1368 Setting Sail

Not long after the black stallion's Ascension, the day of their departure arrived. The weeks they had spent in Fallen Grace flew by fast... so fast, in fact, that Sunny was sad that they had felt so short.

It was nice, spending time with Nephis and Cassie again. Back in the waking world, there had always been invisible walls between them... the great clans, the war, the complicated feelings of the past, the dark promises of the future...

But Nightmares had a way of simplifying things. All of these matters had been made small and insignificant by the dire necessity to conquer the Seed, and so Sunny found himself enjoying the feeling of closeness he had not felt in a long time.

It was funny, really... ever since becoming a Sleeper, he had been told over and over again how dreadful and deadly Third Nightmares were. And there was truth to these rumors, of course — after all, Sunny had already been forced to battle a damned Great Beast to survive here. But, strangely, most of his time in the Tomb of Ariel had been rather peaceful.

He had a feeling that peaceful days would become a thing of the past very soon, though.

From today onward, theirs was a straight path. First to the dangerous waters where Effie and Jet were marooned. Then, to the mysterious city of Twilight, to find Kai and Mordret.

And finally to Verge, the throne of the Defilement. To burn it down and conquer the Nightmare.

Of course, the Chain Breaker was going to return to Fallen Grace between each step to resupply, receive repairs, and give its crew an opportunity to recover. But those stops would be brief and far between.

For the remainder of the Nightmare, Sunny and his companions would be going from one dire battle to another.

Looking at the dreamlike view of the last city of the River People from the height of the temple's tower, Sunny sighed and looked at Cassie and Nephis. The suns had just risen, and the whole world was drowned in countless shades of red. Illuminated by the crimson blaze, both of them looked solemn... and ready.

He lingered for a moment, then asked:

"Is it time?"

Cassie nodded slowly.

"It's time. Let's go."

Together, they descended from the tower, passed the grand hall of the temple, and walked outside. The blind girl's guards were following them from behind, just like always... but today, many more people had come to bid their sybil farewell.

Soldiers, artisans, and citizens of all kinds. Thousands of gaunt old men and women were crowding the streets, looking at the beautiful young woman with golden shackles wrapped around her wrists. Their frail figures and wrinkly faces were like a sea. Their eyes...

Sunny did not know how to describe the emotion that shone in them. Was it pride? Sorrow? Fear? Love? Guilt? Or all of it, fused together?

Human beings were not that simple, after all. They rarely felt only one thing. Most of the time, their hearts were a irrational and contradictory mess of clashing and conflicting emotions.

'Will we manage to save these people? Or are they all doomed?'

Sunny knew that this was not the real Fallen Grace... and yet, he also knew that the shadows of living beings he killed in the Nightmares were still within his soul, indistinguishable from the shadows that belonged to the inhabitants of both the Dream Realm and the waking world.

So what exactly was the difference?

They passed through the crowded streets and approached the piers. The Chain Breaker rested on the water, freshly repaired and refurbished. Its tattered sails were replaced by new ones, each of a gorgeous, vibrant scarlet color.

There wasn't much ceremony. Sunny, Cassie, and Nephis climbed aboard. The two deaf guards remained on the pier.

...But before they left, Cassie turned to the crowd of elderly Riverborn and smiled.

Her smile was like a ray of pure sunlight in this land of eternal dusk.

"My people..."

Her voice echoed above the water, reaching far and wide. The inhabitants of Fallen Grace — the last humans in the Tomb of Ariel — listened with rapt attention, catching every word.

Sunny gazed at the crowd and soon noticed a familiar figure. Cronos was also here, looking at the graceful ship with awe and longing.

Cassie waited for a moment, then continued:

"I have to apologize! Usually, I would have taken you all to the House of Parting to celebrate and enjoy a delicious feast. Sadly... the Lower House is no more, and so, I have no food to offer."

A wave of murmurs rose from the crowd as many people chuckled.

Someone yelled:

"It's alright, my Lady! Feed us when you return!"

The blind girl remained motionless for a few moments.

"...Still, today is not a day for sadness. It is a day for celebration. This journey I am leaving on is not my last. Instead, it is the beginning of a new era... a better era. An era of grace and freedom."

She raised her hands... and pulled them apart, easily breaking the golden chain.

The shattered links fell into the water.

Cassie smiled again.

"Lady Changing Star, Lord Sunless, and I... we are leaving to gather powerful Outsiders and vanquish the Defilement, once and for all. Our victory is assured. I know!"

It would have been an empty proclamation if anyone else had said it. However, for the people of Fallen Grace, Cassie was Dusk, the last sybil... the oracle who had guided their people for many generations, and who knew the secrets of both the past and the future.

Hearing her, they stared with wide eyes. In the next moment, a joyous roar rose from the crowd.

"Our Lady knows!"

"She saw it!"

"Victory! Our victory is assured!"

Staring at the celebrating old men, their sorrow gone, Sunny leaned slightly and asked in a whisper:

"You know? Did you receive a vision of fate?"

Cassie froze, then shuddered slightly. A moment later, she turned to him, her smile turning brittle.

Her beautiful blue eyes were shining with the reflection of the crimson sky.

She lingered for a bit, then answered:

"Who cares about fate? If fate is against us... we'll break it."

Sunny stared at her, befuddled. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Do you think it's easy to break fate?"

The blind girl lowered her head slightly and turned back to the crowd.

...Her quiet answer was almost drowned out by the joyous cries:

"No, it's not easy. It's not easy at all."

Soon, the sails of the Chain Breaker were filled with wind. The graceful vessel moved slowly, leaving the voices of the crowd behind.

The people of Fallen Grace watched as it sailed away, waving and wishing their lady good fortune in the days to come.

But then, they disappeared from view, obscured by the crimson haze.

There was nothing but a vast expanse of water left in front of them.

The first of the many battles was approaching.