1346 Faltering Star

Fiend feasted on the corpses of the Drowned Outcasts with delight. The sight of the metallic devil gorging himself on the dead abominations was a bit gruesome, but mercifully swift. The bodies disappeared into the Shadow's incinerating maw as if they had never existed... before too long, the deck was clear once again.

'Where does all this meat even go...'

This time, the infernal ogre had not gained any new Attributes or Abilities. Which was an expected result — if the Scavengers were capable of attaining new powers from each creature they devoured, Sunny would have never survived the battle with the original Ravenous Fiend. It had to be a rare occurrence, especially now that the Shadow's main Attributes were set.

It did seem like he had grown a little bit stronger, though, just as the other Shadows did when absorbing a fragment.

Throwing a dubious glance at the satisfied devil, Sunny shook his head and commanded the glutton to go find a mop.

While Fiend was washing the blood off the deck, Sunny and Nephis briefly examined the ship and then gathered at the stern to divide the soul shards.

"Let's just each take half."

He looked at the small pile of shimmering crystals, calmly thinking about how to use them best. All of the shards were Transcendent... considering how nonchalant he was about this unimaginable treasure trove, remembering the awe they had felt when witnessing a pair of Transcendent soul shards back on the Forgotten Shore felt both amusing and nostalgic.

Nephis simply shook her head.

"I'll take a quarter. Your Shadows killed twice as many as I did, while you dealt with the depth dweller. That should be fair."

Sunny glanced at her, hesitating. She was right... out of the two of them, he had contributed much more to the victory. That only went to show how powerful he had grown, armed with a developed Aspect Legacy and three powerful Shadows.

It also meant that Nephis needed to catch up as soon as possible.

And yet...

Three quarters of their spoils amounted to seventeen Transcendent soul shards. If made into a Memory and fed to Nightmare, each would give him four shadow fragments. That meant that the black stallion would be most of the way to Ascension by the time Sunny finished weaving all these Memories.

While Nephis was still far away from becoming a Titan. Strategically, strengthening Nightmare first made more sense.

Sunny nodded. "Alright."

Illuminated by the soft glimmer of the soul shards, Neph's face seemed even more reserved than usual. Was she pondering the matter of her faltering progress, as well?

With a sigh, Nephis took her share of the soul shards and methodically crushed them one after another, absorbing the streams of ethereal light. Then, she rose and said, her tone flat:

"We've wasted enough time here already. I'll go back to the steering oar." He watched her walk into the runic circle with a complicated expression.

'Is she still feeling uncertain of herself after the Second Nightmare? She has been... strangely mild ever since coming back. Selfishly, I like this Nephis more. But...'

But he also missed the version of Nephis that was like an uncompromising flame. A flame that burned with enough passion and unreasonable resolve to burn down the entire world.

Sunny shook his head slightly and gathered the rest of the soul shards.

'She is still the same. When the time comes, she'll burn brighter than the seven suns combined... I just hope that I won't be burned with the rest of this cursed tomb when that happens.'

Not entirely convinced, he stored the shards in the Covetous Coffer and went back to peering into the complexities of spellweaves.

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The Chain Breaker continued sailing downstream. In the next week, it was attacked several more times — for better or worse, by solitary Nightmare Creatures instead of groups like the Drowned Outcasts had been.

Sunny and Nephis dealt with the grotesque depth dwellers with some effort... but not too much effort. Apart from a few shallow wounds, the biggest hurdle they faced was removing the corpse of an especially large creature from the ram of the ship, which had impaled the abomination after a purposeful and violent collision.

None of the Nightmare Creatures were as powerful as the harrowing foes they had faced in the far reaches of the future. On the positive side, Sunny and Nephis were alive. On the negative side, they had not been able to salvage as many soul shards as they had after the first attack.

Sunny didn't really mind. His time was divided between studying the weave of Ananke's Mantle and concocting a tentative plan for altering the Dawn Shard. At the same time, he was creating Memories from the shards in his possession — that last task was moving along slowly, since it took him roughly a whole day to weave one.

That pace was only possible because his reserves of essence were fully restored each dawn and dusk thanks to the Crown of Twilight. Still, by the end of the week, Nightmare had absorbed twenty-eight shadow fragments, bringing the counter to [229/300].

Sunny still had enough soul shards to create ten rudimentary Transcendent Memories, each equivalent to four fragments. If nothing went wrong, the counter would reach [269/300] in ten days. His loyal steed's Ascension was drawing close.

By the end of the week, he felt ready to attempt modifying the Dawn Shard. However, because of how important that endeavor was to the conquest of the Third Nightmare, Sunny decided to go over everything he had learned and envisioned a few more times.

Putting the Crown of Dawn away and dismissing the shadow hands, he leaned against the side of the ketch and closed his eyes.

'I've created a sufficient length of essence thread. I've studied the spellweave of the Dawn Shard extensively. I compared the structure of the pattern surrounding the nexus with all the other Memories I possess. I've grown accustomed to weaving with six hands...'

He spent two days meditating on his plans and mentally going over everything that could go wrong.

...Finally, just before dawn of the third day, Sunny opened his eyes and manifested four shadow arms once again.

'It's time to begin.'