1361 Devoured by Time

'Challengers just like us... each and every one of them.'

Sunny remained silent for a while, a complicated expression on his face. He was remembering the very beginning of the Nightmare, and the strange words the Spell had spoken...

[Thirteen million, seven hundred thousand, and seventy seven brave ones... welcome to the Nightmare!]

Back then, he had been understandably stunned and confused. There was no explanation for that number, considering that there were not even a million Awakened in the waking world. The start of the Nightmare had been abnormal in more than one way, though, and so he tentatively attributed these words to an error made by the Spell.

However, Sunny had never been truly convinced that the Spell was even capable of being mistaken. So, what if it had been correct?

He slowly exhaled.

"They are."

Cassie turned her head slightly, confused.

"How can it be?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I'm not sure. But I know for a fact that the people of Twilight were challengers. It is because... we've met King Daeron, Nephis and I."

It was written in the description of the Crown of Twilight — "thus, the valiant king became a guide who guarded his people in their nightmares". That had been Daeron's entire plan, to enter the Tomb of Ariel so that a phantom of him would be conjured by the Spell to guide his people when they challenged the Nightmare.

It had already seemed strange when Sunny first read the runes. However, back then, he had not met Ananke yet... and therefore, had not learned that there were no Nightmares in the ancient past of the Dream Realm.

So where had the Serpent King and his people come from?

"You've... met the Serpent King?"

Cassie's voice trembled a little.

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, and then briefly described their long journey into the past. With each sentence Sunny spoke, the story sounded more and more implausible.

Great Nightmare Creatures, furious storms of broken time, ghost ships that appeared out of nowhere just when they were needed... it was very much like the fairy tale of astonishing adventures that Ananke had told him. And yet, it was all true, of course.

Because Sunny was the one telling it.

"...And so, we repaired the ship as best we could and set sail in search of Fallen Grace. There were many battles on the way, but as you can see, we are both in one piece."

He paused for a moment, and then added somberly:

"None of the Nightmare Creatures we faced was as terrible as the Azure Serpent had been, though. As Daeron of the Twilight Sea had been."

Cassie frowned.

"I've heard that Twilight had its own culture and was an independent city, not at all similar to the ones established by the sybils. I also heard that they were tremendously powerful and even laid siege to Verge, at one point, which ended in disaster. Many of the Twilight people were Outsiders, maybe even all of them. But... challengers? Where could they have come from?"

Sunny slumped in his chair, thinking. Eventually, he said with doubt:

"Maybe... maybe they came from the future of the waking world? Either that, or they were the last remnants of the Dream Realm humans, from the time of extinction after the Doom War had ended. Seeds of Nightmares should have first appeared sometime between when the sybils entered the Tomb and when the Spell infected our world. So... maybe Daeron ruled then, during the twilight of human civilization in the aftermath of the war."

Wasn't that also what the description of the Crown of Twilight said?

"There was a king who ruled over a dying land..."

Nephis sighed.

"It is strange, though. If these people were indeed challengers, they would have entered the Nightmare by taking someone's place. Were there thirteen million humans inhabiting the Great River, even? I doubt it."

She lingered for a few moments, then added somberly:

"There is one thing that concerns me much more, though. Cassie, you said that Twilight was not destroyed, but lost... devoured by time. None of us knows what it means, exactly, but we do know that the Serpent King at least managed to escape. He was a demented beast when we met him, his soul consumed by Corruption. So... will we find millions of powerful Nightmare Creatures when we reach Twilight? Is that lost city an even bigger threat than Verge?"

Sunny suddenly felt cold. As he considered her dreadful words, Cassie said in a cautious tone:

"There is such a possibility. The inhabitants of Twilight can also be long dead. Lastly... there is also a possibility that we will find millions of powerful Awakened warriors, not abominations, when we reach Twilight."

He blinked.

'She's... right.'

Twilight could turn out to be a dire threat, but it could also be hiding an army of allies they sorely needed to destroy Verge and conquer the Nightmare.

There was no point in guessing, either way. Sunny sighed.

"We'll find out when we get there. And we do need to get there — we can't leave Kai behind. We also need Mordret and his power to take on Verge, and his knowledge to eliminate the Soul Stealer."

He looked at Nephis, then at Cassie.

"...There are no objections, right?"

Nephis shook her head.

"Our goal remains the same. Gather the cohort and eliminate the First Seeker... who is far downstream, in the city of Verge. Under the protection of the Six Plagues."

She frowned slightly.

"Although... the task does seem too perilous. There has to be a way to accomplish it, or the Spell wouldn't have sent us here. So, we must be lacking some key piece of information or an important advantage, still. Twilight might very well be the place where that secret is hidden."

Sunny nodded.

"So, we're in agreement then? Let's go fetch Effie and Jet first, then sail to Twilight to retrieve Kai and Mordret. When everyone is gathered and we had learned everything there is to learn, we'll attack Vege."

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, then said quietly:

"I agree. However, we must not forget one crucial detail."

Her beautiful face turned solemn.

"I doubt that the Six Plagues will just remain idle and allow us to gather forces. If they are truly the future versions of ourselves... they must already know what our next steps will be. It would be easy for them to try and stop us."

Sunny didn't even want to think about the paradoxical mess of having his future Defiled self hunting him down.

However, he wasn't opposed to it.

Imagining the vile, scarred face of the Mad Prince, he grinned darkly. "Let them come... I would love to meet the bastards, too."