1548 Final Act

She studied the waters and put her hand on the hilt of her sword.

The enchanted scabbard was the same, but the blade it sheathed was different. The longsword bestowed upon her by the great clan Valor had been destroyed in Twilight, and replaced by the silver blade, which was currently molded to a similar shape.

That weapon was a reward Nephis received for slaying Soul Stealer — a Defiled Saint who had once been a prince of the same clan. Whether there was some symbolism to one replacing the other, Sunny did not know.

Nephis turned slightly, looking at Cassie, and asked:

"How long before we reach Verge?"

The blind girl was the best at steering the Chain Breaker, the most familiar with the slate map created by the sybils, and the one who had spent the most time among the River People. So, she was their navigator.

Cassie lingered for a moment..

"No more than two days, if we sail at moderate speed. More if we want to be truly careful… less if we want to abandon caution."

Noting the answer, Nephis glanced at Mordret:

"Is there danger close to us?"

The Prince of Nothing had been a bit cagey about the particulars of how his Aspect worked, but by now, they knew many things about it.

For example, the distance at which Sunny could control his shadows as an Ascended Terror was somewhere around twenty-four kilometers. His perception was limited to what the shadows perceived, though. Mordret's Dormant Ability, on the contrary, allowed him to perceive the world through any reflection within a similar range — adjusted for the fact that he was merely a Beast at the moment.

It also allowed him to travel physically between these reflections.

Considering that the entire Great River was one giant reflective surface, the Prince of Nothing was nearly omniscient in a considerable area around him.

His Awakened Ability, meanwhile, was what made him so terrifying — the Ability to enter a being's soul through their eyes and possess their body, wearing it as a costume. That Ability, too, would make him a priceless ally during the approaching battle.

Mordret remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head.

"I don't see anything moving. The current itself is a bit strange, though. It's… eerie. We'll see it soon, an area where the water is a little bit darker than usual. I would suggest avoiding that area completely, as well as any other place similar to it."

Nephis looked ahead, then nodded.

"We will proceed at a moderate pace, then, for one day. Then, we will anchor the Chain Breaker and scout the approach to Verge before moving closer."

She hesitated, and then added in a steady tone:

"Be alert. These waters have to be brimming with the Defiled… if we meet one, we can't let it escape alive and alert the others. We can't allow anything to see us before we see it, either. You all know what to do."

Sunny felt a little troubled. Since Nephis was addressing a group, and not him personally, her words were not equal to an order. Still, he felt a bit of a chill while hearing these words.

But she was right.

They did, indeed, know what to do. All of this had been discussed over and over again already. The cohort was prepared as well as it could have been, considering the lack of information about the state of the Defiled city and its current ruler.

Torment…

Sunny frowned.

She had to know that they were coming. Why wasn't anyone here to welcome them to Verge, then? All of them had expected to be ambushed by the Defiled abominations the moment the Chain Breaker left the black void. And yet, nothing happened.

What was the Last Plague planning?

Feeling uneasy, he went about raising the ship's sails. They were going to sail on water, for now, to not be so easily spotted.

The seven suns drowned in the water, suffusing it with beautiful light. The impenetrable darkness devoured the sky — now that Sunny knew about the great swarm of monstrous butterflies hiding somewhere out there, in that darkness, the night seemed far more dreadful. Almost impossibly so.

But there were monsters hiding in the River, as well.

Before dawn came, the cohort clashed with several Defiled abominations. Each of them was more powerful than the Nightmare Creatures they had usually fought upstream, and far more cunning. Thankfully, the might of the seven Masters was more than enough to deal with these solitary abominations.

Although it took some effort, none of the Defiled managed to escape. Those who tried were chased after and finished off by Kai, who was the fastest of them all. His arrows could strike true from a startling distance, as well — armed with incredible sight and a powerful bow, the archer was a deadly presence on the Great River.

Much more dangerous than the solitary abominations were the waters themselves. Here near the Source, they were turbulent and unpredictable, often hiding fatal hazards. The Chain Breaker avoided the truly inescapable ones thanks to Cassie's intuition, and fought through the rest, protected by its enchantments and the sacred tree.

Finally, the sky turned bright again. By the time all seven suns climbed high, the first of the two days they had been supposed to spend traveling to Verge came to an end.

At that moment, they planned to raise the ship above the water, so that it would not be pulled downstream by the current, and organize a scouting mission to stealthily approach the Defiled city.

However… that plan had to be scrambled.

It was because, unexpectedly, they had already reached Verge.

Or rather, its foundation.

Sunny peered ahead, his expression incredulous. His eyes widened slightly.

'These madmen… how did they create it?'

In front of them, the eternally flowing waters of the Great River turned to ice. A vast landmass formed by it stretched as far as the eye could see, disappearing beyond the horizon — too great to be called a mere island, and somehow entirely unaffected by the current.

Frozen in place.

There was sand and lifeless soil covering the rough surface of the endless plain of ice, with rolling hills and dry riverbeds. Skeletal trees rose into the air, bereft of leaves or life. Here and there, mounds of black stone rose, forming a forest of twisted pillars.

In short, Sunny saw something that he had never expected to see in the Tomb of Ariel…

Land.