1371 Dark Garden

The Chain Breaker was sailing across the bloodred expanse of flowing water. Under the blazing crimson sky, no mystical force seemed to be influencing it... and yet, its course was being set by someone other than the person holding the steering oar.

The ship was being pulled toward the lost temple of Fallen Grace. On its deck, three Masters were preparing for battle.

Sunny was stretching, his expression calm and focused. Not that Cassie and Nephis could see it — he had summoned Weaver's Mask a long time ago. In the battle against a corrupted oracle, it was both his best weapon and shield.

Cassie had summoned her armor and half-mask. The Quiet Dancer and a long dagger were resting in twin scabbards on her hips. Nephis was still wearing her white tunic, but there was a beautiful longsword in her hands now. Its hilt was black, with the symbol of a scarlet anvil being pierced by a sword etched into the pommel.

"How do we even fight an enemy who can influence the future?"

After Sunny asked the question, both he and Nephis turned to Cassie. The blind girl frowned slightly.

"...How should I know?"

Who else would know but her?

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then said awkwardly:

"Wouldn't a person who can perceive the future know how to kill one of her kind best?"

The blind girl shifted, then turned to face him. After a short pause, she smiled faintly and asked:

"What, haven't you thought about how to kill someone like me before? A lot?"

He coughed.

"...Never crossed my mind."

Hearing him, Cassie laughed.

"It's like Nephis said, her power has to have a limit. Say she can alter the path of one arrow... then, hit her with two. If she can alter the path of a hundred arrows, hit her with a hundred and one."

Sunny nodded. Indeed, this was the method he had come up with when pondering how to deal with Cassie... purely out of academic curiosity, of course. Since she could perceive a few seconds into the future, the only way to defeat her was to either exhaust her essence or create a future that was inescapable. Then, knowing it would be of no help.

The same principle worked against someone with the power to alter the future, in theory. Assuming that the Defiled sybil could raise the probability of certain events happening, the key to defeating her would be creating a situation where all possible outcomes led to her death.

He sighed.

"So, the brute force approach... I hate it."

Nephis stared at him incredulously.

"Meaning that you like it?"

Sunny shook his head earnestly.

"No."

She hesitated for a few moments, then let out a quiet sigh. "This mask... is confusing."

Was it? Sunny did not think that it was that confusing. All it did was reverse his Flaw, making it so that he could only tell lies. As it turned out, always lying was much more liberating than always telling the truth... that was because there were countless lies, but only one truth.

That said, he wouldn't want to live while always wearing Weaver's Mask. Lies might be liberating, but he did not think that a person who only deceived could be a part of a community... at least not in any kind of meaningful way.

And no one survived in the Dream Realm alone. But, much more importantly...

Being cursed to always tell the truth had landed him in hot water more than once, but looking back at his life up until now, Sunny clearly saw how it had benefited him, as well. Without the Flaw, he would have continued to lie and deceive, remaining isolated and untrusting. The mindset that had saved his life countless times in the outskirts would have become the end of him in the perilous world of the Spell.

He would not have grown close to anyone, and would not have made precious friends. And that, most likely, would have led to him dying in some ditch, miserable and alone.

...Sunny still had plenty of chances to die in a ditch, but at least his death was not going to be quite as bitter.

'That's personal growth right there...'

Chuckling under his breath, he looked at the crimson sky.

Perhaps Ananke had been right. Only flawed things had a reason to improve... and thus, being flawed was the greatest source of growth.

What did it mean for the gods and the daemons, then?

Did the gods, who had been born flawless, create the universal law of imperfection to fuel their own rise to power? If so, which god was it that had created such a cunning thing?

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then sighed and shook his head.

Who cared about these things? The gods were dead, anyway. And he was going to be dead, too, if the three of them failed to kill the Defiled sybil.

"I don't see anything."

Nephis raised an eyebrow, then suddenly tensed.

"Meaning you do see something..."

She turned and peered at the horizon.

There, a dark shape was slowly appearing from the scarlet glow.

A crooked temple was rising from the water, most of it hidden from view and drowned. Its walls, once white and beautiful, were covered by cracks and overgrown with moss. Dark vines were crawling up the broken facade like a burial shroud, blooming with beautiful black flowers.

The artificial island the temple had once stood upon was broken and partially submerged. What little of it remained above the waves was like a wild garden, its dark expanse brimming with thorns.

The sky itself seemed to dim as the Chain Breaker drew closer to the drifting derelict. The eerie sensation at the back of Sunny's mind grew stronger.

"Just relax. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

He threw a grim look at the Sin of Solace, then commanded the manifested shadows to lower the sails. At the same time, his own shadows moved, gliding across the deck toward their master.

Cassie unsheathed her rapier and dagger. Nephis silently raised her sword and rested its blade against her shoulder.

She remained silent for a while, then suddenly let out a long sigh and covered her face with a palm.

Sunny gave her a glance.

'Huh?'

"Wait... don't tell me that you're actually worried?"

Neph avoided looking at him, lingered for a bit, and shook her head.

"No... I'm just realizing... the meaning of everything Lord Mongrel said..."

Her voice sounded strangely aggrieved.

Was Sunny seeing things, or had her cheeks become slightly pink? He stared for a bit, then coughed awkwardly.

"Ah, well... I meant every single word."

With that, he headed to the bow of the Chain Breaker.

Soon, the ship slowed down. Reaching the drowning island, it scraped gently against its surface and came to a halt. Just like before, everything seemed calm... there was no movement in the wild garden of black flowers, and no abominations lunging at them from inside the temple.

The breached walls stood precariously, gaping with ominous darkness. It was as if something was inviting them to come inside.

Summoning his cursed sword, Sunny grimaced and jumped down, onto the sinister shore.

'Since we're invited, let's not make the host wait too long...'