1353 Tattered Sails

There had been a time when Cronos possessed a youthful body and an even younger soul. His soul was still young, all things considered, but his body had turned decrepit and frail. It was full of aches, felt stiff in the mornings, and had to be handled with care.

Still, there were pleasant things about being old, as well.

Cronos had burned with all kinds of hopes and desires when he was young, but now that he was in his twilight years, life was calm and peaceful. Or rather, his feelings about life were calm and peaceful... or was it one and the same? Since one thing he didn't possess was the actual wisdom of old age, it was hard to say.

One thing was for certain — not having to worry about the future, he had much more time to enjoy the trivial delights of life. Like the warmth of his cot, the companionship of his friends and neighbors, or the beauty of the world.

Since Cronos did not sleep much, old as his body was, he had developed the habit of walking to the piers at the break of night, to watch the suns rise from the water. Today, just like always, he left his home carrying a lantern and walked to the edges of the city. Despite the fact that the

streets were still dark, there were many early risers just like him out and about. Some greeted him with words, some with smiles.

Their faces were just as wrinkly as his, and their bodies were just as stiff as his. That also made being old feel less lonely.

Eventually, Cronos crossed a few rope bridges and reached the piers. Several people were already there, waiting in the darkness. Some of them he knew from his days in the House of Youth, some he had met after. Joining them, he extinguished the lantern, sat down, and looked at the water.

They chatted as the night lived its last minutes.

Shrouded in darkness, the Great River glowed with a beautiful red radiance. Then, slowly, its light grew brighter. The chatter quieted down as the old men and women enjoyed the view of the flowing water.

Somewhere far away, the black veil covering the sky rippled. Hints of lilac and azure were mixed into its dark expanse. The River seemed to ignite, fiery colors spreading across its surface. Then, finally, the suns rose from the depths, painting the world in a million shades of scarlet. Reflected in the water, their light was like a spreading flame.

Cronos sighed lightly. "It's a new day."

A cool breeze caressed their faces, and the world was at peace... or maybe it just seemed to be at peace. Of course, it was actually at war — but they did not have to worry about that today. Otherwise, the Lady would have already warned the warriors of the city to prepare for battle.

The group of old folks remained on the pier for a while, not in a hurry to leave. There was gossip to share and idle conversations to be had. As the youngest of the bunch, Cronos had not grown tired of hearing the same old stories over and over again yet, so he received a lot of attention.

He listened and laughed, feeling a comfortable bliss. ...But then, a note of confusion entered that bliss.

Still engrossed in a story told by an old woman who had left the House of Youth a few years before the rest of them fled, he glanced at the River and froze, stunned.

There was a black spot on the horizon.

It was a ship moving in the direction of Fallen Grace. Cronos trembled slightly.

'A ship... but it's not time yet for the fishermen to return. Has something bad happened?'

Soon, the other old folks noticed the approaching vessel as well. The conversation died down, and all of them stared into the distance, somber and tense.

Then, their expressions changed.

The mysterious vessel had drawn close enough for them to discern a few details... its size, the color of its hull and sails, the strange shape of its mast...

Cronos was suddenly gripped with fear. "It's... it's not..."

The vessel had a graceful silhouette, but looked indescribably menacing as it emerged from the crimson glow of dusk. Its hull was battered and covered in scars, while its tattered sails were like an ill omen. Much more importantly...

The ghostly ship was unfamiliar. It was unmistakably alien to their city and its fleet of fishing boats, all of which Cronos knew by heart.

He had never seen an unfamiliar ship arrive at Fallen Grace. They had received guests in the past, when his parents were young, but that time had long passed.

Because Fallen Grace was the last human city on the Great River. "D—Defiled!"

Someone's yell broke the silence, sending the old folks reeling.

The Defiled did not have a habit of traversing the Great River on ships, but they were also sinister and unpredictable. The ominous ship might very well belong to the abominable monsters.

But if it did, why had the Lady not warned them of an approaching attack? Why was the light burning at the top of her palace still white?

Icy dread grasped Cronos.

'Has... has the Lady succumbed? No, no... impossible!'

His irreverent thoughts were interrupted by a loud scream. The observers staggered back, horrified by a dark shadow that moved below the water.

Shocked, Cronos watched as the head of a colossal serpent rose from the waves near the approaching vessel. The beast's scales were onyx black, glistening with dark sanguine glow as they reflected the crimson light of dusk.

"A... a Corrupted!"

People of Fallen Grace had all heard legends of the Serpent King as young kids, so seeing a similar abomination rise from the depths was like watching their childhood fears come alive.

At that moment, the serpent's lightless eyes turned to the pier. Cronos felt his soul tremble, as if the creature was peering directly at him.

And then, something unexplainable happened.

The colossal body of the monstrous leviathan suddenly rippled, becoming vague and indistinct. Then, it dissipated into a tide of darkness.

Instead, a slender human figure appeared on the bow of the approaching ship.

The dark figure was contoured against the burning sky, its mantle moving slightly in the wind. It seemed to belong to a young man with porcelain skin and raven-black hair, his eyes as dark as night.

The same lightless gaze swept across the pier, and then the sails of the ominous ship lowered themselves, as if by magic.

Cronos took a shaky breath, staring at the ghostly vessel. A strange thought appeared in his mind:

"Is... is this the end? Or a new beginning?"