1384 Novel Idea

Eventually, Nephis was done with the pile of soul shards. Sunny stored a few of them inside the Covetous Coffer, then dismissed the alloy chest and rose, looking around the flooded hall.

Although the structure sustained some damage during the battle, it had not collapsed yet. He did not know how much longer the lost temple would last, though. The sight of numerous cracks covering the distant ceiling did not fill him with confidence.

'...It's not the end of the world.'

Sunny had to remind himself that even if the temple collapsed, the three of them would be just fine. They were Masters, not mundane people — it was just hard to remember the difference, sometimes. No one would be able to remain composed when there were countless tons of stone and cold water ready to fall on their heads.

"Shall we go?"

Nephis had finished absorbing the soul shards, and Fiend had finished stuffing his face with what remained of the Drowned. They had rested enough, as well... nothing was preventing them from exploring deeper into the temple.

Rising to her feet, Cassie nodded.

"Yeah. Let's go."

Nephis did a few stretches and brandished her sword in a flowing series of strikes, familiarizing herself with the subtle change of her physical power. Then, she followed the two of them to the far end of the flooded hall.

"What are we searching for, exactly?"

Cassie was looking at the cracked wall behind the dais, her expression glum. After a few moments of silence, she responded in a distant tone:

"This temple used to be dedicated to knowledge. The three sybils who ruled Fallen Grace each had different responsibilities, and this one, as the senior, was the guardian of truths. She oversaw a vast library where everything the sybils knew about the world was recorded. Many faithful priests and priestesses were responsible for keeping and expanding the library, as well."

The blind girl sighed.

"...Of course, most of that knowledge was lost when the sybil succumbed to the Defilement, and the rest had to have slowly deteriorated after her imprisonment. The recent water damage probably obliterated most of what was left. Still, there is a chance that we'll find hints of what to expect on our journey."

Finally, Cassie noticed a small door that was obscured by darkness, most of the narrow corridor it led to submerged underwater. Taking a step in that direction, she said:

"Among other things, the sybils kept detailed maps and records of the Great River here. Every city, every settlement, every stronghold of a powerful Seeker... from what I was able to learn, these maps were engraved on stone slates. They would not have been destroyed that easily. The information about the place where Effie and Soul Reaper are trapped should have been recorded, as well."

The geography of the Tomb of Ariel — or rather, of both the human settlements and the hazardous environments — was constantly shifting. Human cities migrated, while dangerous areas changed or moved. Considering the treacherous nature of the Great River, keeping maps was not too simple of a task.

That said, some places had a constant location. And even if it changed, the knowledge of how they had been in the past could help Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie learn what it was exactly that they would have to face.

'Great...'

Usually, Sunny would have preserved his essence, but since the battle was behind them, and he was being spoiled by the Crown of Twilight, he simply commanded the water to part instead of jumping into its cold embrace.

It took some effort for him to move so much of it, but a few seconds later, the flooded corridor was flooded no more. The three of them descended from the dais and entered through the small door, venturing into the very heart of the lost temple.

As they walked, Sunny couldn't help but feel a bit disturbed. There were much more signs of the sybil's rampage here, close to the inner sanctum. Even though the Defiled abomination was dead now, the marks she had left on the ancient walls remained as eerie and ominous as ever.

Cassie opened her mouth to say something, but remained silent in the end. A grim expression settled on her exquisite face. The bright glimmer of her beautiful eyes dimmed, replaced by somber darkness.

He frowned, worried that they should have given the blind girl more time to rest.

In the end, Sunny hurried his steps to catch up to her and asked:

"Are you alright?"

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then smiled faintly.

"Yes... sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

Then, she traced the frightening marks left on the wall by the fury of the imprisoned sybil.

"I was just thinking what it must have felt like, to be buried here alive. The people of Fallen Grace... they thought that they were showing mercy by not killing her. Or reverence and devotion, perhaps. But..."

She sighed and shook her head.

"Wouldn't it have been better to just die?"

Sunny lingered for a while, not knowing what to answer. It was just a curious question to him — but to Cassie, who had lived an entire year playing the role of a sybil, it had to be much more personal.

Eventually, he shrugged: "I'd rather die, yes."

The blind girl smiled.

"Yeah. That just goes to show... that good intentions often produce the most cruel of results. Don't you think?"

When Sunny nodded, she paused for a moment, then suddenly added in a dark tone:

"However... personally, I disagree. I'd rather live, no matter what."

He looked at her with surprise, slightly confused by the contradiction.

"Why?"

Cassie remained silent for a few moments. It seemed as though she was considering his questions seriously.

Eventually, she chuckled:

"...Honestly, I'm not quite sure. Pride, maybe? The world is trying to kill us so hard. It just feels like such a shame, to let it have its way."

Sunny stared at her with an incredulous expression.

'What the hell?'

Wasn't it basically the same thing he had told Hero all those years ago, in the First Nightmare? It was like listening to a more refined and eloquent version of himself.

Was it such a surprise, though? Although he and Cassie came from entirely different backgrounds, they were more alike than anyone would think... simply because they both shared an affinity to fate, and knew better than most how tyrannical fate was.

He kept quiet for a bit, then scoffed. Before Sunny could respond, though, Nephis spoke from behind them:

"Well, then, what's the problem? Just make sure not to die. There, problem solved."

He nodded with a grin.

"Exactly. I mean, it's not that hard... if a fool like me can stay alive, anyone can."

Cassie smiled, amused by their awkward attempts to raise her mood. She nodded.

"Ah... alright. What a novel idea. I'll take it under advisement."

As the sound of quiet chucking echoed in the dark corridor, the three Masters went deeper into the darkness of the ancient temple.