1534 Rejuvenated

The Chain Breaker landed on the water and cut across its surface, approaching a familiar pier. Just like in the past, there was a crowd of people watching the graceful ship approach.

Sunny remembered the last time he had seen these people... it was when he, Nephis, and Cassie were departing from Fallen Grace, on their route to find and rescue the other members of the cohort. Thousands of gaunt, solemn old men and women had gathered on the piers on that day to see Dusk, their protector and savior, leave.

Perhaps to never return.

What was it that Cassie had said back then, after breaking her golden chains in a striking and decisive manner?

She had said that they would gather powerful Outsiders, vanquish the Defilement, and usher in a new era. An era of freedom and grace. That she knew it to be true.

Sunny had been a bit surprised by her impassioned proclamation and jokingly asked if she had seen a vision of fate. To which Cassie had responded...

'Who cares about fate? If fate is against us... we'll break it.'

As if it was easy, to break fate.

Looking back, that speech was really out of character for the quiet, reserved young woman. Sure, she had been putting on a show to give the people of Fallen Grace hope. But why did it seem that Cassie had been much more alive... much more herself in those few moments than ever since?

Sunny sighed, feeling a tentative smile find its way to his face. Well... she had not been wrong.

They had indeed gathered powerful Outsiders, against all odds. Three Masters had left Fallen Grace, but seven of them returned. Which might not have seemed like much, if one did not know what they had gone through to reach that conclusion.

Much more important was the fact that, while their number had swelled, the number of their enemies had dwindled. Devouring Beast, Undying Slaughter, Soul Stealer, and the Dread Lord were gone. The Mad Prince was gone, too, and so only one of the Six Plagues remained.

Would Cassie's promise to vanquish the Defilement come true, as well?

'We'll make it come true.'

Feeling a newfound sense of determination, Sunny looked at the people crowding the pier. Now that the Chain Breaker had drawn closer, he could see them better.

Even though he knew what to expect, the sight still startled him.

'Huh...'

Gone were the gaunt, wrinkled faces. Gone were the hunched backs, blurry eyes, and lifeless white hair. Instead of thousands of old men and women, thousands of vigorous youths were staring back at him, their bright eyes full of vibrancy and life.

"It's Lady Dusk! Our Lady!"

"Our Lady has returned!"

"Look! That is Lord Sunless! They're back!"

"W—was that ship flying?!"

"There are people on the deck!"

The wind brought over a choir of excited voices. Kai, who was standing near Sunny, gave him an amused look and smiled.

"Why do I feel like I'm preparing for the opening song of a comeback concert?"

The charming archer scratched the back of his head and added in a confused tone:

"Ah... it must be because there's a crowd of excited teenagers in front of me. Old instincts are kicking in."

Sunny gave him a strange look, remembering that his friend's life was perhaps the strangest of everyone aboard the Chain Breaker. And that was saying a lot, considering that there was a dead woman and Mordret among them.

Finally, the Chain Breaker reached the pier. The ship was tied in place, and then a wooden gangway was lowered to allow its passengers to disembark. Cassie descended first, causing the crowd of people to explode with cheers.

The citizens of Fallen Grace seemed beyond themselves at the sight of their sybil. Their youthful faces were beaming with wide smiles, and their eyes glowed with excitement.

However, they were also full of curiosity, which was why their gazes moved away from the blind girl soon.

It was not everyday that Outsiders came to Fallen Grace — in fact, many or even most of these people had only seen such an event once. Recognizing Sunny and Nephis, the crowd exploded with cheers once more. Sunny felt a little overwhelmed by that warm welcome.

Then, the youths gathered at the pier looked at the other members of the cohort curiously.

Kai caused a bit of a stir in the crowd, just as expected. Wearing his ivory armor, with his auburn hair tousled by the wind and an irresistible smile on his face, the charming archer waved shyly at the youths, causing many to sway.

The warmth of his smile was in sharp contrast to the chilly aura emanated by Jet. Wearing a cold expression, she walked down the gangway and pierced the crowd with a grim look of her icy blue eyes. The volume of the cheers died down a little... but a different kind of gleam ignited in the eyes of many people. Especially the young man.

Sunny shook his head, knowing precisely how they felt.

Mordert's appearance also caused a strong reaction. Although not as charming as Kai and not as striking as Jet, he was nevertheless the most enigmatic and mysterious of the group. His easy smile, mirror-like eyes, and the slight feeling of wrongness hiding in their reflective depths made for a magnetic impression.

If only these people knew that they were looking at a deranged monster who would not hesitate to slaughter them all to form a few soul cores, as long as he could get away with it.

...Strangely enough, though, the most memorable impression was not made by Kai, Jet, or Mordret. Nor was it made by Cassie, Sunny, or Nephis.

Instead, it was Effie who elicited the strongest reaction from the people of Fallen Grace.

After two months of sailing across the Great River, her belly grew even larger than it had been before. The boisterous huntress had lost most of her former poise and grace. In fact, simply walking was tough for her.

Supporting her belly with one hand and using a spear as a walking staff with another, Effie cautiously descended the gangway and looked at the crowd of youths with a bright smile.

Her appearance caused all of them to grow silent.

Sunny could not understand why, at first, but then realized that the people of Fallen Grace must not have seen a pregnant woman in a long, long time. Before, they were banished upstream, turning old and decrepit. In fact, they must not have seen anything like that for a while before that, as well — among the River People, pregnant women could only be seen in the House of Youth.

Looking at Effie must have been like looking at the promise of having a future, for them.

The huntress leaned toward Sunny and whispered, her smile becoming a little strained:

"Doofus... why are they all staring at me?"

He cleared his throat, not knowing how exactly to answer that question. Eventually, Sunny said:

"It's because they are happy."

Effie chuckled.

"Oh..."

She turned to the crowd and waved.

"I guess I should be happy then, too."