1391 Rushed Exit

Sunny had wanted to get back to the slates, but as he left the secret room, he suddenly felt uneasy. Something about the chamber had changed... he couldn't quite put a finger on it, but it was as if the shadows populating it were moving.

"Hold on to something."

Hearing Cassie's voice, he put his hand on a stone pillar. In the next moment, the floor beneath him violently shook. Its already pronounced tilt was suddenly even steeper, causing countless small pieces of rubble to roll in their direction.

The sound of falling water had grown louder.

'Curses.'

Looking at his companions, Sunny sighed and said in a glum tone: "I guess the battle did too much damage to the temple, after all." Nephis nodded somberly.

"Should we hurry?"

He hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. A swarm of sparks rose into the air, slowly forming into a familiar alloy chest.

"We probably don't have much time before this entire place sinks. Let's just load everything into the Covetous Coffer... we can continue studying the slates when we're safely back on the Chain Breaker."

Of course, safety was a relative term here in the Tomb of Ariel. Sunny had only grown more wary of the Great River after reading the records in this ancient chamber, but still... he was not enthused at the idea of having to escape the temple while it was actively drowning.

Feeling like they had very little time left, the three Masters abandoned all attempts of categorizing the slates and simply threw everything remotely intact into the welcoming maw of the Covetous Coffer. The temple shook one more while they were at it, causing Sunny to curse in frustration.

Finally, they were done. Not wasting any time, Sunny led the way out of the central chamber, past the rooms full of rotting scrolls, and into the cold darkness of the narrow corridors leading to the great hall. By then, it felt like they were climbing a steep hill — the stone floor was tilted downward, water rushing past their feet and drenching them from above.

'Ah, I don't like this...'

Logically, Sunny understood that he would be able to escape the drowning temple even if it collapsed and started sinking. Not only was he strong enough to break through the stone walls, he also possessed Memories of the House of Night that allowed him to swim like a fish and breathe underwater.

However, he still felt tense and claustrophobic. Being caught under an immense mass of stone, with cold water rising higher and higher with each moment, was not the most pleasant of feelings. The ancient temple was shaking and groaning, slowly crumbling around them.

'I can just send one of the shadows ahead and get to the surface by using Shadow Step. I can take Nephis with me, as well.'

He glanced at Cassie, who was walking behind them while using the holy staff as a cane. After a short moment of hesitation, Sunny chose to keep all the shadows with him.

Soon, they reached the great hall where the battle had taken place. Although not much time had passed, it was in far worse shape already —there were actual waterfalls flowing through wide cracks in the distant ceiling, and the dais where Cassie and the Sybil had clashed was partially submerged underwater.

His Shadows, whom he had left there to stand guard, were silently watching the rising water.

"Nightmare! Come!"

In the blink of an eye, the black stallion was already at his side. Sunny lingered for a moment, then turned around and grabbed Cassie by her thin waist.

"Excuse me..."

Effortlessly lifting the delicate girl, he placed her on the dark destrier's broad back and gave Nightmare a silent command to reach the surface as soon as possible.

"You better hold on tight!"

Cassie remained motionless for a split second, then suddenly paled and grabbed onto the dreadful steed's mane tightly. She opened her mouth to say something, but a moment later, both of them were gone in a burst of wind. All that could be heard was the sound of adamantine hooves ringing on stone in the distance, and a short shriek.

'Now, then...'

No matter how fast Sunny and his shadows were, Nightmare was many times faster. And since one of those shadows had been accompanying the black stallion, the three of them — the Shadow, the shadow, and the blind seer — reached the surface much sooner than Sunny would have.

By the time he and Nephis reached the edge of the dais, he could already see the crimson blaze of the twilight sky. Just at that moment, the temple shuddered in another violent quake...

Grasping Neph's hand, Sunny pulled her into the dark embrace of shadows. A short instance later, they stepped on the ashen soil of the incinerated garden, bright sunlight briefly blinding both.

When Sunny regained his vision, the first thing he saw was Cassie kneeling on the ground in front of Nightmare, her face of an unhealthy greenish color. Taking a few deep breaths, the blind girl raised a trembling hand and pointed an accusing finger at him.

"W—w... warn me next time! D—damn it!"

He grinned.

"What's the point? Didn't you already know what I was going to do?"

Sunny hurriedly helped her stand up, dodging the tip of the Guiding Light in the process.

"Watch where you point this thing... in any case, there's no time to tarry! We might have escaped the temple, but this whole island is going to fall apart soon. So, hurry up and run!"

At that point, Nephis gave him a somber look and said, her voice flat:

"I'll hurry and run... as soon as you let go of my hand."

She lingered for a moment, and then added evenly:

"...Or do you want me to carry you?"

Sunny froze, then lowered his gaze and realized that he was, indeed, still holding Neph's hand. He blinked a couple of times, then looked up and gave her a smile.

"Actually, yeah. I wouldn't mind being carried."

With that, Sunny let go and dashed toward the shore of the island-ship.

Soon, the graceful silhouette of the Chain Breaker appeared in front of them. He felt much too happy to see the ancient ship, and leaped onto its deck without wasting a single second.

Just as he did, the drowning island resounded with a deafening crack, and split apart.