1560 Freedom of Choice

"...The Well of Wishes."

Sunny stared at Cassie with an incredulous expression, struggling to understand what her words meant.

'What is she talking…'

Then, his face changed slightly, a hint of confusion and ridicule appearing in his eyes.

"The… the children's story? The fairy tale about a magical well that grants the most precious wish of anyone who reaches it? Are you… are you out of your mind?"

Sunny took a step back, barely avoiding falling out of the ketch. His mind was full of bewilderment and disbelief.

"Come… come on! You can't possibly be serious! You don't believe that it's true, do you?!".

That was the fairy tale Ananke had told him, not long before her death. Sunny remembered it well… but he had never expected to hear Cassie, someone so smart and pragmatic, put her hopes in a children's story about a magic well!

The blind seer, however, did not seem affected by his ridiculing tone. She faced Sunny calmly, her face somber.

After a while, Cassie gritted her teeth and said, her voice steady:

"It might not be true for anyone else. But it's true for you, Sunny. If you reach the Estuary… your wish to be free will come true. Free of your bond, free to live your life the way you want. Free of fate itself."

She lingered for a moment, then rose to her feet, too, and walked closer, stopping a mere step away from him.

"But, Sunny… you can't have both. You can reach the Estuary from here, but once the Nightmare is over, your chance will be gone. The moment Nephis destroys the First Seeker, your chance would have slipped away."

She smiled bitterly and raised the Guiding Light, offering it to him.

"That was what you were truly angry about, wasn't it? That I took the choice away from you."

Cassie pushed the sacred relic into his hands and took a step back.

"Well, here it is. Instead of an empty apology. I am giving the choice back to you. You can leave and rush to the Estuary… the Guiding Light will show you the way through the mists of the Source, as long as you don't give another True Name to it. Once you reach the Estuary, use the Mirror of Truth and push to its heart. There… you will find your freedom."

She turned away, lingered for a moment, and then added in a quiet voice:

"But… I hope that you make a different choice. That you will stay with us, despite everything. Nephis, I, and the others… are we so terrible? Is it really that unbearable, to share a bond, if it's based on trust? I think you know by now that it's not. What is unbearable is not having been given a choice about forming that bond, and now, even though the connection between you and her will remain the same… it will be there because you have chosen for it to exist. So… you decide. That right is yours, again."

Sunny stared at her silently, entirely shaken. His mind felt empty, as if all thoughts had been banished from it by this sudden revelation.

"No… no, wait a minute. What do you mean, it's it true for me? I can get rid of Shadow Bond if I reach the Estuary? How? What is in there, at its heart?"

Cassie frowned a little, then shook her head.

"I don't know, exactly. What I do know, without a shadow of a doubt, is that my words are true. If you reach the very heart of the Estuary before the Nightmare ends, you will become free from fate. You will be fateless. The strings that hold you like a puppet will set you free, and your connection to Nephis will be broken as a result. I saw it, and Torment saw it as well."

He frowned.

"P… preposterous! Plus, doesn't it sound exactly like what killed Nephis the last time? The Mad Prince, he… he was… he was obsessed with reaching the Estuary…"

Suddenly, his eyes widened. He thought he understood now why his versions from the previous cycles had all ended up entering the Source in search of the Estuary. If there was indeed a way to break free from the cruel grasp of fate that had been hidden at the heart of the black pyramid by the Demon of Dread…

Then Sunny, obsessed with regaining his freedom as he was, would have given his all to find it.

The actions performed by all his previous selves only served to give credence to what Cassie had said.

But that was also why Nephis had died in the cycle that birthed the Mad Prince.

The blind girl, however, shook her head.

"The Mad Prince had entered the Estuary in search of his freedom, but failed to resist the Defilement and became Corrupted instead. Thus, the endless cycles continued. This cycle, though, was engineered by Torment and him specifically to make sure that all members of the cohort survive. Whether you find the Estuary or not, there are mere days left before Nephis storms Verge and kills the First Seeker. The end… is already inevitable."

Sunny raised a trembling hand and rubbed his face, dazed.

"But… how can I leave? Verge, the First Seeker… won't the cohort need me for the battle? Torment is there, as well… no, wait… she's dead."

Without Torment, Verge had been left without a leader. The First Seeker was a harrowing force, but also a mindless one. It could not lead the creatures Corrupted by its touch… which was why Fallen Grace had not been destroyed in all these years, most likely.

The level of the threat presented by Verge was still immense, but with Neph's incorruptible soul, the most terrifying power of the First Seeker had already been rendered meaningless.

Cassie nodded.

"Sure… we can use having you at Verge. The battle will be perilous, without a doubt. It will be fierce and fearsome, far beyond anything that a mundane human can imagine. But we can also manage without you. We have the Memories you have created, after all. We have Aspect Legacies, experience battling the Defiled, and means to defend ourselves from the First Seeker. We even have Mordret, who wields a Divine Aspect, just like you."

The blind girl sighed.

"So, Sunny… you must decide. I've given the choice back to you. Now, it's in your hands."

With that, she took a few steps and jumped out of the ketch, landing on the icy shore. The Echo of Torment dissolved into a whirlwind of sparks, leaving Sunny alone in the boat.

Cassie then turned and looked at him expectantly.

Her face was both scared and hopeful.

Sunny froze, not knowing what to do.