1336 Stench of Fate

The small dot that had appeared in the distance slowly drew closer as the ketch approached it, guided by Neph's firm hand. At some point, however, she silently released the Names, allowing the boat to drift forward on its own.

Her gaze was directed forward, a rare rattled expression apparent on her face. Sunny was no different.

Paralyzed by shock, both of them froze. After a few moments of stunned silence, he flinched and asked in a trembling voice:

"What... what the hell is it doing here?"

His mind was in turmoil, unable to process the truth of what they saw.

In front of them, a battered ship was floating listlessly on the waves. Its silhouette was beautiful and fluid, but there were ugly burn marks and terrible scars littering the graceful wooden hull of the damaged vessel. It looked... like it had escaped from the depths of hell after a long and dreadful battle.

It also looked completely empty, like a ghost ship abandoned by its crew. But what was truly inconceivable about the drifting ship...

Was the sound of rustling leaves carried from its deck by the wind.

Looking up, Sunny saw the mighty branches of a sublime tree that grew around the eerie vessel's mast.

He knew this ship. He knew it too well. ...It was the Chain Breaker.

The battered vessel in front of them was the ancient flagship of the Fire Hunters, which Noctis had won from them in a gamble. It was also the ship that Cassie and the Fire Keepers had restored to its former glory, and which Sunny named.

Chain Breaker looked almost exactly the same as the last time Sunny had seen it... but also unfamiliar. Apart from the harrowing scars covering its hull, there were also other differences. The hull itself seemed different, with bands of dull metal reinforcing its graceful lines. He did not recognize the fearsome shape of the ship's ram, either.

The vessel looked much fiercer than the one from his memories, resembling a embattled warship more than it did a beautiful yacht.

There were many discrepancies, but the most glaring one was the sacred tree itself. It was much, much taller and more robust than the one Cassie had nurtured, drowning the entire middle section of the ship in the shadow of its crown.

Still... it was the Chain Breaker. Was it?

No, it couldn't be...

It was inconceivable that the flying ship had somehow found its way into the Tomb of Ariel. Sunny failed to understand how it could have appeared here.

Seeing it felt simply too bizarre.

Shaken, he tore his gaze away from the battered vessel and looked at Nephis. His mouth felt dry.

"How could it be here?"

She hesitated, just as rattled as he was. After a while, she shook her head.

"I don't know. Maybe... maybe it's a different ship. The people who built the Chain Breaker could have created more than one vessel. Maybe."

Both of them knew that the probability of that being the case was extremely low. Noctis had owned the flying ship for the better part of a thousand years, and modified it extensively over the centuries. He had been the one who planted a tree from the Sacred Grove of Heart God on the ship's deck and created the enchantments that connected the two into a single whole, as well.

How could there be another ship like that? Nephis took a deep breath.

"...Or maybe Noctis had visited the Tomb of Ariel at some point in time. If he did, then his ship would have been carried into the Nightmare by the Spell, just like Daeron of the Twilight Sea was. Because the Great River flows through time."

She frowned.

"Does it look like how it had been when Noctis commanded it? It's different from how it is now. In the waking world, I mean."

Her voice was full of doubt.

Sunny frowned, then looked at the battered ship once more. After a while, he said with uncertainty:

"No... it doesn't look like either the past or the present version of Chain Breaker. It's different from both."

After a short pause, he added:

"Of course, I was with Noctis only at the very end of the thousand years he had spent in the Kingdom of Hope. The ship we traveled on might have looked different before. That guy... he surely rebuilt and modified it many times. The version we saw was only the last out of many."

Was that the reason, then? The copy of the Chain Breaker was here because Noctis had visited the Tomb of Ariel once upon a time, leaving an imprint for the Spell to conjure back to life?

...If so, then where was the flamboyant sorcerer himself? Why was his ship drifting in the current of time, damaged and abandoned?

That theory was the only one that made any kind of sense... but it was still tenuous at best.

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, both feeling a somber sense of unease. Eventually, he sighed.

"There's actually a different, more pressing question."

She nodded slowly.

"What are the odds that in the endless vastness of the Great River, we would blindly arrive at the exact spot where this ship is located?"

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

Looking away, he remained silent for a while. His thoughts were grim. 'This situation smells, and it's a familiar smell. The stench of fate...' He looked at the battered ship darkly.

"It can't be a coincidence. Just like Ananke finding us was not a coincidence. The person who had sent her a message through dreams must have intended for us to find the Chain Breaker."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then added:

"In fact, I am willing to bet that this is where the dream told her to point us." Both of them remained silent for a while, disturbed.

Was it Dusk, the Sybil of Fallen Grace?

Who else could have predicted the future so precisely?

'Someone who can see the strings of fate far better than I can, that's for sure...' Nephis threw one more glance at the battered ship, unnerved, then shook her head.

"I guess we'll find out soon. For now... we were both worried about the ketch enduring the journey to Fallen Grace, weren't we? Now, there's a nearly indestructible ship in front of us. One that was built to endure a sea of divine flames, no less. It looks damaged, but since it hasn't sunk yet, the damage must not be too crippling."

Sunny stared at her silently for a moment.

"...You want to climb aboard? Are you cr... are you sure?" She met his gaze and shrugged.

"Why not?"

He remained silent for a bit.

Then, Sunny chuckled wryly and looked away.

"Damnation. I must be crazy myself... because I really want to climb into that ship, too..."