1536 Future Youths

There was a squad of soldiers on the pier, as well, all wearing white armor tied at the waist with red sashes. Unlike the last time Sunny had seen them, the warriors filled their armor well, brimming with vigor and vitality.

Their captain was a tall, beautiful woman with fiery red hair. Sunny only recognized her because of an open helmet with a scarlet plume she was holding on the bend of her right arm... she was the captain that had escorted him and Nephis to the temple the last time around.

She had seemed ancient then. Now, she looked not much older than they were. Everyone here did, really, or even younger. The startling change was still making him feel a little dizzy.

Sunny had known, of course, that killing the Defiled sybil would allow Fallen Grace to migrate downstream and return these people their youth. Knowing and seeing were two different things, however.

Seeing them like this was a bit... bittersweet. Sweet because it was nice to witness his actions doing some good, bitter because it reminded him of Ananke.

As Sunny was pondering the strange reality of living on the Great River, the soldiers created a passage through the crowd and surrounded the members of the cohort, helping them leave the pier.

They were escorted along the familiar streets once again, moving toward the temple of Dusk. There had been a lot of people on the pier, but there were even more here, crowding the sidewalks and the roofs of the buildings, all staring at the returned Outsiders with excitement and awe.

The crowd followed the small procession, constantly growing. Some people were calling out to Cassie, some simply cheered from a distance. After the relative tranquility of months spent at sea, Sunny was having trouble adjusting to the boisterous atmosphere of Falling Grace.

"Lord Sunless! Lord Sunless!"

He turned his head, hearing his own name.

The voice was unfamiliar, and the face of the scrawny teenager calling out to him was unfamiliar, too. But Sunny recognized those curious, intelligent eyes almost immediately.

He frowned slightly, but was actually amused.

"Cronos? Is that you, brat?"

The teenager, who had been kept away by the captain of the soldiers, grinned:

"Yes! It's me. Lord Sunless, welcome back!"

Sunny smiled, then nodded at the captain, signaling that it was alright to let the young man approach. A few moments later, Cronos joined the procession and looked at the other members of the cohort with wide eyes.

"Lord Sunless... are these Outsiders, as well?"

Sunny nodded.

"Sure. That one, I found in a well once. That one is a freeloader who likes to invite herself into other people's houses. That one is in the habit of giving young men like us weighty slaps, so be on guard around her. Oh, and that one is a monster wearing human skin... don't trust anything he says, and never look him in the eyes. They are all incredible warriors, though. There is no one more qualified to fight the Defiled here in the Tomb of Ariel, that's for sure."

Hearing those descriptions, the members of the cohort gave him sour looks. Effie shook her head.

"How come Cassie's introductions are so much better?"

Cronos stared at her belly with a curious gaze. Noticing it, she grinned.

"What, do I need to give another talk... no, wait. You can be a hundred years old, for all I know. How old are you, kid?"

The teenager chuckled awkwardly.

"Oh... I'm eighteen, my lady. Sorry, I didn't mean to stare."

'Eighteen...'

The last time Sunny had seen Cronos, he had been seventeen. So they had not spent that much time away — much less than he feared, at least. It had been no more than a month of two, at most, before he remembered himself on Aletheia's Island.

The teenager, meanwhile, blushed in embarrassment.

"It's just that my wife and I, we were thinking of going to the House of Youth ourselves... since it was rebuilt recently... ah, but it's probably not a good idea, still."

Hearing that, Sunny almost stumbled.

"What... wait... since when do you have a wife?!" Cronos laughed again.

"Right, you don't know! Well... we knew each other for a while. But since we were both old and decrepit, there was no point in anything except for quiet friendship between two elderly folk. Once the city migrated downstream, and we were both suddenly young once again... well, one thing led to another..."

He scratched the back of his head bashfully.

"Actually, there are many new families in Fallen Grace. We all thought for a long time that we would be the last generation of the River People. But, now... it's a bit strange? People are actually looking forward to the future."

The captain of the soldiers, who had been listening to the conversation silently, gave him a reproachful look.

"You are too young to go to the House of Youth, brat. In fact... you should still be in the House of Youth! Not as a parent, but as a child. Spend a few decades growing up before thinking about acting like an adult and starting a family."

She seemed to be from a generation that had experienced things properly, unlike Cronos, who had turned into an old man before reaching adulthood, and was only now learning how to be young.

Effie observed them with a perplexed expression, then glanced at Sunny and winked.

"You hear that, doofus? This guy is eighteen and has already proposed to his girlfriend. What were you doing at eighteen?"

Sunny gave her a dubious look.

"You should remember it well, no? I had just helped Nephis win a bloody civil war, and then led all the surviving Dreamers of the Dark City to safety while the sky was more or less literally falling on our heads."

Cronos stared at him incredulously for a moment, then suddenly asked, his voice full of curiosity:

"How terrible! Does the sky fall often, outside?"

Effie laughed.

"More often than you would think, when this guy is around..."