1544 Innermost Void

After returning the silver blade to Nephis, and failing to say anything meaningful to her, Sunny did not have much to do. He spent some time with Kai, Effie, and Jet, enjoyed a good night of sleep, and then assumed his usual spot under the branches of the sacred tree to meditate.

Everything that could have been done was already done. They had prepared as best they could… at least he thought they did. Now, all that remained was to clear his mind and prepare himself mentally for the coming battle.

Sunny and his companions spent the rest of the time the Chain Breaker was traversing the empty void clearing their minds and steeling their hearts. The battle they faced promised to be a dire one…

But, honestly, Sunny did not find it hard to calm his mind and get ready to face whatever it was that would come.

There were only so many times he could feel nervous to the point of losing sleep before a decisive battle. He had experienced so many bloody clashes in Antarctica that anticipating another one had long become an ordinary event. Preparing for one mentally was not only a skill, but also a habit.

So, Sunny found himself feeling strangely calm. He slowly went over his experiences in the Tomb of Ariel, consolidating his insights and shoring up his fundamentals. Rapid growth was most welcome, but failing to digest his many gains properly could leave him unstable.

He had to eliminate all instability before reaching Verge..

Others were doing the same, each in their own fashion. While Sunny meditated under the sacred tree, Nephis practiced with her new sword, getting used to its weight and powers.

Jet had found a hammock, somewhere, and was comfortablyasleep in it. Effie was enjoying the snacks she had prepared for herself. Kai was practicing a strange, outwardly inefficient form of archery while absentmindedly humming a song. Cassie was steering the ship, which seemed to calm her down.

Mordret, morbidly enough, was inspecting his collection of bodies. Those of them that had belonged to Awakened each possessed their own unique powers, so he was probably coming up with plans of when and where to use them best.

'That guy… is such a creep.'

Sunny shook his head, and then went to inspect his Shadows... which were created from the dead creatures he had killed. Not creepy at all, surely.

Everything seemed to be in order. Everyone was ready.

…But before they could return to the Great River, an unexpected event threw a wrench into their plans.

Sunny was on his way to the bow when a loud boom resounded from below the deck, and the entire ship suddenly shook. Gritting his teeth, he immediately stepped through the shadows and appeared at the galley, which seemed to have been the place where the booming sound originated.

He had expected to see some harrowing Nightmare Creature that had come from the void and infiltrated the Chain Breaker, or perhaps Mordret trying to kill one of the members of the cohort… but nothing like that was happening.

Instead, he only saw Effie standing near the bulkhead, hissing curses. Her fist had crashed through the durable wood, splintering and cracking it. Her other hand was resting on her belly.

Her face was pale, and twisted by a grimace of pain.

Before Sunny could understand what was happening, Kai and Jet appeared at the doors. Cassie was not far behind them.

Mordret had not deemed it necessary to show up, but was definitely watching through the reflections. Nephis, meanwhile, remained on the stern, controlling the ship.

'What happened?'

Effie lingered for a few moments, then turned to them and forced out a smile. The sight of it was familiar, but Sunny was unnerved by the dark, bitter look in her eyes.

The huntress took a deep breath and said, her voice somewhat strained:

"Ah… I think… that was a contraction."

Sunny remained motionless for a moment, trying to comprehend the meaning of what Effie had said. Then, his face fell.

They had left Fallen Grace so swiftly precisely because they hoped to end the Nightmare before Effie was due. No one knew what would happen to her baby if it was born here… would it be Riverborn, or an Outsider? Would it become infected by the Nightmare Spell the moment it was born? Would it survive the return to the waking world?

Because they did not know, they could not risk it. They had to escape the Tomb of Ariel as soon as possible, and it had seemed like there was enough time.

But fate had different plans. Even though Effie had not been pregnant for nine months yet, the labor had started prematurely.

Seen from a different perspective, though, she had been carrying her child for close to two years now. So, if anything, its birth was long overdue.

Effie studied their frozen faces, and then looked down with a sigh.

"...Sorry, everyone."

Sunny frowned.

A moment later, he said in a stern voice:

"What are you sorry for? Give that nonsense up right now. Also… please don't break the ship any more. We need to traverse this bottomless abyss, so, you know, it would be really inconvenient if it fell apart around us."

He glanced at the other members of the cohort. Jet and Kai looked extremely worried, while Cassie maintained a calm expression.

'First, I need to get Nephis here.'

Effie was a Master, and her pregnancy was nothing if not irregular. Sunny had very little idea about how to deliver a baby, but he knew that having a powerful healer at hand would be extremely helpful.

Nephis could recover from having her neck broken and most of her body vaporized. Certainly, making sure that both Effie and the baby survived the delivery would not be a problem.

Banishing unnecessary thoughts from his mind, he shifted into problem-solving mode and pulled Kai away.

"Let's go… give the ladies some privacy."

Then, glancing at Cassie, he said:

"I'll send Nephis down. You… probably know what to do better than I do."

Receiving a nod from the blind girl, he led Kai away.

Ascending to the upper deck, Sunny walked over to the stern of the ship and stopped near Nephis, who looked at him with a silent question.

He lingered for a moment.

"...Effie seemed to be going into labor. Go, they're waiting. I'll steer the ship."

A frown appeared on Neph's face, and she left the runic circle without saying a word. Soon, Sunny and Kai were left alone.

But not for long.

Mordret had appeared from somewhere, sparing them a curious glance.

"I couldn't help but overhear. It seems that a wolf cub is about to be born, huh? How exciting. Can't say I ever heard about a child being born in a Nightmare… that should be a first, even among the Great Clans…"

Before he was done talking, Kai suddenly turned and raised a hand. It seemed as if he had wanted to grab Mordret by the collar, but managed to control himself, and simply put a hand on his shoulder instead.

Kai's usually gentle eyes were shining with a cold and furious kind of light.

"...You stay away from that child, Prince Mordret. I'm warning you."

His clear voice did not contain the authority of his Ascended Ability, but it still crashed into the Prince of Nothing like a wave. Mordret stared at the charming… usually charming archer for a few moments, amusement slowly disappearing from his gaze.

Then, he scoffed.

"Who do you take me for? A monster?"

He shook his head.

"Well, alright, I might be a bit of a monster. But I'm not a fool. What do I gain from taking the body of an infant? Relax, Ascended Nightingale. We are all in the same boat. Quite literally."

Kai glared at himfor a few moments more, then slowly removed his hand and took a step back, leaning on the railings. His expression was suddenly somber and pained.

He remained silent for a while, then said in a lost voice:

"How… did this happen?"

Sunny knew how he felt, because he felt the same.

Nevertheless, he suddenly had a ridiculous impulse to start explaining the birds and the bees to his friend, just like Effie had done to him so many times.

Steering the Chain Breaker through the dark void, Sunny chuckled all of a sudden.

"It just did. Don't worry… with Nephis there, it's all going to be alright."

However, he knew that the delivery itself was not what Kai was worried about.

It was everything else.

Shaking his head, Mordret walked to the edge of the deck and looked into the dark emptiness beyond.

Somewhere fat away, the Great River flowed, a long span of it shrouded in mist. Outside the mist of the Source, Verge was waiting for them.

He smiled.

"What an exciting Nightmare it is. Is it not?"