1561 Treacherous Shadow

Sunny stood at the deck of Ananke's catch, looking at Cassie, but not seeing anything. A storm of emotions, fragmented thoughts, and burning desires raged in him, making it hard to comprehend the true scope of what the choice presented to him was.

He took a deep breath.

At that moment, the Sin of Solace tried to distract him by saying something, but Sunny forcefully cut off the voice of the sword wraith, concentrating on the sound of waves breaking against the shore of the frozen wasteland instead.

'Calm down... let's think this through.'

So... Cassie, who had turned so quiet and unassuming to almost be invisible, had been burning with an insane ambition all along. Just like Sunny, who had swore to break the chains of fate that bound him, she had been pursuing the very same goal, as well.

Acting behind the curtains and armed with the revelations she received, the blind seer had been subtly manipulating the events of the past years to achieve that goal, suffering in silence as she stubbornly pushed toward it. All to give Sunny back the choice she had taken from him.

The extent of her machinations was both admirable and frightening, so vast and intricate as to almost be inconceivable.

But it was real. Cassie had indeed managed to create a moment where at least one of them — Sunny — had an opportunity to free himself from fate.

And that... was much more significant than one would think.

Sure, Sunny could fulfill his most ardent wish and win back his freedom, destroying the Shadow Bond, and even his [Fated] Attribute. Thus making it possible for him to live a life free of its shackles.

But what Cassie wanted to achieve went far beyond that.

What she wanted was to forge a weapon to resist fate. And that weapon... was a single variable.

Just as it had happened with the cycles of the Great River, which were thrown into utter chaos by the appearance of the Mad Prince, the tapestry

of fate would become chaotic and unpredictable with the appearance of a fateless being. The entire flow of fate would change as a result of that.

Fateless... was a very suitable name for what Sunny could become, should he enter the Estuary and reach its innermost secret.

However...

While Cassie wanted to break fate, just like Sunny... in a contradictory fashion worthy of a human, she also wanted Sunny to refuse that chance and remain with her, Nephis, and the cohort. To choose them over his desire to be free.

And just like Cassie, Sunny wanted both of these things, as well.

Breaking fate was nice. Gaining his freedom was nice. Learning the secrets of the Tomb of Ariel was a cherry on top.

However... not abandoning his friends right before the decisive battle against the forces of the Defilement was also nice. Choosing to remain by the side of the people he cared about — and the person he loved — seemed just as precious.

So, what was he supposed to do?

Jet had once told him that there was no freedom in this world. That the only freedom there was the freedom to choose his own chains... and Sunny came to agree with her, over time.

By choosing to stay with the cohort, he would be choosing his own chains. In a sense, that would make him free, as well.

But, but...

Maybe there was no freedom in the waking world. Maybe there was no freedom in the Dream Realm, too.

But they were currently in the Tomb of Ariel, which contained an entire realm of its own. Who was to say that there was no freedom in this bizarre and senseless world, either?

Cassie surely seemed certain that she was telling the truth. And despite everything that had happened between them, Sunny was inclined to believe her.

He had been resentful of her for what she had done, and for failing to even say that she was sorry. But now he knew that instead of saying a few easy... or maybe not so easy... words, the blind girl had been silently striving to redeem her mistake, instead.

She was trying to repent by giving the choice she had taken from him back.

And now, she had managed to do just that.

If he wasn't satisfied even by such a show of sincerity, then what could he be satisfied with?

Granted... Cassie had gone about her redemption in an incredibly extreme and possibly misguided way. She also put him in a very tough situation.

Sure, the choice he had wished for so fiercely was not in his hands. But what was he supposed to do with it?

'It's... true...'

One had to be careful of what they wished for.

Sunny stared at Cassie for a while, then lowered his gaze and looked at the Guiding Light, which she had pushed into his hands.

"This... was the message Torment had to deliver?"

The blind girl nodded slowly.

"Yes. It's easy to enter the Source. But it's almost impossible to find the entrance to the Estuary within the mist, unless you know the way. The Guiding Light is now showing the way to the Estuary. The message she delivered to me was the True Name that can make the relic of the sybils point to where you must go."

He hesitated.

"What is the True Name?"

The blind girl smiled helplessly.

"I don't know. Torment's power blocked that memory in my mind. The seal was only removed once we reached Verge. And after I used it to activate the Guiding Light, the memory of it was erased from my mind, as if it was never there."

She hesitated for a moment.

"No matter to whom or to what that True Name belongs to, it is incredibly powerful. Just bearing it for a few moments put a terrible strain on my mind and soul. So... if you do decide to leave us. Take care once you reach the Estuary."

Sunny remained motionless for a while.

He didn't want to abandon Nephis. Even if the cohort was more or less capable of taking Verge without his help... he simply did not want to.

But.

If he threw all the complicated thoughts about the nature of freedom and what it meant to be free in this world out of his mind, there were only three things left.

Sunny himself, Nephis, and the connection between them.

In the past, he had run away from her twice. Once in the Dark City, and once at the ball of the great clan Valor.

Sunny didn't wish to run away from Nephis for the third time.

However, he also knew that any kind of relationship between them — at least the current them — was impossible as long as Shadow Bond existed.

So, weirdly enough... by abandoning her on the shores of Verge, he would not be running away from Nephis. Instead, he would be moving towards her.

Because only by becoming free of her could Sunny be with her. He took a deep breath, and then looked at Cassie.

At the same time, Sunny dismissed Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare, calling them back to his soul. All six of his shadows were already with him, wrapped tightly around his body.

And then, the shadows along the shore moved, extending forward and pushing the ketch back into the water.

'I'm sorry, everyone... I guess I am a treacherous bastard, after all.'

Sunny knew that Cassie had guided the ketch along the shore precisely to give him the opportunity to take it away. She would return to the Chain Breaker on foot, while he... he would be free to sail downstream, toward the Source.

Racing to reach the Estuary, and reclaim his freedom, before Nepis conquered the Nightmare.

Looking back, Sunny threw one last glance at the blind girl, who was standing forlornly on the icy shore, summoned a certain Memory, and shouted:

"Cassie!"

She turned, hearing the sound of his voice. Sunny smiled darkly.

"Let's do it!"

He clenched his fist and raised it into the air.

"Let's break fate!"