1537 Last Testament

Eventually, the cohort reached the familiar island-ship that carried a beautiful palace of white stone — the Temple of Dusk. Sunny had spent enough time under its roof to feel a hint of nostalgia at the sight of it. That was where he and Nephis had felt both hopeful and wary before their first meeting with the fabled sybil of Fallen Grace, only to meet Cassie instead.

The blind girl's two Ascended guards were waiting for them at the entrance to the temple. Unlike the other citizens, they had not changed as drastically. Both looked much younger, true, but were still mature and taciturn. Their composed faces did not betray any emotion when they bowed deeply to Cassie, but he could sense the deep care and reverence in their gazes.

Despite that, the two seasoned warriors still wielded the macabre symbols of their duty to not only protect their lady from any danger, but also protect the city from the lady, if need be. The woman wielded an unsheathed greatsword, while the man held a crimson silk cord.

Cassie greeted them both warmly, not paying any attention to the tools they were prepared to use to end her life.

With that, the cohort was ushered to a hall where a feast had already been prepared. The leaders of the different forces within the city were gathered there, waiting to meet their returned ruler — and the champions she had brought back from her journey.

The next few hours were a bit tedious for Sunny. He enjoyed the food and the beverages while listening silently to the conversation.

They had been gone from Fallen Grace for just shy of eight months. Around one month had been spent to reach Aletheia's Island, three or four to escape it, one more to reach Twilight, and the last two months to come back.

During that time, the city had migrated downstream after receiving the news that the Defiled Sybil and her Drowned minions were eliminated. There had been no major attacks on Fallen Grace since, although the Awakened warriors left to protect it — and a few Masters, as well, including the two deaf guards — had fought against many wandering Nightmare Creatures.

Luckily, those had been feral abominations, not war parties of the Defiled. The defenders of the city had been able to either slay or chase the monsters away without letting them damage the island-ships.

Fallen Grace was indeed doing much better than it had when Sunny and Nephis first reached it. That was already apparent after their walk to the temple, simply from all the activity and repair work they had noticed on the streets. The city felt... invigorated. The reports of the leaders of the city only confirmed what they already knew.

Cassie seemed gratified to hear that Fallen Grace, which she had cared for in solitude for an entire year, was doing well. A rare bright smile found its way onto her face, reminding Sunny of how earnest and soft-hearted the blind girl had been once... a long time ago.

In turn, she shared the story of their journey — a somewhat simplified and embellished version of it, at least — with the leaders of Fallen Grace.

Then came the part of the conversation that these people had been waiting for with bated breaths. Without wasting any time, Cassie announced that she would be departing again shortly. This time, to lead the group of Outsiders she had gathered to attack Verge and rid the Great River of the curse of the Defilement once and for all.

The people gathered in the hall seemed stunned to hear that. Not only were they struggling to conceive of the fact that such a thing was even possible, they were also startled and heartbroken to learn that their lady would be leaving mere days after returning home from a long and harrowing journey.

But there was no way around it. The cohort was determined to only spend as much time in Fallen Grace as was needed to perform light repairs on the Chain Breaker — a week, at most.

There was no point in staying longer. It would only give Torment — who was a potent seer herself — more time to prepare for their arrival.

More than that, they were on a timer.

Effie's pregnancy was nearing the end stage. She was already close to eight months along... if they lingered in Fallen Grace, her child could be born on the way to Verge.

Nobody knew if the child conceived in the waking world would become Riverborn or not, so they did not want to risk it.

"I see that you are concerned."

Cassie's voice was soft as she addressed her people.

"And although you hide it well, you are also frightened that after I leave this time, you will never see me again. That this will be our final farewell."

She smiled gently.

"...You might very well be right. I might never return."

Her words caused a deathly silence to settle in the hall. The people of Fallen Grace were looking at their sybil with complicated expressions, a storm of emotions raging in their eyes.

Sunny suppressed the desire to sigh.

It was true that Cassie would never return. Whether they lived or died, she would never see these people again — because victory in Verge meant the end of the Nightmare. Once the First Seeker was destroyed, the cohort would go back to the waking world.

And the inhabitants of the Nightmare... actually, Sunny did not know what would happen to them. Perhaps would they cease to exist the moment the Spell announced its appraisal.

Cassie shook her head slightly.

"But that is alright. Even if I don't return, Fallen Grace will live on. It has been protected by me and my sisters for a long time... but nothing lasts forever in this world. A time will come when there will be no sybils left in the Tomb of Ariel. A time will come when there will be no Outsiders left, either. Only the River People will remain. That is you. You must carry the torch of humanity into the future, with or without me. You must persevere, endure... and thrive."

She paused for a moment, then added, her voice growing harsher:

"That is what I expect from you all. Don't disappoint me."

Hearing her words, the Riverborn gathered in the temple looked down with solemn expressions.

Sunny sighed.

The Spell was a cruel thing, indeed. It threw them into Nightmares and tasked them with changing fate. But what they strived to change was just an illusion.

It would have been great if they were in the real Tomb of Ariel, changing the lives of real people.

But, sadly, time — and fate — did not work that way.

What had happened was set in stone, and could not be changed. Not by mortals like them, and not in a Nightmare.

...Or, at least, not in a Third Nightmare.