1585 Climbing Out of a Grave

Sunny looked at the ceiling, extending his shadow sense upward. At the same time, he allowed his mind to drift back to the very end of the Nightmare.

...And what a Nightmare it had been.

Sunny did not know how long he had spent wandering the dreadful currents of the Great River, trying to escape the Tomb of Ariel. The last cycle had taken... how long was it? Close to a year? And that was only his subjective time. For some people, like Cassie and Mordret, it had lasted for much longer.

But that was only the final of the countless cycles. So, he could not even guess how long of a journey it had been.

What he did know, however, was that it ended in the very heart of the Estuary, past the silent lake where Ariel's heretical testament had been inscribed. Near the forgotten grave of the Demon of Oblivion...

Where a Cursed Terror had been waiting for him, hidden in the darkness.

That Terror...

Sunny was more or less sure who it was.

'The loathsome Thieving Bird, hated both by the gods and the beings of the Void...'

It was the thieving miscreant who had stolen the Weaver's eyes, and whose spawn he had slain on the Forgotten Shore, thus receiving the [Drop of Ichor] and Weaver's lineage.

That single event had started the chain of falling dominoes that intertwined his fate with the nebulous Demon, as well as the rest of the daemons and the dead gods.

Wasn't it very ironic, then, that the Thieving Bird would be the one to break that fate?

And Sunny... was pretty sure that that was exactly what the vile thing had done.

The moment the Thieving Bird's talons plunged into his chest, he felt it taking something from his soul. But then... he vaguely sensed it taking something else, from somewhere that lay even deeper.

It was a hard thing to describe. Even now, Sunny felt somehow different, in addition to all the changes caused by the Transcendence. It was as though a burden he did not even know he was carrying had been lifted, making him feel both unburdened and scarily untethered.

Had the Vile Thieving Bird stolen... his fate?

That would certainly be one way — an indescribably bewildering and roundabout way — for Cassie's promise that he would gain freedom in the Estuary to come true. It would also explain whose True Name Torment had delivered to the blind seer at the cost of her life.

But what did it mean, exactly, for his fate to be stolen?

Did it even work? Did he lose the [Fated] Attribute? Was he really free?

What about Shadow Bond? He had been banished from the Nightmare Spell as a result of losing his fate... would his mystical connection to Nephis be severed, as well?

Sunny frowned, knowing that he would find out soon.

'One thing is certain, though...'

If the Nightmare had not ended at just the right moment, he would have certainly been killed. Sunny could justifiably be proud of his power and prowess, but he was a mere ant in front of a Cursed Terror... and a very special Cursed Terror at that. If even Weaver had fallen victim to the vile Thieving Bird, what hope did he have to resist it?

'What was that thing even doing in the burial chamber? Why did it enter the Tomb of Ariel? And how did it get past the guardian of the lake?'

The last question was the easiest to answer. The vile thing had even been able to steal from the Demon of Fate, so bypassing a guardian left behind by Ariel would certainly have been easy for it.

As for the other two...

A piece of Weaver's soul had been left in the heart of Ariel's Tomb. Perhaps the Thieving Bird had become obsessed with the Demon of Fate? The description of the [Drop of Ichor] said that it had been enamored by Weaver's beautiful eyes, after all. Not to mention that it had gone mad after witnessing the reflection of the Void frozen in Weaver's pupil.

Had it stolen Sunny's fate because it was connected to the enigmatic daemon?

If so, it would have probably taken his body and soul, as well, given the chance. He had inherited three parts of Weaver's lineage, after all.

'Was the Nightmare ending just at the right moment simple luck, or the last gift from [Fated]?'

Sunny did not know. Nor did he care, really.

If he was truly free from that damned Attribute, he would rather never remember that it had ever existed at all.

'Let's go.'

He had already extended his shadow sense as far as he could — which was much further than before, now that he was a Saint. Sadly, all he could feel was a mess of compressed concrete and alloy for dozens of meters above. That was only logical, considering that Valor's stronghold in Antarctica had been largely built underground.

He was, more or less, buried alive.

'Figures...'

Still, there was no reason to worry. Sunny could not simply use Shadow Step to reach the surface, but he was more than strong enough to burrow through the ruins — mundane concrete and alloy could not stop a Saint.

However, there was a simpler method.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then dismissed his avatars and wrapped the shadows around his body. Then, he dissolved into the darkness, becoming a shadow himself.

The collapsed stronghold was not a monolith. Even after it crumbled, there was plenty of space left between the debris — perhaps not enough to accommodate a human body, but more than enough for a formless shadow to slip through.

Gliding up the wall, Sunny slid into a thin crack between two concrete plates and slithered upward for a few meters, eventually reaching a dead end where the debris was compressed too tightly, leaving no gaps. There, he simply used shadow sense to locate another tiny pocket of empty space nearby and teleported to it, still maintaining the form of a shadow.

Just like that, he ascended higher and higher, slowly approaching the surface. In the process, Sunny discovered something remarkable.

Now that he could absorb the ambient essence while in the embrace of shadows, the rate at which his own essence was being consumed to keep himself intangible was lower than the rate at which it was being replenished. In other words, Sunny could remain in the form of a shadow indefinitely now, for as long as he stayed away from bright light and true darkness.

'Amazing...'

Eventually, he reached another large pocket of space and temporarily assumed corporeal form to look around.

By some luck, the level of destruction was much lower here, enough so that there were mostly intact pieces of furniture strewn around the floor, covered in dust. Sunny observed the dark, claustrophobic space for a few moments, then took a step forward and bent down, fishing out a small device from under the dust.

It was a standard-issue military communicator, its screen cracked. Nevertheless, the communicator was still working — when Sunny picked it up, the broken screen lit up, revealing a fragmented image.

The thing seemed to be malfunctioning, but he could still make out what he needed — the time and date.

Staring at the blinking screen, Sunny opened his eyes wide.

'...Huh.'

According to the broken communicator...

Today was roughly a week since the disastrous Battle of the Black Skull.

Considering the time the members of the cohort had spent traversing the harrowing desert, the Spell sent them back to the exact moment they had entered the Seed of Nightmare.

While they were wandering the dreadful depths of the Tomb of Ariel, time stood still in the waking world.