1339 Moving On

The Chain Breaker was steadily advancing down the Great River. The gale Nephis could summon by uttering its name was not powerful enough to push the ship as fast as it had pushed the ketch, but to their luck, the winds were blowing in the same direction.

Carried both by their power and the current of time, the graceful vessel rushed forward at great speed.

All around them, there was nothing but sunlight and sparkling water. The vast expanse of the Great River was beautiful and exhilarating... of course, great horrors were hiding behind the deceptive facade of its beauty.

But nothing had attacked them yet. ...Life went on.

Sitting in the shade of the sacred tree, Sunny felt strangely indignant about that fact.

He had been constantly busy during the week they spent patching up the battered ship, which was a mercy. Now that there was really nothing for him to do, Sunny found himself feeling numb and hollow. His lightless soul seemed even darker than usual these days.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the calming sound of the rustling leaves.

'Just... how much can a person endure?' He was tired of loss.

He was also tired of losing.

'Sometimes it feels like I was better off not caring about anyone except myself. Those were the days, weren't they?'

As he smiled crookedly, a familiar voice suddenly resounded from above:

"Do you mean the days of being a frightened, pathetic, miserable little wretch that not a single person in the world cared about, in turn? Well... I suppose it's indeed the best you deserve. That's how you'll end up anyway, eventually."

Opening his eyes, Sunny looked up with a dark expression.

The Sin of Solace was standing above him as if nothing had happened. The loathsome wraith looked like he always had... exactly like Sunny. The bastard was even wearing a perfect copy of Ananke's mantle. His face was full of cold contempt.

Sunny scoffed.

"Wow. Look who decided to show up. I thought you chose to crawl back into whatever pit that had spawned you and never come back. Where the hell have you been?"

The apparition smirked.

"Maybe I just got sick of watching you fail, lose, and get people killed all the time. Even imaginary creatures like me have a limit, you know? Ah, of course you don't. You don't know anything, the fool that you are."

Sunny stared at him for a while, silent. His eyes were cold and somber. Eventually, he shook his head and said evenly:

"For someone who hates me so much, you sure are too helpful. Why save me from the Mad Prince if you feel that way? Don't you think that you owe me an explanation?"

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Owe you? And you even have the audacity to call someone mad after spouting such nonsense... I owe you nothing."

He shook his head, then said with a derisive smile:

"Let's make something clear. I did not save you. I just saved myself from having to endure more misery. Being stuck with a hateful worm like you is already bad enough, but being stuck with you if you become Defiled? Gods...that would be truly insufferable."

Sunny tilted his head, thinking.

'So, the secret the Mad Prince wanted to tell me was truly dangerous enough to turn me into a Defiled...'

Or was it? Was he supposed to believe anything that the Sin of Solace said? The sword wraith acted like an independent being, and in a sense, it was... but the source of that being was still Sunny himself, Therefore, the bastard could not know anything that he himself did not know.

The Sin of Solace was a part of his mind, after all.

...Wasn't he? Sunny frowned.

'To be honest, I have no idea what that thing is anymore.'

He had figured out the nature of the sword wraith in Antarctica, and had even gotten a good grasp of how to deal with the apparition. But once they entered the Tomb of Ariel... that nature seemed to have changed without any explanation.

Why had it changed? And how?

Was it the influence of the Tomb itself? It had been built by the Demon of Dread, after all, from whose whisper the curse that caused the sword wraith to manifest was born. Or was there something more sinister at play?

Staring at the Sin of Solace, Sunny asked:

"What are you, really? How did you know that the Mad Prince in my dream was dangerous? Why did you try to stop him from subjecting me to Corruption?"

The apparition grinned.

Without saying anything, he lingered for a while, then looked down and touched the sleeve of Ananke's dark mantle.

"By the way, what a wonderful mantle. You should really get more people killed and collect a piece of clothing from each one. Then, we'll be able to add an apparel section to the Brilliant Emporium. Ah! Shame you didn't think of that in Antarctica..."

Sunny growled and swiped at the grinning apparition, but he was already gone. The sword wraith had disappeared just as suddenly as he had appeared.

'That bastard!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny leaned back and stared at the swaying branches of the sacred tree. He was full of dark anger.

But...

The appearance of the Sin of Solace had distracted him from his melancholy, at least. Until those last words plunged him right back into dejection.

He sighed.

'I'll learn the truth eventually...' For now...

He had felt better when he was busy, so the best solution for this dark mood would be to make himself busy once again.

Controlling the sails did not take much of his attention, so Sunny had to do something else.

Luckily, there was a lot for him to do.

He had to continue studying the Estuary Key. He also had to weave a lot of Memories to help Nightmare Ascend, as well as come up with ways to make the members of the cohort stronger.

'Let's get to it, then. There is a week or two left before we reach Fallen Grace. I can achieve a lot in two weeks...'

Abandoning the shade of the sacred tree, Sunny went to the bow of the Chain Breaker, where Ananke's ketch was fastened to the deck. He and Nephis had retrieved it from the water before setting sail, planning to use the ketch as a lifeboat if the need arose.

Summoning the Shadow Chair, he placed it near the battered sailboat, sat down, and looked at the glistening expanse of the Great River.

Then, Sunny sighed and contemplated what task he would tackle first.