1311 Temple of the Nightmare Spell

Consumed by despondence, Sunny tried to find solace in anger. But it was of no use. Then, Sunny tried to remind himself that the Ananke he knew was just an apparition conjured by the Spell... the real Ananke — the true Priestess of the Nightmare Spell who had lived in the real Tomb of Ariel — was long dead, her spirit and bones taken by the Great River.

She had never met Sunny and Nephis. She had never traveled to the far reaches of the future, or made delicious small pies for two complete strangers.

In fact, it was not at all clear if the real Ananke shared the same fate as the one he knew. The Serpent King had brought many challengers into the Nightmare, after all —their actions had to have changed the flow of events within this version of the Tomb of Ariel.

Perhaps the real Weave was never destroyed by one of the Six Plagues, or had been wiped out entirely long before Ananke was born.

But telling himself that Ananke was not real did not help either. It never did. Be it the First Nightmare, the Second, or the Third, Sunny could not help but treat the people he met as real.

With a heavy sigh, he turned to look at the magnificent structure they were approaching. It was an unusual one. Much larger than most buildings in Weave, it was situated in the very heart of the city, on a solitary island-ship that floated some distance away from the rest. The artificial island was connected to the neighboring ones with rope bridges of white silk, resembling a spider sitting at the center of a vast web.

The structure itself was tall and imposing, built of roughly cut black stone. Tattered white banners were hanging from its walls, fluttering in the wind. It looked nebulous and sinister, like a temple of some dark deity.

...Sunny had and idea who that deity was.

Looking up, he saw a lonely figure standing on the roof of the numinous temple, looking down at the desolate ruin of Weave. The black silk of its long hair and tunic remained motionless despite the strong wind. He couldn't see the figure's face from the distance, but silhouetted against the azure sky, it seemed strangely grim.

'There you are.'

The Sin of Solace had finally shown himself after hiding somewhere for a long time. And yet, the wraith was simply observing the ghost city from above instead of tormenting Sunny with snide remarks... its behavior had been getting stranger and stranger ever since the start of the Nightmare.

'Well, good. Stay away for as long as you want, you won't be missed.'

Paying attention to the apparition through one of the shadows, Sunny followed Ananke across one of the rope bridges. As they got closer to the ominous temple, Sunny and Nephis felt a strong sense of unease... however, the young priestess looked unperturbed. If anything, her expression grew calmer.

"This is the last place we will visit in Weave."

Even her voice sounded lighter.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked in a somewhat stifled tone: "Is this... the temple of Weaver?"

Ananke shook her head with a faint smile.

"No, my Lord. Weaver was elusive and had no desire to be worshiped. It is useless to worship the Demon of Fate, anyway... no matter how virtuous you are and how many offerings you make, fate will always remain uncaring, unchanged, and inevitable."

She pointed to this dark temple.

"No, this... is the temple of the Nightmare Spell. Of the gift Weaver has given us to rely on instead of the gods, the daemons, and of fate itself."

'Of fate itself...'

Sunny was once again faced with the fact the Demon of Fate seemed to have created the Spell to resist the very thing that was supposed to be the source of their power.

'Maybe Weaver was bound by the chains of fate, just like I am bound by them, too.'

The sudden thought was both ominous and chilling. If even the Demon of Fate had not been able to escape its clutches, then how could Sunny ever hope to succeed where Weaver had failed?

Still... despite everything that had happened, he still wanted to be free. That primal desire was rooted deep within his soul, smoldering, too vast and searing to be put out by shallow things like knowledge or wisdom.

Even though Sunny had learned that there was no such thing as true freedom — at least not without sacrificing everything one held dear — he still stubbornly clung to the desperate wish of breaking free of his bonds. It was just that the tumultuous twists and turns of his strange life had dampened that fiery hope a little.

He sighed, then glanced at Nephis with a guarded expression.

...She was not going to do something extreme like burning the temple of the Spell down, was she?

Ananke might have been sincerely devoted to them, but Sunny doubted that the young priestess would just watch silently as her home was destroyed. And although it was sometimes easy to forget because of her gentle temperament, she was still a true Saint.

Even if she wasn't, Sunny simply did not want to fight Ananke.

Luckily, Nephis seemed to be holding back her hatred for the sake of their kind guide. She had been raised by her grandmother, after all. Even though Neph had not shown it, meeting Ananke must have pulled at the strings of her heart... which still existed, no matter how abused, neglected, and ravaged by torment it was.

"Let's hurry inside."

Oblivious to the hidden conflict between her faith and the people she considered to be its apostles, the young priestess headed toward the gates of the sinister temple with a smile on her lips.

Sunny and Nephis followed, neither of the saying anything.

Soon, they passed through the dark entrance and found themselves within a vast hall. Its interior was shrouded in darkness, creating a solemn and mysterious atmosphere — for everyone except Sunny, of course, who could see everything just fine. Narrow beams of stark sunlight were falling from the elaborately carved light wells in the

ceiling, intertwined in a complicated pattern...

The Temple of the Nightmare Spell looked frightening and sinister on the outside, but its interior was quietly beautiful. The intricate tapestry of falling light resembled the breathtaking weave of the inner workings of the Spell, while the darkness of the vast hall was like the lightless void between dream and reality where it was hiding.

It was... strangely peaceful here.

What caught Sunny's eye, however, were the white tapestries of enormous spiderwebs growing freely between the columns and support beams of the hall.

He shifted uncomfortably and pointed to them, mentally preparing for battle: "I... think an abomination did make a nest in the ruins."

Ananke looked at him in confusion for a moment, then chuckled. Her melodious laughter echoed under the roof of the dark hall.

"No need to be alarmed, my Lord. The spider silk has always been here. No one knows what the Demon of Fate looks like, you see... which is why they are often depicted as a spider. Because of that, spiders were akin to sacred animals to us followers of Weaver. It was forbidden to harm a spider or its web, and we lived peacefully side by side with many."

She swept her gaze across the interior of the temple, her eyes growing wistful.

"I spent my youth in this temple, learning the duties of a priestess from my mother. The spiders who lived here were my friends. They are all gone now, of course... fate wasn't merciful to them, either. But their silk remains."

Sunny gave the young woman a strange look. 'So, little Ananke was friends with spiders...' She... must have been one hell of a creepy girl.

But then again, who was he to judge? Sunny had never been a well-adjusted child himself.

'At least I didn't have to deal with all this sticky web. Gods, living in this temple must have been annoying!'

As he thought that, his gaze finally settled on a mass of roughly cut stone towering in the center of the hall. It resembled a wide pillar that had been broken by a devastating blown and then damaged by unbearable heat, its upper part deformed like a melted candle. The widest beam of sunlight fell vertically on the stone pillar, bathing it in blinding white radiance.

Walking closer, Sunny noticed that the whole mass of stone was covered by engravings. There had been many scenes depicted on it once, it seemed, but now, only one remained.

He shivered.

Cut into the ancient stone, an enormous gate was depicted, its titanic surface wrapped in unbreakable chains. In front of it, a tall figure stood, the shape and form of its body hidden by a dark mantle. Only the face could be seen... or rather, the mask. The mask of a fearsome demon with ferocious fangs and a crown of three twisting horns.

Drawn to the stone image, Sunny felt his blood stir. Of course, he knew whose figure was carved into the broken pillar.

...It was Weaver.