1526 Tempered in Flame

Nephis tilted her head, remained silent for a few moments, then said:

"I received a fair number of Memories, too... sadly, not nearly as many as one would have expected, considering the death toll of the explosion. Still, there is at least one or two for each of us. We can distribute them later."

With that, she turned to Sunny.

"That is what happened to Soul Stealer. What happened to the Dread Lord, though? How were the three of you able to kill him?"

He lingered for a bit.

'Cassie almost died in that explosion. Is Neph not concerned about that at all?'

A slight frown appeared on his face.

Eventually, he grimaced and answered in a dark tone:

"Well... I already said that the Crown of Twilight allowed me to ignore his commands. That should have made things easier, since his most fearsome weapon was taken away. In practice, though, so was mine. My mind. Without being able to think straight, I was no better than a frenzied beast... worse, even, because even a beast would have used everything at his disposal to survive."

He shook his head.

"But I was unwilling to summon my Shadows, or work together with Kai to bring the Dread Lord down. That was... unfortunate, to say the least. In the end, we ended up outside the city, in that floating fortress. I tied down the fiend, relentlessly attacking his body. That gave Kai an opportunity to destroy the amulet which had protected the bastard from Soul Stealer, and that gave Mordret an opportunity to attack his soul, in turn."

Sunny glanced at Kai and smiled from the corner of his mouth.

"The Dread Lord was paralyzed for a few seconds, and our resident dragon slayer used those seconds to drive an enchanted arrow through his brain. That was how the three of us — but mostly Kai — managed to kill him."

Kai had also prevented Mordret from taking possession of the Dread Lord's body, which would have undoubtedly given the Prince of Nothing ideas. Right now, he could be trusted not to turn on them because he needed Nephis to destroy the First Seeker. If Mordret had the power to subjugate her with the authority of the dragon's voice, though?

Who knew what he would have done?

In hindsight, Kai's decision to not wait for the results of the soul battle might have saved them all.

Sunny gave Mordret a somber look.

'Gods. How did I end up on the same team with that guy?'

Noticing his gaze, the Prince of Nothing smiled.

"Oh... I would have killed the Dread Lord myself. Probably. There was a little problem, you see — a seed of Corruption somehow ended up blooming in my soul. Luckily, I managed to extricate the infected part and turn it into a Reflection before the disease spread. So, I am back to being a mere Beast. Alas."

Now, it was time for them to stare at Mordret.

'What the hell...'

Who talked about becoming infected with Corruption, cutting up their own soul, and turning the contaminated portion of it into an external entity in order to heal themselves? What insanity was that?

Then again... perhaps Sunny wasn't the best person to accuse someone of insanity. He was currently living out the devious plan concocted by his past Defiled self, after all.

While he was contemplating whether any of the seven people present on the mess deck could be called sane, Jet smiled and winked at Kai.

"Congratulations, Ascended Nightingale. Welcome to the club... the I Killed Myself club? No, that doesn't sound right. Let's call it the Othercide Club. You know, for people who killed the other, evil version of themselves."

She yawned lazily and summoned a wisp of mist, making it swirl around her fingers.

"So, did you unlock your Aspect Legacy, as well? Or at least received a powerful Memory? Oh... you could have received an Echo, even. Having an Echo of yourself would be really weird, right?"

Everyone looked at Kai, imagining him having an Echo of himself. He coughed awkwardly.

"That... no, I did not unlock my Aspect Legacy. Or receive a Memory, or an Echo. Actually, something strange happened."

He hesitated for a moment.

"I seem to have received an Attribute, instead. The [Dragonslayer] Attribute. I am... not quite sure what it does."

Sunny tilted his head, slightly bewildered.

'So... it's an actual Attribute.'

"What does the description say?"

Kai seemed to blush a little.

"Ah... you know... something about being forged in battle, tempered in flame, and quenched in dragon blood... stuff like that."

Sunny stared at him incredulously.

'Well, damn. I bet the Spell was generous on the compliments, too.'

In any case, Kai's new Attribute had to have made his friend stronger. Considering the description, it most likely had something to do with durability and elemental resistance. Maybe there was a deeper layer to it, too — the truth would come out in time.

Good... that was good. The cohort was finally assembled, and most of the members had already grown stronger. Nephis had received a collection of powerful Memories, as well — considering the strength of the Nightmare Creatures of the Defiled legion, many of them would be of the Transcendent Rank.

Sunny still had five Supreme soul shards stored in the Covetous Coffer, so he would be able to elevate some of those Memories to the Supreme Rank, as well.

The cohort would be ready to face Verge... and Torment. The only Plague that remained.

Was that by accident, or the result of someone's intent?

The will of the Mad Prince? Or Torment's own?

Sunny did not know, but suspected that one of those two, or maybe even both of them, had harbored plans for Verge behind the Dread Lord's back.

He sighed, then looked at Cassie and asked, not addressing anyone in particular:

"So... what's the plan now?"

Nephis answered immediately, no hesitation in her steady voice:

"What else? We sail for Verge, of course."

Then, she turned to Cassie and asked:

"What is the fastest way we can get there?"

The blind girl hesitated for a moment.

"I'll have to check."

She stood up and left, soon returning with a heavy crate. The stone slates they had recovered in the drowned temple of the Defiled sybil were stored there.

It took Cassie some time to lay the slates out on the table, reference them, and come up with an approximate route. In the end, she pointed to a particular slate. There, the shape of a graceful castle was etched.

"It seems that the fastest way to Verge is to simply sail downstream and keep going until we almost reach the dawn of time. However..."

The blind girl put two slates that did not seem to have anything in common together.

"With what we know about the shape of the Great River now, we can save a lot of time by simply crossing it, sailing past the western Edge, and braving the inner void. That way, we should be able to bypass most of the journey into the past and land near Verge directly."

A strange silence settled on the mess deck.

Nephis studied the stone slates for a while, then nodded.

"This will take us close to Fallen Grace first. Let's stop there on the way, then, before departing for the final battle."

She looked at them, her gaze lingering on Sunny for a few extra moments. Eventually, she said:

"...If there is no objections."

He might have been mistaken, but it seemed as though at least a hint of liveliness had returned to her voice. Well, the words liveliness and Nephis did not really go together, but it was a great relief to see that her humanity was slowly coming back.

She was even interested in their opinions... his opinion, in particular. At least it seemed that way.

Sunny sighed.

'What else is there to do? If we want to escape this Nightmare, Verge in the only way.'

He shrugged.

"No objections from me."

The others did not have any, either.

After a few moments of silence, Nephis nodded.

"Onward to Verge, then."