1334 Dire Promise

Sunny and Nephis remained motionless for a while, carried by the indifferent, inevitable current of the Great River. His heart was heavy... too heavy to bear. It was in so much pain that the suffering felt almost physical.

Or maybe it was.

Eventually, the pain turned dull. But the unbearable weight remained.

Slowly raising his hand, Sunny tightly gripped one of Neph's arms. She was still hugging him from behind, so he couldn't see her face. She couldn't see his, either... which was perhaps for the best.

When Sunny spoke, his even voice was low and full of torment:

"Neph..."

He raised his eyes to the distant blue sky.

"Why can't we protect anyone?"

...There was no answer for a while. Eventually, Nephis let out a quiet sigh. "Because that is not the world we were born into."

She lingered for a moment, her body still pressed against his. Then, she added:

"You and I, and everyone we know... we were born to destroy things, not save them."

Sunny lowered his head, thinking that maybe she was right. The world they lived in —both of the worlds, really — needed killers more than it needed builders. That was the sign of the dire times they belonged to.

But what was the point of slaying Nightmare Creatures and conquering the trials of the Spell if there was nothing to return to except regret and ruin?

A few moments later, he heard Neph's voice again. Holding him, she said in a hesitant tone:

"I don't know if it helps... but Ananke never intended to return to Weave. She knew that she wouldn't be coming back all along."

Sunny's eyes trembled. Shifting slightly, he turned his head and finally looked at Neph. "What?"

She sighed.

"What kind of future would it have been, to return and spend the rest of her limitless life alone in the graveyard of everything she loved? She had only held out for that long because of a dream about the Children of Weaver... us... needing her help. Once we were gone, her last reason to remain would have been gone, too."

Nephis looked away.

"That was why the supplies we gathered in Weave were only meant for two people, not three. And why she wanted to tell us about its past so much."

Her voice grew forced and heavy.

"...That was why she took us to the House of Parting, as well. Where the Riverborn come to leave on their last journey. To have a feast with their loved ones before saying farewell."

Neph's usually motionless face contorted slightly. She remained silent for a moment, then said evenly:

"We made her food, listened to her tales, and kept her company along the way. The order of things might have been wrong... but at least she wasn't alone at the end. We were there to send her off."

Sunny lowered his head, stunned. 'The supplies...'

Why didn't he realize that all the things they had gathered in Weave were meant for the two of them, and not Ananke herself? How could he not have noticed something so obvious?

Perhaps it was because, deep down, Sunny had always known the hideous truth. He had just closed his eyes to it, not wanting to bear its weight, and found solace in convincing himself that they would think of something later... even though there was nothing they could do to change the bitter outcome.

Ananke was gone.

He stared at the wooden boards of the deck, trying uselessly to console himself. He told himself that the woman they knew was not the real Ananke. Of course, it didn't help. He told himself that everything had happened according to her wishes... that disappearing in the embrace of the Children of Weaver was the best death a priestess of the Nightmare Spell could have hoped for.

Of course, it didn't help, either.

In the end, there was only one way to lessen the burden crushing his weary heart. It was to turn the pain into anger.

Sunny could not bring Ananke back... but he could exact bloody vengeance on those who had doomed her.

'The Mad Prince...'

The image of the odious abomination appeared in front of his eyes. Sunny's face hardened, and his hands slowly turned into fists.

'That bastard might still be out there, somewhere.' His eyes gleamed with murderous hate.

...But then, Sunny reminded himself who the Six Plagues were. Or rather, who he thought they were.

He remained silent for a while, and then said in a distant voice:

"Neph. You know... I saw the Mad Prince in a dream."

She let go of him and shifted back, allowing Sunny to turn around and look at her. His expression was grim.

He hesitated for a few moments, then forced himself to say:

"I... think I know who he is. Who each of the Six Plagues is. They're us... they're us from the future. Cassie, Effie, Kai, Jet, Mordret, and I...all the members of the cohort. Except for you."

Sunny remembered the dream where the vestige of the Defiled madman had attacked him. The deranged voice calling him a murderer, over and over again.

'Murderer...'

Closing his eyes for a moment, he said quietly:

"Because we killed you. You can't be Corrupted, and so, we must have killed you. That's why there are only six Plagues."

There it was. The thought he was scared to admit to himself, said aloud.

Sunny struggled to keep his emotions suppressed and looked at Nephis, not knowing what her reaction would be.

Her face was motionless, and her beautiful grey eyes were calm... like always. Sunny could usually read the true emotions hiding behind her expressionless mask, but he failed to decipher them this time.

Was she confused? Unbelieving? Angry? Frightened?

Nephis remained silent for a long time.

Then, she looked him in the eyes and said calmly:

"That's great, then."

Sunny blinked.

That... was not the reaction he had expected.

Confused, he frowned and asked, making sure that he had heard right: "...Great?"

Nephis nodded, as if confirming something obvious.

"Of course. If the Six Plagues are really us from the future... then we know all about them. We know all their strengths, and all their weaknesses. We even know their Flaws."

She smiled slightly out of the corner of her mouth.

"I was worried about having to face them before, but if what you said is true... well, then it changes things. If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If the enemy is yourself, though... everything becomes much simpler, doesn't it?"

Sunny stared at her, stunned.

"Indeed..."

Indeed, she was right.

His eyes widened a little.

If the Mad Prince was truly a future version of himself — a vile apparition from a future where Nephis was dead — then all it took to kill the bastard was to speak their True Name aloud.

If the Devouring Beast was truly a future version of Effie, then killing her would be as easy as isolating the fearsome Plague and denying her access to sustenance. Before too long, the Defiled abomination would weaken, and her body would consume itself.

If Undying Slaughter was truly the future version of Jet, then they simply had to engage her in a battle for an extended period of time, not allowing the wretched thing to slay anyone and absorb their essence. Eventually, her soul would collapse by itself.

If Torment was truly the future version of Cassie, then her strength lay in her prophetic powers and an incredibly high affinity to revelations and fate. She could not be too formidable physically... so, Weaver's Mask would render her defenseless.

There were the other two, of course. Mordret's Flaw was unknown, and Sunny doubted that he would share it freely. However, the Prince of Nothing would be able to deal with the Soul Stealer personally without revealing his secrets.

Kai's Flaw, meanwhile, was not something that could be exploited to bring him down in battle.

Still... knowing how to kill five out of the Six Plagues was already a brilliant result. It was much better, by far, than facing six harrowing abominations blind.

Sunny had been so shaken and revolted by the dreadful possibility of turning into the hateful Mad Prince that he failed to consider its hidden benefits.

His eyes gleamed darkly.

Looking up, Sunny stared at Nephis silently for a few long, poignant moments. Then, he said quietly:

"Neph... let's kill the Mad Prince."

His voice slowly grew stronger.

"Let's kill that wretch, and the rest of the Six Plagues with him. Let's slaughter the Defiled. Let's burn Verge to the ground."

He gritted his teeth and leaned forward, his eyes burning with dark murderous intent. "Let's conquer this horrid Nightmare."

Sunny's words hung in the air for a moment, and were then carried away by the wind. Nephis remained silent for a while.

Then, she smiled, white flames igniting in her eyes.

"...It's a promise."

[End of Part One: Currents of Time]