1472 Given Promise

Outside Aletheia's Tower, the island was still the same. And yet, it was entirely new.

The mist still flowed between the ancient pines, and the frozen Nightmare Creatures were still standing on the white stone bridge. But it was a new day. Sunny could already observe subtle changes.

The fog was growing thinner. Devouring Beast, who should have been in the vicinity of the tower at that time, was nowhere to be seen. He did not dare sending his shadows out to scout, but he knew that the bestial giantess was now somewhere else on the island, hunting different prey than usual.

Undying Slaughter was somewhere there, as well.

For a moment, Sunny wanted to release the Fragment of the Shadow Realm. The not knowing of it all was gnawing at him. But in the end, he held himself back.

Nothing was going to change if he knew every minute detail of what was happening to the two Defiled Saints. The only thing that mattered was the end result — whether the Plagues were going to prevail against the prisoners of Aletheia's Island or not. And that question was not going to be answered any time soon.

So, Sunny was left alone with his dark thoughts... for a short while.

Then, he heard the sound of footsteps and saw Nephis climbing the steps. She entered the bedchamber and froze for a moment, looking around with her usual indifferent composure. Her gaze lingered at the soot covering the walls, and then settled on Sunny.

He looked up from where he was sitting on the floor and met it silently. Nephis lingered for a moment.

"I wanted to congratulate you on becoming a Terror. But... you don't seem to be very excited."

Sunny looked away and shrugged, not knowing what to say. Was he supposed to express his indignation at Wind Flower's inevitable death? That would be... a bit childish. She was not the first person he had met who deserved a less bitter end, and would certainly not be the last.

Saying such things to Nephis, who had lost and buried her own share of precious people, seemed especially cruel.

With a sigh, Neph walked over and sat down near him. She hesitated for a bit, then gently put her arm around his shoulder.

"Did you fulfill your promise to the sleeping Saint?"

Soothed by the familiar steadiness of her even voice and the warmth of her embrace, he nodded.

"Yeah. She wanted me to burn her body, so... well, you can see."

After a while, a heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"It is a bit strange, don't you think? The Nightmares are supposed to be trials of strength for us, the challengers. But what I remember the most is the strength of the illusory people who lived, struggled, and died in these conjured worlds. Noctis, Ananke, Wind Flower... somehow, the passion with which they lived seems much more real than even ours."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then said slowly:

"I don't think it's strange at all. I remember those whom I met in the Nightmares, as well."

She paused before adding, her voice a little lower than before:

"Even though sometimes, I wish to forget."

Sunny smiled bitterly.

Wouldn't it be nice, to forget some things? He was thinking about how nice it would be to forget all the agony he had experienced on Aletheia's Island just recently. It had only been a few months of torment... and yet, he was almost driven mad.

If the loop continued for another month... a year... a few years...

Maybe Sunny would have indeed grown to resemble that bastard, the Mad Prince.

Shaking his head, he looked at the soot and embers left in the wake of Wind Flower's deathbed and fell silent.

After a while, leaning slightly on Nephis, Sunny asked:

"You once told me something. That people like us are born to destroy things, not save them. Do you really believe that?"

She did not answer immediately. Eventually, though, Nephis nodded.

"Yes. Maybe. You and I, Sunny... we were born in a time of war, disaster, and ruin. In a world that is being killed by a flood of invaders. Such a world doesn't need saviors and builders... their time will come after killers and destroyers like us do our part. If we don't, there will be no world to save, and no homes to rebuild."

A pale smile appeared on her beautiful face.

"So, yes... I believe it. But I also believe that it's not something bad. It's a blessing, in fact."

Sunny remained silent. What a dire blessing it was... well, what else had he expected to hear? She was the Star of Ruin, after all. The last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan, the inheritor of the fire.

He sighed.

"I promised Wind Flower to conquer this Nightmare, you know?"

A dark grin appeared on his face.

"That's the second time I promised to conquer it."

Nephis stood up and looked at him, then smiled from the corner of her mouth.

"Well, then... we'd better really conquer it. You wouldn't want to become a liar, would you?"

Suny chuckled and rose, as well, the memory of her warmth still lingering on his skin.

"Of course not. I am the most honest person in the world, after all. Two worlds, even."

With that, they left the scorched bedchamber and descended to the first floor of Aletheia's Tower, where the rest of the cohort was preparing for the coming day.

Cassie had gone to study the runes in the basement, Effie was busy roasting the Great Tyrant's meat on coals. Jet had dismissed her damaged armor and was sitting on top of the Covetous Coffer, lazily mending a piece of leather clothing.

Noticing the two of them, she looked up and smiled.

"Hey. What's the plan for today?"

Sunny tried not to stare where he was not supposed to stare and coughed.

"Nothing much. Rest, recuperate. Gather our strength."

He paused for a moment and then added, his voice grim:

"We are going to need as much strength as we can muster to defeat your evil twins, starved or not."