1355 Fallen Grace

'No... I'm definitely not imagining it. These people are weird!'

The citizens of Fallen Grace were indeed looking at Sunny funny. The frail old man in front of him was smiling with an odd mix of joy and terror, just like the rest of the elderly folks that had met them on the pier. They were simultaneously far too excited and far too scared, like a bunch of teenagers who met an idol for the first time.

He could vaguely understand why they would be delighted — it seemed that Dusk had already been waiting for Sunny and Nephis, after all. Which was potentially a piece of good news...

But where had the awe and terror come from?

'Uh... maybe I shouldn't have shown up as a serpent?'

Sunny had thought that the River People would be accustomed to seeing creatures of all kinds, but maybe he was wrong. Still... there was a strange incongruity between the age of these people and how animated their reactions were.

This whole city was strange.

When Sunny and Nephis had first seen it, both were tense and wary. They had not known what kind of welcome to expect, and kept their guard up.

Fallen Grace looked a lot like Weave, but also different. Painted by the crimson radiance of dusk, it floated on the waves, stretching as far as the eye could see. It was much larger than the forlorn city of the followers of Weaver, and also more developed, feeling like a place with much deeper roots.

There were more island-ships, most paved neatly with cobblestones and carrying graceful, picturesque buildings. The islands were connected by rope bridges, with wide canals below. Slender gondolas with intricate patterns carved into their pale wood moved through them.

Unlike Weave, there were no windcatchers here. Instead, there were sails of vibrant scarlet fabric stretched between the taller buildings, making the city look like a grandiose flotilla. The buildings themselves were built from white stone and pale wood, with crimson accents added here and there to liven up their scenic facades.

Fallen Grace was like a flower of pure, immaculate white drifting between the ominous crimson sky and the blood-red waters of the Great River.

However... it was a wilting flower.

Although the beautiful buildings had been masterfully constructed, most of them were showing signs of deterioration. The newer ones did not seem nearly as picturesque, either. The rope bridges were frayed and poorly maintained. The scarlet sails might have looked magnificent once, but now their fabric had faded, its surface covered in patches and signs of makeshift repairs.

Most glaringly of all... the streets of the city were too desolate. From what Sunny could tell, half of the buildings had no inhabitants, standing abandoned and empty. That felt deeply wrong.

He had grown up in NQSC, after all. In a city surrounded by defensive barriers, space was deeply precious... and since there was not enough of it to go around, people like him were condemned to the outskirts. Even there, emptiness was not tolerated.

Plus, the only people in sight were these old men and women... where

were the sailors? Where were the soldiers? Where were the Awakened?

Why was the Chain Breaker allowed to approach the city without being met by its guardians?

Sunny found the situation very strange. 'Well... at least they are not attacking us.'

That was a concern for Nephis and him, which was why he had dove into the water as a serpent.

He stared at the old man, trying to understand why the local seemed to be growing paler and paler with each passing moment. Then, mentally shaking his head, he sighed and said:

"That's good, then. We've been anticipating meeting Lady Dusk a great deal, too."

Maybe they would finally receive some answers from the last sybil of the Estuary.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then asked bluntly:

"Your city defenses seem awfully lacking. Where are the warriors? Why hasn't anyone prevented our ship from entering your waters?"

The old man let out a nervous chuckle.

"Oh... why would they? The Lady would have warned us if there was danger. Since she didn't, there must be no danger. So..."

He paused awkwardly and added:

"Please don't worry, though! Someone will arrive shortly to escort you, esteemed guests. I am sure of it."

Sunny and Nephis stared at the old man incredulously. 'Huh.'

So that was why. Fallen Grace was ruled by an oracle... and therefore, its citizens lived by a completely different set of rules. Why post watchmen if any attack could be foretold in advance? It was something like that, perhaps.

He wasn't sure he could really comprehend how drastic of a change such a life would be.

'Makes one wonder how the cities of the sybils fell, despite it all...'

Perhaps it was precisely because these people relied on the sybils so much... and the sybils, no matter how potent their prophetic powers were, could not have been omniscient. Especially when there were more sinister powers at play.

As Sunny was pondering these matters, there was a small commotion at the end of the pier. A dozen figures appeared, all wearing armor and wielding weapons. Their armor was white, with red sashes tied around the waist. The weapons, thankfully, were sheathed.

The old men and women stepped aside to let the soldiers approach. As they did... Sunny was surprised once again.

The warriors, each and every one of them... were as old as the group of people that had met them on the pier. The armor fit their shriveled figures badly, and they seemed to struggle under the weight of their weapons. Nevertheless, the old soldiers tried to maintain dignified expressions.

There was fire in their eyes, still.

The leader of the squad, an ancient woman wearing an open helmet with a red plume, bowed deeply and then saluted with a trembling hand.

"Welcome, Children of Weaver. It is my honor to witness the day of your arrival. I... will take you to the Lady. Please..."

The old woman made a gesture, asking them to follow.