1532 Unchanging

After an especially fierce battle against a swarm of aerial abominations, the deck of the Chain Breaker was slick with blood. Fiend was sitting near a pile of grotesque corpses, munching on them with shining eyes. The disturbing crunching sounds spread far and wide, making the members of the cohort throw disgusted looks at him.

The ravenous ogre paid it no attention, continuing his morbid meal in utter delight.

The flying ship had landed on the water, and was now swaying gently on the waves. Its sails were filled with wind, and steered by Neph's steady hand, it moved swiftly across the current.

Sunny had just finished inspecting the hull of the Chain Breaker to check if it had received any damage. Apart from a couple shallow scratches, everything seemed fine. Relieved, he gave Cassie the sign that it was alright, and went about helping Kai wash the blood off the deck.

The motions of cleaning the ship up after a battle were so familiar by now that he could have performed them with his eyes closed and his shadows gone.

Eventually, everything that needed to be done was done. The pile of corpses had disappeared, consumed by Fiend. The soul shards had been recovered and cleaned. The deck had been washed, the sails and masts had been checked.

The members of the cohort returned to what they had been doing before the Nightmare Creatures attacked. Effie was already starting to prepare dinner, and a delicious smell wafted from the galley.

The seven suns were falling toward the horizon.

Instead of returning to his usual spot and manifesting shadow hands to continue weaving threads of essence, Sunny hesitated for a while, then made his way toward the stern of the ship. There, Nephis was standing in the runic circle, holding the steering oars.

He leaned against the railing nearby and summoned the Endless Spring, taking a sip of the invigorating water.

They spent some time in silence. The silence between them had been comfortable once, but now, it was making Sunny feel burdened. Eventually, he asked:

"How long do you think it will take us to reach Fallen Grace?" Nephis looked at the sky, then shrugged.

"Five weeks? Maybe six. Depends on the wind and the obstacles we'll meet along the way."

He nodded. All in all, two months would have passed since the day they left Twilight by the time Fallen Grace appeared in sight. Which meant that he would have spent around nine in the Nightmare. The same went for Nephis, while Cassie... Cassie would be closing in on having been in the Tomb of Ariel for the better part of two years.

It would be five months for Effie and jet, and two for Kai. 'What a mess.'

Sunny wasn't even sure how old he was exactly, anymore, especially in relation to the other members of the cohort. He was still shy of turning twenty-one by several months, at least.

After thinking about that for a bit, he asked:

"How do you think the people in Fallen Grace are doing?"

The citizens of Fallen Grace had been supposed to migrate it downstream after the news of the Defiled sybil's demise reached them. That would have allowed them to regain their youth, and maybe even usher in a new generation, with time.

But since Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie had not bothered to stay back and check, there was no telling what actually happened.

'I wonder how that brat, Cronos, is doing...' Nephis sighed.

"It's impossible to tell. After all, we don't know how much time we spent on Aletheia's Island and to traverse the vortex."

That was true, as well. Sunny only knew how many revolutions he endured after becoming aware of them, not how many deaths it had taken for him to learn the truth of the loop. Time had also acted extremely strangely in the depths of the Great River, when they were traveling through the vortex, and in the dark void beyond.

In a sense, the only member of the group who had experienced each day

of the Nightmare normally, from start to finish, was Mordret. But even he had no idea how long it had been since they entered the Tomb of Ariel —or rather, since they started this cycle of the Great River — because it was close to impossible to track the passage of time in the reflected version of Twilight, where it had been frozen.

All he knew was that he had played cat and mouse with Soul Stealer for a very long time before the Chain Breaker arrived.

Sunny remained silent for a while, trying to choose the correct words. But they weren't coming.

What was the point of words, anyway? If their troubles could be solved with words, they would have solved them a long time ago. Words were cheap, and actions spoke louder.

Some problems could not be solved at all.

He winced, then said the first thing that came to his mind: "I wonder... how that brat Cronos is..."

"I'm sorry."

Neph's voice interrupted him, making Sunny flinch slightly. He glanced at her, surprised.

Nephis was looking ahead, at the horizon. Her motionless face was painted by the light of the descending suns. She remained silent for a moment, then sighed and turned to face him.

"I am sorry for making you dismiss your crown."

Sunny did not answer immediately. He kept quiet for a while, studying her face. His own expression was neutral, not exposing any of the swarm of emotions hiding behind it.

There it was, an apology. The conversation he had been delaying went much smoother than he had expected, arriving at what could very well be considered the best possible outcome.

But it did not solve anything.

So what if Nephis was sorry? It did not change what she had done. It did not change what she could do in the future, either. They could discuss it endlessly, expressing their reasons, feelings, intentions, and desires. But that fundamental truth would not change, making all else meaningless.

Perhaps it was just like the Sin of Solace had said. The only way to resolve this issue... was for Sunny to surrender.

But he did not know how to, and did not wish to surrender, either. Eventually, Sunny sighed, as well.

Looking away, he nodded.

"...Yeah. I am sorry that you did that, too."

With that, he forced out a smile.

His smile was unconvincing, and a little joyless.

"But hey, what else were you supposed to do? At least you helped me save face. You might not have known it, but I was moments away from trying to bite you. That... would have been really embarrassing. Not to mention bad for my teeth."

Sunny shook his head and pushed himself off the railing.

"Dinner is almost ready, so I'd better go. Cassie will take over from you soon. Come down before the food gets cold."

He waved at her and left.

The first of the seven suns fell into the Great River, drowning in its unfathomable depths. Far behind them, the sky was already turning dark.

The Chain Breaker continued sailing in the direction of the distant sunset.