1566 The Estuary

There was the sound of wind whistling in Sunny's ears. He was falling.

Flying through a sea of darkness, lost and disoriented, unsure of where he was.

'The... Estuary...'

The wind howled louder, and Sunny felt his body plummeting through it at terrible speed.

Belatedly, he remembered the need to summon the Dark Wing and slow down his fall.

Or summon the shadows and turn himself into a monstrous butterfly. Or even a crow...

But it was too late for what.

Dazed, he caught a glimpse of an enormous black edifice swiftly approaching him from the darkness. It was like a rough, irregularly shaped, giant sphere of black stone that hovered in the void, eternal and indestructible. Strange mountains rose from its surface, hollow on the inside...

It looked like a giant stone heart. Perhaps it was.

A moment later, Sunny saw Ananke's ketch collide against the surface of the sphere below him and shatter, fragments of wood flying to all sides.

There was no time to slow down his fall.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny looked at the swiftly approaching surface of the back stone. The moment his body would have been broken against it, he activated Shadow Step and dove into the shadows, instead, submerging deep into their dark embrace.

Hidden there, safe, he remained motionless for a while.

'I... made it?'

Sunny tried to calm down his feverish mind and moved up, returning to the surface.

Emerging from the shadows, he stepped on the surface of the weathered stone and instantly fell, feeling gravity pulling him down.

He was on a steep slope.

Sunny slid down that slope, surrounded by the fragments of broken wood. Despite the sharp rocks tearing at his skin, he did not allow himself to cry out in pain. Instead, he gritted his teeth, wrapped the surrounding shadows around his hand, and turned it into the clawed hand of a shadowspawn.

Twisting, Sunny struck the slope with his claws. They failed to penetrate the rugged black surface, sending sparks flying into the air — however, the friction alone slowed him down.

Eventually, Sunny came to a halt at the very edge of an abyssal drop, his feet dangling above an empty black void. The pieces of Ananke's ketch spilled into that void, disappearing in the darkness.

He remained laying for a few moments, catching his breath, then tried to access his surroundings.

There was no light in the world. He was surrounded by darkness, with only the weathered surface of black stone separating him from the abyss. The sound of roaring water came from somewhere far, far below, turning into a barely audible whisper.

It came from above him, too, and from all sides.

The whispers assaulted his mind, making him dizzy.

Sunny grimaced, then cautiously stood up, struggling to keep his balance on the steep slope. Finally, he looked around.

'So... this is the Estuary.'

The Estuary was supposed to be located in a place that existed before time, and therefore before the gods had been born. So... that place was supposed to be the Void.

But either the Spell was unable to replicate the true Void, or unwilling to. Perhaps the Estuary was isolated from it, somehow. In any case, all Sunny could see was darkness and the surface of the vast sphere of black stone under his feet.

His expression was somber. 'No time to waste.'

Leaning forward, he arduously climbed back up the slope, eventually reaching its middle point — that was where he had first fallen. Without stopping to rest, Sunny continued to climb.

'Cassie said... that I need to get to the very heart of the Estuary. This means that I probably need to somehow climb inside the sphere.'

Remembering the strange hollow mountains, which resembled torn aortae, he continued to ascend the slope.

Eventually, Sunny crested the top of what seemed like a tall hill, and looked down.

He froze, shaken by what he saw.

His eyes widened, full of shock and fear.

'N—no... how can this be?'

In front of him, nestled between several immense outcroppings of black stone, was a vast valley. And on the floor of that valley, shrouded by darkness... lay the remains of countless broken ships.

It was a vast ship graveyard.

The harrowing thing about it, though, was that each of these ships looked familiar.

They were all the Chain Breaker.

There, in front of him, thousands of Chain Breaker lay on the black stone, broken and destroyed. Although each was destroyed in a unique manner, shattered by a terrible impact, most of them were exactly the same. Some were a little different, seemingly modified before turning into a forlorn wreck.

The shape of their rams was slightly different. The tattered sails were painted in different colors. The trees growing around the central mast of these ships were dead and twisted, devoid of all life.

Some of the trees, though, looked perfectly healthy and alluring, countless succulent fruits weighing their branches down.

Shuddering, Sunny decided to keep as far away from those wrecks as possible.

There were countless broken ships in front of him — thousands of them. And it was just in that one valley.

They weren't the wrecks of an entire fleet of similar vessels. Instead, they were the same vessel, destroyed countless times.

Suddenly covered in cold sweat, Sunny felt his sense of reality shaking. 'What... that does it mean?'

He shuddered, then began to descend into the valley. As he did, he noticed more wood fragments among the shattered ships.

They were all the remains of Ananke's ketch, piled in tall hills. He just... he did not understand.

'How is this possible?'

As Sunny felt unsure of his sanity, a derisive laughter suddenly resounded from behind him.

Turning swiftly, he looked into the darkness with wide eyes. But it was just the Sin of Solace.

The sword wraith... looked more substantial, somehow. Walking out of the darkness, he looked at Sunny with contempt and smiled viciously:

"What? Did you think that you were the first one to make it this far? Did you think that this is the first time you betrayed your cohort and decided to seek freedom in the Estuary, instead?"

The apparition scoffed and looked at the ship graveyard, his dark eyes burning with strange glee.

"Fool. There were countless versions of you that had come this far. Betrayal after betrayal, repeated endlessly in countless cycles... truly, your treachery knows no bounds."