1383 A Pile of Soul Shards

Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie spent a while resting on the dais of the flooded hall. They were surrounded by the stench of blood and death, but none of them minded. It was too familiar of a smell, after all — most Awakened would not lose appetite because of it.

The three of them needed to refuel their exhausted bodies, regardless. Without speaking much, they consumed a hearty meal and spent some time catching their breaths. There was mental fatigue to deal with, as well — the mind was not as quick to recover from the strain of the battle as the body.

Sunny, it seemed, was in a better shape than Nephis and Cassie. After spending some time in a comfortable daze, his thoughts started to wander. Curious, he checked his runes.

'...No luck.'

Despite the large number of enemies he and his Shadows had slaughtered, there were no new Memories, not to mention Echoes. Sunny was not too discouraged, though — mostly because his shadow fragment counter was showing [1944/5000].

'I've... earned almost five hundred fragments in a single battle.'

That was a truly stunning amount. Sunny struggled to remember if he had ever earned that much, that fast... considering that the Nightmare promised to be quite intense from this point onward, there was a good chance that he would emerge from it as a Terror. Just six battles of

similar scope would do the trick.

Of course, it was uncertain if he would survive the Nightmare at all. Still... every fragment he absorbed made him a tiny bit stronger. So, earning hundreds of them in the span of a few minutes was a boon.

After a while, the three of them reluctantly got to work. By then, Fiend was mostly done with devouring the gargantuan corpse of the depth dweller — once again, Sunny was flabbergasted by how much meat could fit inside the gluttonous Shadow's bottomless belly. The monstrous abomination had been at least ten times larger than the steel devil, and yet, there was barely anything left of it.

'...Does he have some sort of an endless spatial storage instead of a stomach?'

Shaking his head, Sunny called both Fiend and Saint over. Then, the five of them started the gruesome job of recovering the soul shards from the Drowned.

After a while, they were back on the dais, sitting on the cold stones. All three humans had a somewhat strange look on their faces, their eyes reflecting the beautiful glow of a sizable pile of radiant crystals that lay between them. Unable to control himself, Sunny trembled.

'So... so... so much money!'

There were no less than three hundred Transcended soul shards in the pile. Three hundred! In the waking world, they would have sold for enough money to buy the entire terrace district where his home was located. Even then, he would be left with enough credits to... to...

'What do I even spend it on?'

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then scratched his head.

"I don't know about you Great Legacies, but this just seems too extravagant. I knew that Third Nightmares were something else, but still..."

Cassie and Nephis turned to him. After a few moments of silence, the blind girl shook her head.

"No... that's a bit much even for us."

Clan Valor was rich beyond imagination, but its expenditures were equally enormous. It took a lot of resources to maintain an army of Awakened and keep a great citadel safe, while people who could slay Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were few and burdened with other responsibilities.

Sunny glanced at the mesmerizing pile of soul shards and sighed.

'Damn it... why, why can't I absorb shards?'

He remained silent for a while, then said in a stifled voice:

"Well... time's a wasting. Come on, Neph. Chop-chop!"

She gave him a confused look.

"Huh?"

Sunny swallowed his tears and smiled.

"Cassie has already saturated her core, so you're the only one who can make use of these shards. Leave me a few for weaving, and absorb the rest."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments.

"But I only killed the depth dweller and a dozen Drowned. You and Cassie deserve these shards much more."

He shrugged.

"The sooner we make you a Titan, the better. I already received my share of fragments, anyway... plus, we're in the same boat. Quite literally. You said it yourself, too — individual strength is not all that. If there's anything we can do to increase the overall strength of the cohort, it has to be done."

Sunny leaned forward, picked up a shimmering crystal, and threw it to Nephis. Her gaze did not move, but her hand shot forward and caught it.

She hesitated for a bit, then sighed and crushed the soul shard. A stream of white sparks then entered her body, surrounding it with radiance.

Before it dimmed, Nephis picked up another shard and absorbed it, as well. One, two, three, ten...

Trying very hard to keep bitter envy from showing on his face, Sunny observed the process from the sidelines. Belatedly, he realized that absorbing hundreds of shards was a very slow process.

With nothing else to do, he simply stared at the soft radiance surrounding Neph's slender figure.

After a while, a quiet sight escaped from his lips.

'Pretty...'

Then, Sunny coughed.

'I mean, this mountain of wealth... can there be a prettier sight?! Too bad it's going to be all gone soon. Yeah...'

Forcing himself to look away, he glanced at Cassie. The blind girl seemed to have regained some of her liveliness, but she still looked unsteady. He summoned the Endless Spring and offered it to her.

Cassie must have been low on essence, because she didn't see his gesture. That probably meant that her Aspect Abilities were not activated, leaving her truly blind, just as she had been as a Sleeper.

Sunny lingered for a moment. Calling out to her, he gently grasped her wrist and placed the Memory into her palm.

"Here. Drink some water."

She held the Endless Spring for a bit, then brought her other hand closer and traced the shape of the beautiful glass bottle with her fingers. A subtle smile appeared on Cassie's lips.

Bringing the bottle to them, she took a few sips of the cool, refreshing water, and offered the Endless Spring back to Sunny.

"Thank you."

Dismissing the Memory, he remembered the past. The Endless Spring was one of the three Memories Cassie had earned in her First Nightmare. It had served them well on the Forgotten Shore, and was later gifted to Sunny by the blind girl.

The beautiful glass bottle had followed him on all his misadventures ever since, saving his life on several occasions.

...Looking back, it was quite a thoughtful gift.

"But don't you know why she gave it to you?"

Sunny flinched, looking up at the Sin of Solace. The sword wraith had appeared from the darkness at some point, unseen, and now stood above him with a cold expression.

"Not out of any kind of affection, of course. It was just something to dampen the torment of guilt she felt over betraying you. So, if anything, that gift of hers was quite self-indulgent. A person can't condemn a friend to death and want to feel good about themselves at the same time, you know. If they have any shame."

The apparition smiled.

"Hey. She never even apologized, did she?"

The Sin of Solace shook his head.

"So maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she has never had any shame, and has never felt guilty about stabbing you in the back, to begin with."

Sitting opposite Sunny, Cassie hugged her shoulders and lowered her head.

He gritted his teeth.

'Shut the hell up. Nobody asked for your opinion, wretch...'

As Nephis continued to absorb soul shards, the laughter of the odious wrath echoed in his ears.