1564 Returning to the Source

Some time later, Sunny saw thin lines moving in the air. Drawing closer, he saw something that resembled spiderwebs blowing in the wind, frayed and torn.

The only thing was that each string of the ghostly spiderweb was many kilometers long, and there were numerous such strings, moving between the sky and the surface of the Great River like tattered sails.

Some of them were white, but as Sunny guided the ketch between the billowing strings, he stared to encounter more and more of them that were bright red. Eventually, it was as though he was traveling through a forest of red threads.

Navigating between them was not easy, but he was reluctant to come close to any of the strings, or allow the wind to bring any of them closer.

Eventually, Sunny witnessed something else. Out there in front of him, far in the distance, an immense depth dweller was weakly struggling against the current, its body enveloped by several dozen of the white spiderwebs. The creature's carapace seemed impregnable, but the strange strings did not seem to care. They simply grew through it, penetrating the leviathan's body.

As they did, their color slowly started change from white to red, the redness spreading from the point of contact with the abomination's flesh along the length of the strings.

Blood. They were drinking the leviathan's blood.

Turning pale, Sunny gazed at the forest of vibrant red strings that surrounded him, stretching far into the sky, permeating a whole region. His fingers turned white on the steering oar of the ketch.

He escaped that horror, as well.

And many more like it, although not unscathed.

Sometimes, Sunny had no choice but to fight, unleashing the full fury of the onyx serpent or his other shapes on the creatures that wanted to consume him. Some of them, he managed to kill... but most of them, he simply escaped after delivering several painful wounds.

By the end of the day, Sunny was bloodied and exhausted. His essence was on the verge of running dry, too.

But then the dusk came, and the Crown of Twilight replenished his dwindling reserves.

After dusk came the night, though, and it was more beautiful, and more harrowing, than any other night Sunny had experienced in the Tomb of Ariel.

By the end of it, he was barely alive. But he was alive, nevertheless.

Sunny did not allow his blood to flow, and his bone refused to break. Even his soul, which had received a few deep wounds when he used Shadow Incarnation to form his shells, was potent enough to withstand the damage without falling apart.

Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare were beaten and battered, but alive, as well.

The ketch too survived. Even though there were new scars on its hull, one of its masts had cracked, its sails sporting signs of hasty repairs, Ananke's boat was still in one piece.

Throughout all of this, Sunny had not said a single word, and had not even allowed himself a single groan.

Pain was his old friend. He could withstand much more than that. 'Well... maybe not that much more.'

He was exhausted, both physically and mentally. If there was one good thing about the horrors of the dawn of time, though, it was that the necessity to constantly be alert and on edge made it completely impossible for him to consider the consequences of what he had done... the fallout of breaking his promisese, abandoning his friends, and leaving for the Estuary instead of fighting side by side with them in Verge.

'I wonder what they are doing, now...'

The scouting teams must have returned, by now. Nephis and the others had already learned of his absence. They must have even had enough time to digest it, to a degree, albeit not come to terms with it.

They were most probably advancing toward Verge.

...Which meant that he did not have a lot of time left.

'Where is it? Where is it?'

He was trying to calculate how far he had traveled from the Defiled city,

and how that distance translated to what they had seen from the black void. From up there, it almost seemed as though the wisps of mist shrouding the Source touched the walls of Verge.

But from the surface of the Great River, the distance between the two was nothing short of vast.

Still... Sunny had been moving fast, both aboard the ketch and when summoning his shells.

By all accounts, he had to be getting close.

He glanced at the Guiding Light, which pointed directly forward, and summoned what little was left of his patience.

Finally, the night was over.

The seven suns rose from beyond the horizon once again, chasing away the darkness. The waters of the Great River grew dim. A soft twilight enveloped the world, and with it, a flood of essence poured into Sunny's soul.

He let out a relieved sigh, summoned the Dying Wish, and used what little charges were left in the charm to heal the most dire of his wounds.

It was then that he saw it...

A wisp of mist drifted past him, disappearing into the gloom of twilight.

Feeling his heart skip a beat, Sunny spun and looked forward, trying to see what was hiding beyond the horizon.

The horizon... was hazy. It also seemed to be drawing nearer with each moment.

'This is it!'

Both relieved and excited, Sunny called upon the waters of the Great River, making the current run faster. The ketch flew forward, drawing closer and closer to the wall of mist.

Soon, it was surrounded by tendrils of thick fog. They flowed past the ketch, drifting above the waves. In front of him, the world turned somber and gloomy, rare rays of sunlight breaking through the veil of mist.

Then, the mist obscured the sky entirely, making it seem as though nothing else existed in the world.

Sunny found himself in familiar surroundings.

After nearly a year of wandering the dreadful expanse of the Tomb of Ariel...

He had finally returned to the Source.