1541 Into the Sunset

On the last night before their departure from Fallen Grace, Sunny let out a deep sigh and listened to the Spell whisper into his ear:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

[...You have received a Memory.]

With that, the Transcendent charm he had been working on had become a Supreme one. Its enchantment, which enhanced the material properties of objects, was further strengthened. Not only was the nexus of its weave more potent now, but the weave itself had also been made more robust to withstand the increased pressure.

Strings of ethereal light were intertwined with the black threads of shadow essence, forming a mesmerizing tapestry.

Sunny took a deep breath.

'Four down… one to go.'.

He had saved the hardest Memory for last — the Transcendent memory of the Seventh Tier meant for Nephis. That one, he was going to have to alter on their way to Verge.

Things were happening so fast now. Looking back at what he had experienced in the Nightmare, it was hard to believe how close the end of it all was. It seemed like Sunny had been sharing the ketch with Nephis and Ananke just yesterday, but now, he was approaching the finish line.

Dismissing the charm, he rose and stretched his limbs, then left his quarters. It was night, but no one in Fallen Grace seemed to be asleep. While Sunny was passing by the windows, he saw numerous people crowding the streets on the neighboring island-ships. They were all looking at the white temple, knowing that their lady, and the Outsider warriors she had gathered, were going to leave come dawn — or rather, dusk.

Leave to challenge the very source of the Defilement.

It was not an exaggeration to say that their fates depended on the result of their journey. However… looking at these people, Sunny did not feel that they were concerned for themselves. It seemed like they were concerned about Dusk and her Outsider companions, instead.

'Funny…'

Sunny could not remember the last time he had watched someone go into battle on his behalf. It must have happened occasionally, but he was usually the one doing the fighting. In Antarctica, he had carried thousands of refugees on his back across the frozen hellscape… which had seemed like a burden, at the time.

But, in a sense, he would have been burdened watching someone fight and die for him more. So, he could easily understand the complicated storm of emotions brewing in the hearts of the people being left behind in Fallen Grace.

He often complained about how harsh and unforgiving the life of an Awakened was… but it was also a privilege.

Consumed by such detached thoughts, he entered the hall where Cassie was giving the last orders to the people who would be ruling the city in her absence. Some of them he knew, like the captain of the soldiers or the carpenter who had been in charge of repairing the Chain Breaker, while others were strangers.

All of them bowed respectfully when he entered.

"Lord Sunless."'

He nodded at them and approached Cassie, then placed a hand on her shoulder. A spark of energy traveled between them as the Supreme charm was transferred from his soul to hers.

"Here… all done. The enchantment is substantially more powerful now. It also consumes much more essence, so be careful."

She summoned the charm, which was shaped like a jade flower, and weighed it on her hand. Soon, the petals of the ornament ignited with a soft glow, hinting that its enchantment was activated. At the same time, the hilt of the Quiet Dancer glistened.

A faint smile appeared on Cassie's lips.

"Thank you."

Sunny nodded, then hesitated for a few moments. There were too many people around them, so he couldn't be too free in what he said. Still… he didn't want to remain entirely silent.

Eventually, he removed his hand from her shoulder and asked, his voice serious:

"Listen. Are you… alright?"

Cassie raised an eyebrow, seemingly confused.

"Sure? Why wouldn't I be? I'm better than ever."

There was a rare hint of sincere relief and anticipation in her voice.

Sunny frowned, lingered for a moment, then nodded again and turned to leave.

In truth, he had wanted to use this opportunity to retrieve the shadow that followed Cassie around. But hearing that answer, he changed his mind.

'Keep her company for a little while longer.'

Who in their right mind would be relived in such a situation?

Leaving the shadow behind, he left the hall and went to find the other members of the cohort.

The night ended quickly, and the seven suns rose from the waters of the Great River once more. Fallen Grace was once again painted by the vivid radiance of the blazing sunset, drowning in its crimson splendor.

The soldiers, all wearing their white armor, had formed a corridor on the streets of the floating city. Their gazes were solemn as they watched the seven Outsiders leave the temple and walk toward the piers. Separated by that living wall, the crowd of citizens was watching them, too.

This time, there were no cheers. Instead, everyone was silent, which felt a little eerie.

Feeling the weight of countless gazes, Sunny was reminded of the docks of Falcon Scott on the last day of evacuation, for some reason. Back then, people had been desperately trying to get on the last leaving ship, knowing that everyone who stayed behind would die.

Today, the situation was exactly opposite. The people staying behind were going to be safe. The ones who were sailing away would be risking their lives. However… the atmosphere was strangely similar.

Desperate desire that could not be expressed with words. Fear, longing, and shame. Sorrow, grief, and pain.

And hope.

Hope was such a powerful and resilient thing. Unreasonable, even. It could bloom even in the most terrible of situations, bringing with it strength to go on.

Sunny knew hope better than most. And hopelessness,too.

They reached the pier and boarded the Chain Breaker. Turning back, Sunny looked at the crowd one last time. Most of these youths looked unfamiliar — even if he knew them from before, their appearance had changed now.

He did, however, notice Cronos standing in one of the first rows, accompanied by a pretty young woman. Noticing him looking, the teenager smiled and waved.

'This guy…'

Sunny smiled and waved, as well. He even winked, making the brat look startled.

'This is what we're fighting for, I guess. In a way.'

There was a little empty space in front of the gangway leading to the ship. Cassie's two deaf guards were standing there, looking up at her with lost gazes.

She turned around and faced the crowd.

This time, however, there was no speech. The blind girl remained silent for a few moments, then addressed her guards instead.

"...Thank you. You two are free, now."

They were looking at her, unable to hear those words. She smiled softly.

"Thank you for everything. Take care of yourselves. And of each other."

The two Ascended seemed to sway slightly, then knelt silently. The woman let go of the hilt of her sword. The man dropped his silk cord into the water.

Tears were streaming down their weathered faces.

Cassie sighed lightly, bowed deeply to the crowd, and turned away.

"Let's go. It's time for us to leave."

Soon, the Chain Breaker departed from the pier and rose into the sky.

They were flying into the blazing sunset, disappearing into its bloodred glow.

Forever.