1410 River Nomads

The three women looked at him expectedly.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

"You know where we are, right, Jet? In general, I mean."

Taking the cup of tea and cradling it in her hands, she nodded.

"Yeah... we are inside that weird pyramid. Somehow. This place is the Great River, which is supposed to flow endlessly from the future into the past."

He sighed in relief. It seemed that Effie and Jet had learned a few things about the nature of the Third Nightmare, as well.

"Indeed. Because of the nature of the Great River, there are all kinds of strange things happening to time in this Nightmare. For example... Nephis and I have been here for about four months now. But Cassie has been here for more than a year."

Nephis and Cassie nodded calmly, since they had already known that fact. Jet, however, seemed perplexed.

"What?"

Sunny looked at her, lingered for a moment, and said:

"Yeah. What about you?"

Soul Reaper suddenly seemed uncertain. He touched her hair briefly, then blinked a couple times.

"About... two months? Effie and I were sent to the same place, two months ago."

This time, it was Neph's and Cassie's turn to look stunned.

"How can that be?"

Sunny smiled faintly.

"I'll explain in a bit. But first, Jet... can you tell us what has happened to you two?"

She took a sip of tee, then smiled back at him.

"Sure. Why not?"

Jet's icy blue eye grew a little distant.

"The three of you must know more about this place than we do. Look, you even have a ship! Effie and I... we weren't that lucky. The people whose roles we've taken belonged to a tribe of river nomads. Their ancestors were the survivors of one of the destroyed cities, I think, but these guys... they had already regressed into abject savagery. Which is not that surprising, really, considering how they lived."

She sighed.

"The river nomads did not have a place to live, constantly migrating instead. They rode sea creatures as steeds and hunted weaker abominations for sustenance. When Defiled or powerful Nightmare Creatures appeared, they ran. Actually, their way of life was really ingenious... and tenacious. I have never even thought that it was possible, for humans to live entirely in the water without ever stepping foot on land."

Cassie tilted her head a little, confused.

"These nomads... they were Riverborn?"

Sunny was confused, too. How could Riverborn lead nomadic lives?

Weren't they bound to a span of the Great River they were born on?

Jet nodded somberly.

"Yeah. That was why they regressed that much, that quickly. The nomads lived very short lives, you see. No generation lasted more than a couple of decades. They rarely remained as children for more than a year or two, and were expected to join the hunts immediately after. If there was danger, the older generation was sacrificed to let the younger one escape. Even if there was no danger, they had to follow the abominations they could hunt. So..."

She shook her head.

"They might have looked like adults, but in reality, it was a tribe where no one ever reached adulthood. They were all ignorant, savage kids."

Soul Reaper leaned back, fed her crow Echo a grape, and grimaced.

"Well, by the time Effie and I came around, it could barely be called a tribe. There were maybe a dozen people left. All the other nomad tribes seemed to have gone extinct already, as well. We were most likely the last."

Her expression darkened slightly.

"So, we tried to keep them alive and find out where we were, what was happening, and how to conquer the Nightmare. It took us some time to learn how to live the lives of the Great River nomads. In the process, we also learned from the surviving tribesmen about the Tomb of Ariel, the Great River, the Defilement, and the fall of the River Cities. Oh... and we fought plenty of Nightmare Creatures. Well, I did, at least."

Jet stretched and then winced, briefly touching one of her bandages.

"Everything went if not well, then at least alright until we stumbled on an especially powerful swarm of the Drowned. Our tribe... at that point, there were no children among the nomads anymore, so there was not even a point in trying to run. In the battle, everyone was killed. Only Effie and I managed to escape."

Sunny noted that Jet and Effie remained Outsiders despite having taken the roles of two Riverborn people. It was an interesting fact.

Meanwhile, she shrugged and continued:

"Usually, our mounts would have been fast enough to give a slip to most enemies, but the Drowned pursued us relentlessly, as if it was their life's mission to obliterate all nomads. The sea creatures we rode had also been wounded in the battle, so they were gradually slowing down. After about a week of running away and fighting pitched battles with those bastards, we got lost in the mist, and then sucked into this whirlpool. I only managed to send my Echo out, hoping against all hope that Crow Crow would manage to find one of you."

Soul Reaper looked at the black bird and smiled. Then, her smile faded slowly.

"Effie and I were separated while trying to reach the island. And here we are, I guess."

Nephis glanced at Cassie, then frowned a little. "What do you mean? How long have you been here?" Jet looked at her with surprise.

'There, the moment of truth.'

She scratched her head.

"A couple hours? I landed, tried to search for Effie, and got lost in the mist. Then, that thing attacked me... I managed to flee, but she would have probably finished me off soon if not for Sunny. Talk about a prince on a white horse... who needs one when there's a pauper on a black horse, right?"

Soul Reaper grinned and downed the rest of her tea in one gulp. A satisfied expression appeared on her face.

Nephis and Cassie, meanwhile, seemed troubled. The blind girl frowned:

"But how is it possible? Your Echo arrived at Fallen Grace many months ago."

Jet stared at her, bewildered.

"What? Wait... I thought that you guys were already on the island. Wasn't that why Crow Crow was able to find Sunny so fast?

Cassie shook her head.

"No... we only ventured to find Wind Flower after learning that the two of you were here."

Soul Reaper leaned back.

"That doesn't make any sense."

Everyone grew quiet, failing to understand the strange discrepancy. In that silence, Sunny finally spoke:

"It's because time moves in a circle on this island."