so tasty with so few ingredients... even the memories of the grotesque tunnel could not slow Sunny down. He attacked the roasted meat like a hungry wolf, annihilating it in no time. He still had to put some effort into chewing, but that only made the rich flavor and delightful texture last longer on his tongue.

Some time later, both Sunny and Nephis were pleasantly satiated and sprawled on the ground, looking very much like Imp. Sunny was very much relaxed and sleepy, as well as in a great mood.

Well, it was his birthday, after all. Surviving one more year was enough of a reason to celebrate, especially considering how many odious things he had lived through to get to today.

Plus, the Great Monster's meat, which Nephis had marinated and roasted over the coals, was truly sublime.

Come to think of it, she had silently assumed the role of the cohort cook from the moment they met on the Forgotten Shore. Whenever the cohort was together, Nephis was the one to feed everyone. The dishes she prepared were always filling, flavorful, and... just right. That was a strange talent of hers.

'Huh. Maybe I should hire her as chef when I open my restaurant...'

Sunny smiled. There was one thing slightly bothering him, though. A talent like this did not really fit her stern and knightly persona. How come Nephis knew how to cook? So splendidly, at that?

Sunny turned his head and looked at her.

"Hey, can I ask something? Why are you so good at cooking? Doesn't seem like something you would be passionate about..."

Of course, it didn't. Nephis was only passionate about one thing, and to such a startling degree that it left no room for any other passions.

She remained silent for a few moments.

"...Wilderness Survival."

He raised an eyebrow, surprised.

"Huh?"

Nephis shrugged.

"Did you think that children from the Legacy Clans are only taught how to swing swords? You studied Wilderness Survival at the Academy, so you must know how important survival skills are in the Dream Realm. Therefore, we learn to take care of ourselves in harsh conditions from childhood. Nutrition is an integral part of survival, and so it gets a lot of attention in the curriculum."

She paused before adding:

"At least that's how it was for me. Each clan has its own way of teaching its heirs, of course."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Makes sense... I should have guessed myself.'

He smiled.

"So, what you're saying is that you've been taking cooking classes since childhood?" Hearing his words, Nephis frowned.

"Not... cooking classes! I've been taught both theoretical and practical skills concerning proper nutrition. It was a series of very thorough and elevated courses."

Sunny nodded a couple of times with a ponderous expression. "Alright. I'm convinced. You're hired!"

She stared at him in confusion.

"You're hired... what? Are you talking to your sword again?" Sunny vigorously shook his head.

"No... I'm talking to you..."

Nephis remained silent for a while, then let out a long sigh. "Sometimes I really don't understand what you're saying." He grinned.

"Don't worry. That makes two of us."

With that, Sunny laughed and turned away.

"Anyway. Goodnight, Neph."

There was a moment of silence, and then she dismissed the Memory lantern, plunging the deep fissure into darkness.

"Goodnight, Sunny."

...The carcass of an ancient behemoth floated on the currents of the Great River, and two humans slept peacefully in a crack in its shell.

\*\*\*

Their lives slowly changed after the appearance of the dreadful butterfly... but, strangely, not by much.

Both Sunny and Nephis spent their days pretty much as they had before — they trained together, ate together, and rested on the soft moss together. Sometimes, Neph would go off to practice swordsmanship on her own, while Sunny would study the Estuary Key or sit motionlessly for hours, observing the Azure Serpent.

He could feel his technique slowly improving as the small imperfections left within its principles and application were tempered and refined. He could also feel his understanding of the Great Beast deepening bit by bit.

Only the Key of the Estuary remained a complete mystery.

By now, Sunny had a faint suspicion that its weave encompassed two separate patterns. One was hidden within the other, with its function aimed inside. The other was much more vast and complicated, with its function directed outside. Both were stunning, ingenious, and inseparably intertwined.

He had no idea what either of the patterns was supposed to do, though. 'Troublesome...'

When the tapestry of black strings started to blur in front of his tired eyes, Sunny would turn his attention back to the Azure Serpent.

The frenzied creature was not having a great time. It continued to devour the flesh of the Black Turtle day after day, waiting patiently for the opportunity to consume Sunny and Nephis. But, now, it had to contend with the monstrous butterfly, which was a harrowing adversary.

The butterfly descended from the sky on the third day after their first battle, and then again on the sixth. Both times, the two great abominations fought to a bloody draw, and the winged horror chose to retreat.

Nephis hid in the fissure while the creatures were battling, but Sunny secretly stalked them from the shadows. Extending his shadow sense deep into the water, he followed the Azure Serpent as it furiously fought against the Great Monster.

Watching someone fight with their life on the line was the best way to truly get to know them, after all. just these two battles pushed Sunny's understanding of the mad leviathan further than days of peaceful observation.

The Azure Serpent... was proud. And powerful. And absolutely insane. Its madness was even more terrifying than the sinister frenzy consuming the minds of all Nightmare Creatures.

It was also insidiously cunning and exceedingly lethal, possessing a frightening combat acumen that must have been honed by experiencing thousands of perilous battles.

This was why the great river serpent managed to send the more powerful creature retreating three times in a row.

...On the seventh day after their first battle, however, a new change shook the dark island.