1533 Dusk Flower

Chain Breaker was sailing across the vast expanse of the Great River. With each day, the time of their inevitable arrival at Verge drew closer. Torment was waiting there, as well as the remnants of the Defiled horde. All dreadful and powerful adversaries, without a doubt.

Sunny felt a strange melancholy settle in his burdened heart... something he did not want to carry, and could not afford to feel. His mind had to be focused on the preparations for the nearing battle. The battle that was going to decide whether they would return home as Saints, or be buried forever in the dreadful darkness of the Tomb of Ariel.

So, he did what he did best. He put his feelings aside, and got to work.

Five Memories waited for him to alter them, each possessing a unique and complicated weave. Each was different from the Crown of Dawn, and called for a different approach.

The suits of armor Effie and Kai had received for slaying the two Chain Lords of the Ivory City were the easiest to deal with. Armor was meant to be durable, after all, and perhaps for that reason, the weave of these Memories was robust and durable, as well.

Or maybe it was simply because of where they came from. In any case, Sunny had a good feeling about altering the Memories left behind by the two immortal Saints.

The deadly arrow and the helpful charm Nephis had received in Twilight were much more complicated. They were entirely different from each other, as well, which made the task of studying the weave of their enchantments harder.

But the most troublesome Memory by far was the Transcendent weapon of the Seventh Tier Nephis had received for slaying Soul Stealer. Not only was the weave of the silver blade infinitely more complex, but Sunny was also trying to do something he had never done before — replace a single nexus of a greater Memory and enhance only one of its enchantments, leaving the rest untouched.

More than that, the weave of the altered enchantment had to be completely isolated, so that the pressure of its more potent essence did not break the balance of the entire tapestry.

The elaborate puzzle of it all was driving him insane. Finding countless solutions to a myriad of problems demanded all of his attention.

Which was good. Sunny enjoyed being faced with problems that could actually be solved. He also liked not being able to dwell on other things too much, focusing entirely on a single task.

Days passed. Turning into weeks...

The Chain Breaker braved the vast expanse of the azure sky and finally entered the reaches of the Great River where the world was eternally bathed in the crimson radiance of dusk.

They fought plenty of harrowing Nightmare Creatures on the way. Sunny was somewhat forced to swallow his previous confidence — yes, nothing managed to defeat the cohort or gravely wound any of the seven Masters. But they came close to being defeated on more than one occasion.

One time, the impregnable hull of the Chain Breaker was even breached. Luckily, they were flying above the currents at the time, so the ship did not take any water. But having to hastily patch the damaged section in the middle of a prolonged battle made everyone remember why arrogance was the quickest way to die in the unforgiving world of the Nightmare Spell.

Not long before the second month of their journey came to an end, Sunny finally finished his work on the two suits of armor. Effie and Kai each had a Supreme Memory to protect them now, while Jet had her Legacy Relic. This made him feel better about the terrible battle that waited for them ahead.

Most of the preparatory work for the other three alterations had been complete, too. Sunny had plenty of essence strings at his disposal, as well as detailed knowledge of each of the three weaves. All that remained now was to carefully go over his plans, envision every step, and try to predict what could go wrong.

That was going to take him some time... but before that happened, the Chain Breaker finally arrived at Fallen Grace.

The arrival this time was different from the first.

Back then, neither Sunny nor Nephis had known what to expect from the last human city on the Great River. Therefore, they had been wary and ready for battle. He had even chosen to assume the form of the onyx serpent, following the graceful vessel from below the waves.

Many things were different now. The Chain Breaker was soaring above the water instead of resting on the currents. There were more people aboard.

Fallen Grace itself was different, too. Not only did it feel like an island of safety and peace in the ocean of perilous danger, but the city had also changed visibly.

It had indeed migrated further downstream, allowing the citizens to gain back their vitality. The first time Sunny and Nephis saw Fallen Grace, it was like a wilting white flower that floated on the crimson waves, bathed in the intense glow of the setting suns. There were still signs of deterioration hidden behind its beauty, but the white flower did not seem like it was dying anymore.

Instead, it looked to be recovering from a cured disease.

Many of the weathered buildings were being repaired. The sea of scarlet sails that helped Fallen Grace stay in place seemed freshly dyed. The island-ships were connected by solid bridges, and a few new ones were being constructed at the edges of the city, with countless people working on their unfinished frames.

Above all else, the atmosphere of the last city had entirely changed. If it had been somber and stifled before, now it was brimming with vigor and vitality.

It was as if people who had no hope had suddenly regained belief in the future.

Seeing Fallen Grace like this was a stark reminder for Sunny. A reminder of what it was that they were fighting for.

Even though he had almost forgotten, they weren't fighting against the Defilement to merely survive, or even to conquer the Nightmare and become Saints.

They were fighting for these people. Their defeat would mean the end of the River Civilization, while their triumph would give the people of Fallen Grace a chance to rebuild and thrive once again.

Even if these men and women were merely phantoms conjured by the Spell, their joys and sorrows mattered.

But, more than that... they were a symbol of similar cities back in the waking world. The elegant canals of Fallen Grace were no different from the bustling streets on NQSC.

Making sure that they would not turn empty and desolate... that was the calling of the Awakened. The change that had happened to this floating city served to illustrate what the triumphs or failures of Awakened truly meant.

Standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker, Sunny took a deep breath.

'We will destroy Verge and conquer this Nightmare.'

He had promised to do so. He had promised to do so thrice. Soon, he would have the chance to make good on his promise.