1372 Clearing a Path

A moment later, Cassie and Nephis landed behind him. The water splashed quietly as it licked the shore of the drowned island, the black vines glistening with crimson luster in the blaze of dusk. Apart from that gentle sound and the whispers of the wind, the dark garden was silent.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, extending his shadow sense outward. Eventually, he shook his head and said warily:

"There's movement."

Which meant that there was none.

The dark vines also did not seem to exude poisonous mist, and neither were their black flowers full of parasitic pollen. As far as Sunny could tell, the garden of thorns was entirely safe.

They were not taking any chances, though.

Taking a step forward, Nephis silently raised a hand. Wisps of white flame rose from her skin, and then suddenly shot forward in a rain of incandescent drops. As her eyes shone with incinerating radiance, the white drops fell on the vines and suddenly exploded into a roaring blaze.

Nephis stared at the dark garden with grim determination, and following her will, the flames spread with astonishing speed. Soon, the entire place was engulfed in fire. It crawled up the walls of the crooked temple, turning the magnificent edifice into a towering pyre... soon, the three of them found themselves standing in front of a sea of flames.

The black flowers dissolved into the white inferno. The slithering vines were obliterated from existence. The ancient stones cracked and melted, revealing more of the dark interior of the lost temple.

Still, no abomination revealed itself from the depths of the burning garden.

Nephis let out a long sigh and closed her eyes for a moment. The furious radiance illuminating them from within dimmed, and then disappeared to reveal her pale complexion. At the same time, the raging flames were left without the will that had been pushing them forward. With no more fuel to burn, they grew smaller and were gradually extinguished.

The black garden had been turned into cinders and ash, while the walls of the drowned temple were cracked and blackened by soot. The path was clear.

Sunny had expected an ambush to spring until the last moment, but it seemed that there was indeed no danger here... at least on the surface. What waited in the depths of the temple, though? No one could tell.

He considered sending his shadows underground to explore, but decided against it. The more powerful enemies he faced, the more of them possessed means of sensing and harming intangible beings. The shadows were no different from parts of his soul, but lacked the protection of his Ascended body.

So, keeping them close when dealing with a powerful opponent was a wiser choice.

"Let's go."

Shielding her face from the heat, Cassie took a hesitant step forward. Sunny observed her for a moment, then followed.

Catching up to the blind girl, he asked:

"How are you feeling?"

She held tighter to the hilt of the Quiet Dancer and forced out a smile.

"...Better. It's just that I sense varied futures instead of a definite one here. I was disorienting at first, but not too difficult to get used to. I am long accustomed to perceiving the world from multiple points of view, after all. Still... I think I am going to have a huge headache when we're done..."

He nodded slowly. Sunny was no stranger to looking upon the world from several points of view — that was a natural state for him, considering the growing number of shadows he possessed. However, perceiving several seconds into not one, but a multitude of varied futures had to be terribly confusing.

He had always struggled to understand how it was exactly that Cassie managed to handle the mental strain of perceiving two different moments simultaneously, especially to such a degree that it aided her in combat instead of becoming a hindrance... not to mention that she remained blind in both of these different moments of time.

Humans were supremely adaptable creatures, but everything had a limit. Maybe it was because Sunny had been slow to realize how abnormal his own talents were that he rarely considered how exceptional his companions were, as well. Cassie was usually quiet and unassuming, so it was easy to overlook her inconspicuous, but exceptional mental prowess.

In truth, it was rather astounding.

Sunny glanced at the blind girl again and frowned slightly.

'It's alright for everyone else to overlook her, but why do I always make the same mistake? I should really know better.'

Perhaps it was because deep inside, he still saw Cassie as the helpless girl that had desperately needed his assistance on the Forgotten Shore. Both of them had changed drastically since then, but that first impression was so deeply ingrained that erasing it was simply too difficult.

If so...

Sunny wondered what image of him was ingrained deep inside Cassie's heart. However, he only allowed his thoughts to wander for a brief moment.

They were in the enemy territory, after all. It was no time for idle thoughts.

"Do you even have to ask the question? The image of a deceitful, selfish scumbag who outright told Nephis that she was a fool for dragging dead weight around, and that it would be better for the two of you to leave the useless blind girl for dead. Oh, what? You think that Cassie really did not hear that conversation?"

Sunny threw a hateful glance at the Sin of Solace, who was walking a step behind with a contemptuous grin on his face.

...Did Cassie's shoulders tremble a little at the sound of the sword wraith's voice? He wasn't sure.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, but remained silent in the end. He didn't really want to answer, and didn't really know what to say.

There had indeed been a conversation like that, soon after their first meeting on the Forgotten Shore. The blind girl had been fast asleep back then, though... most likely.

She had never indicated otherwise.

"Stop."

At the sound of Cassie's voice, Sunny tensed up.

"What is it?"

Had she really heard the Sin o Solace?

The blind girl remained motionless for a moment, then took a step forward and leaned down. Her hand disappeared into the ash, and pulled out the singed remains of a crude spear from beneath it. Her face turned somber.

Dropping the spear back to the ground, she sighed and said darkly:

"...It's the Drowned."