1363 The Shadow, the Star, and the Oracle

The news that the Chain Breaker could be restored to its former... future?... glory was a welcome one. However, it was going to take time for Cassie to repair it. They were also going to need a lot of materials, as well as plenty of help from the locals of Fallen Grace.

There were experienced shipbuilders among them. Sunny and Nephis had only patched up the ancient vessel well enough for it to not sink immediately, but there were a lot of things they weren't able to achieve. Now, the situation was different.

Just repairing the hull and the decks was going to take a few weeks. After that part was done, more intricate work would start — Cassie was going to have to restore the runic pathways that made the enchantments of the flying ship work.

That sounded like a lot of time.

Sunny and Nephis knew that an entire year had already passed within the Tomb of Ariel since the start of the Nightmare, and yet they felt uneasy wasting even a single day. The members of the cohort were somewhere out there, after all, their situations unknown. Perhaps they were in desperate need of help.

In the end, the three of them decided not to postpone their departure too much. Sunny and Nephis needed to rest, and the Chain Breaker had to receive urgent repairs... but since Cassie would be able to work on the enchantments alone, they were going to leave Fallen Grace as soon as the work on the damaged portions of the hull was finished.

Which left them with maybe two weeks of peaceful time to recover and prepare themselves.

Looking at the crimson blaze of dusk from the window of Cassie's private chambers, Sunny sighed.

The sky was a painting of beautiful red, and the Great River was like a sea of burning blood. The city below them was like a snow flower.

"...Are you going to be alright, leaving Fallen Grace behind?"

Turning away from the window, he looked at the blind girl. She was brewing tea, seemingly not at all inconvenienced by her golden shackles.

Nephis was nearby, too, studying the murals on the wall. Cassie softly shook her head.

"I did get attached to these people. But what we are doing is for their sake, as well... if we don't strike at Verge, there is no future left for the River People. In a few years, or decades at most, they will be gone."

If they were the real River People, of course. As far as humans of the waking world knew, the world of the Nightmare would cease to exist as soon as the Seed was conquered. But... it was hard to make the distinction.

Sunny had never been able to, at least.

He walked over to the table and sat down.

"Do they understand that? Will they let you go?"

The two guards were standing just outside the door. Even though he could not see them, he could feel their shadows.

Cassie lingered for a few moments, pouring the tea into beautiful ceramic cups.

"They will. I'll explain it well... don't worry. Come, let's have some tea."

Nephis pulled her attention away from the murals and joined them at the table. Her face was calm and composed.

Raising her cup, she hesitated for a bit, then said in an even tone:

"I haven't had a chance to say it. But I... I missed you too. And I'm glad that we found each other, too."

She looked at Cassie, then at Sunny. Her gaze lingered on his face for a few extra moments.

Then, Nephis took a sip of the fragrant amber liquid and smiled faintly. "It's like the good old times."

Sunny was considering saying something heartfelt as well, but then surrendered to the embarrassment of showing his true feelings and pretended to choke on his tea instead.

"Good? Which times exactly are you calling good? The time when I got skewered by a Carapace Centurion, or when that damned tree mesmerized us? Or when we were attacked by that depth dweller while crossing the dark sea at night?"

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then nodded.

"...Yes."

He stared.

'If that's her idea of a good time... I'll be damned, that actually explains a lot...'

Sunny felt sorry for the guy who would take Changing Star on a date one day.

As he did, the Sin of Solace laughed derisively.

"Self-pity, huh?"

'Shut the hell up!'

He threw an angry glance at the sword wraith, then shook his head.

Who was he kidding? Sunny had felt nostalgic about the simple days of surviving on the Forgotten Shore many times. The hell of it... had also been like a dark paradise, for him.

Looking through a shadow, he studied the three of them — Nephis, Cassie, and himself.

'Gods.'

Each one of them had changed so much. They were practically unrecognizable... and it wasn't even because of how much their appearance had been transformed by the Awakening and the Ascension.

Back then... Sunny had been a powerless street rat who only cared about himself and how to keep his secret. Cassie had been a sweet, but helpless girl, broken by the severity of her crippling Flaw. Nephis had been an isolated young woman who didn't know much about the world, except for the fact that she was going to burn it to the ground.

'Look at us now.'

The scrawny kid from the outskirts was gone, replaced by a fair young man with eyes so cold and dark that it was easy to cut yourself on their chilling gaze. The helpless girl was now a beautiful young woman whose softness concealed unwavering will and ominous power. Nephis... had changed the most, perhaps, learning too many bitter lessons.

Their names were known across the world, and they had long lost count of all the powerful abominations cut down by their blades. Fallen, Corrupted, even Great. Devils, Terrors, even Titans.

There had been humans, too... Awakened, Masters, and even Saints.

Who would have thought that three teenagers that had met in the Crimson Labyrinth would be drinking tea in a hidden world created by a daemon one day, resting before setting sail to wage war on an entire city of Nightmare Creatures?

Sunny took a sip of his tea and shook his head.

'Life is sure funny sometimes.'

Still... it was damn good tea.

He hesitated for a while, and then said awkwardly:

"I... might have missed you, too. I'm glad that the three of us are once again together."