1310 Forsaken

'A Corrupted Titan...'

Sunny's face grew dark. The memories of Falcon Scott flashed in his mind, bringing with them a bitter taste. It was another city that had been destroyed by a Corrupted Titan, even if the scale and swiftness of destruction was different.

He remained silent for a few moments, then asked quietly: "Aren't Titans usually... huge?"

Ananke hesitated, then shrugged. Her azure eyes were crestfallen.

"Most are. But some aren't. More than that, the Defiled... they were humans once. Their path to profane power is unique."

He nodded, feeling a deep sense of unease. A Corrupted Titan... if one of these Six Plagues was indeed as powerful as the Winter Beast, then just how terrifying the Dread Lord would be?

Still, Sunny felt a dark and scathing desire to kill that Mad Prince.

It was strange, really... he had met all kinds of horrid Nightmare Creatures, but knowing that the mad butcher who destroyed Weave had been a human once filled him with dark wrath.

'Just how low can a person fall...'

Odious. The Mad Prince, whoever he had been before succumbing to Corruption, was simply odious. Such a vile creature had no right to exist.

Sunny gritted his teeth, thinking about how many of the abominations he had slain in the past were former humans as well. After thousands of years of Corruption, the distinction was all but erased, but... here in the Nightmare, it felt different.

Nephis, meanwhile, had another question. Looking at the forlorn vista of Weave with a frown, she hesitated for a few moments, then asked softly:

"Ananke... you said that the Outsiders were the most powerful warriors of your city. The Mad Prince easily killed them all. Wouldn't that mean that he could have killed all the Riverborn, as well? Why did he spare you?"

Sunny grimaced. He was asking himself the same questions, but didn't want to speak it aloud in fear of hurting the young priestess more than she had already been hurt.

Ananke remained silent for a while, her head lowered. Eventually, she took a breath and said quietly:

"Maybe he wanted us to suffer longer. Maybe he needed us to live some more, for whatever reason. Maybe he simply did not care. The Riverborn... he did kill some. However, then, he stayed his sword and kneeled in front of the girl he spared. She was a child who had just recently arrived from the House of Youth. He asked her a question, then left."

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other somberly. She asked: "What did the Defiled ask?"

The young priestess lingered, then slowly shook her head.

"He asked her... do you wish to live? She said that she did. Hearing that, the Mad Prince burst into laughter, wiped his bloody sword on her tunic, and disappeared. He never returned, and since all our elders were dead, we never heard about him again."

'Insane bastard.'

Sunny frowned, remembering the piece of flotsam that he had drifted on for the first couple of days in the Nightmare. It was a tenuous connection at best... but why had the Mad Prince asked the girl what she wished? Was he, perhaps, the lunatic who had carved the frantic runes into the ancient wood?

If so, then maybe the Six Plagues had already become five. Considering that the piece of flotsam had seemed like a fragment of a destroyed vessel, the Defiled Titan might have perished in a battle with one of the harrowing Nightmare Creatures upstream.

That said, there was a very troubling thing about connecting Sunny's improvised raft to one of the Defiled from Verge. There were letters of the waking world alphabet among the runes, too... how the hell would Mad Prince know them?

'Damnation...'

It was all too eerie and mysterious.

Shaking his head, Sunny took one last glance at the drowned square. The fierce battle that had taken place here must have fractured the foundation of the artificial island, which was why it became flooded... he sighed and turned to Ananke.

"We still have to gather supplies, right?"

She nodded.

Sunny pulled the young woman away from the square and said in a soft voice: "Then show us around Weave. We can get them on the way."

Ananke smiled a little, while Nephis threw him a grateful glance over her shoulder.

'If Ananke wants us to remember her city, then it's the least we can do. I'll make sure to write a detailed research paper after returning to NQSC, so that everyone in the waking world could learn about it, too.'

Sunny smiled.

"You know, Ananke, I am a well-respected professor in the future." She looked at him with a hint of confusion in her azure eyes.

"A... professor?"

He nodded.

"A teacher. I teach young Awakened how to survive and provide for themselves in the wilderness. At the most famous academy in the world, no less! However, our knowledge of the intricacies of surviving in marine environments is not that extensive. I am sure I will gain a lot from learning about Weave. Then, I'll be able to teach my students about it, as well. They'll be thanking me with tears in their eyes!"

The young priestess seemed more confused than touched. Sunny frowned. "What is it?"

She shook her head slightly.

"No, it's nothing. But, my Lord... aren't you a food merchant in the future? How can you also be a teacher?"

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched. Her remained silent for a few moments, then answered stoically:

"Learned people also have to eat, don't they? That's just how great I am. Respected academic, renowned warrior, accomplished military commander, thriving entrepreneur... I am the picture of a perfect gentleman."

Ananke looked at him, then nodded with bright sparks in her azure eyes. "My Lord is amazing!"

As Sunny grinned, Nephis added under her breath:

"...And so very modest."

His grin dimmed, but only for a moment.

Nodding energetically, Sunny agreed.

"Indeed, amazing is a word that can be used to describe me..." \*\*\*

They traveled across Weave to collect everything needed for the long journey ahead. Even after long years of being abandoned, the city still seemed to be in a relatively good shape. However, beneath the beautiful surface, it had already started to crumble.

Sunny knew that Weave was not going to exist for much longer. Maybe in a decade or two, the floating city was going to break apart and be swallowed by the currents of the Great River, disappearing forever under the waves.

Before it did...

They gathered fruit from the wild groves and other supplies from various caches that Ananke had established throughout the city. There was food, spices, wine, tea leaves, and necessities that one would need to travel the Great River.

There were items, as well. The weapons and armor that the people of Weave had crafted and used were of inferior quality to the powerful Memories that Sunny and Nephis wielded, but they were able to collect a lot of things that would make traversing the Tomb of Ariel easier — from simple blankets and cutlery to fishing nets sturdy enough to capture Nightmare Creatures and sail repair kits.

Everything went into the Covetous Coffer.

As they moved from one district to another, Ananke also shared stories of Weave and its people with them. How they lived, what rituals they observed, what passions drove them and what vices they sometimes succumbed to.

There were interesting details about the everyday lives of the River People and entertaining anecdotes. Sunny really learned a lot from hearing these stories, and the more he learned, the more amazed he became.

Their world was so different from anything he knew, and so, they had adapted to its strange circumstances with the tenacious ingenuity inherent to all humans.

Their knowledge of how to survive on the Great River had been built over many generations of persistent, relentless learning and unceasing improvement.

Humans were the most adaptable of species, indeed.

When Ananke started to tell them about Weave, there was a shadow of sadness in her eyes. However, as she remembered the people from her past, they gradually grew bright and warm.

A sweet smile appeared on her lips.

...But the more the young priestess spoke, the more despondent Sunny became.

He hid his expression and stared at the empty streets of the desolate city, his own eyes veiled by somber darkness.

'It's unfair...'

Ananke had been nothing but kind to them, so it was unfair. Sunny and Nephis were going to leave Weave to travel into the distant past and challenge the Nightmare, but she... she could never leave.

Because she was Riverborn.

After guiding the two of them as far as she could, the young priestess was going to return to the crumbling city. And live the rest of her life here, alone and forsaken.

Sunny's heart was heavy, and his hatred of the Mad Prince burned darker. Looking away, he gritted his teeth.

'Curse that vile bastard...'