1638 Pretty as a Picture

It did not take long to discuss the details of their agreement with Cassie. She was wary of him, somewhat, but Sunny held the overwhelming advantage in the negotiations. After all, he had what she wanted, and knew more than her on top of that. It wasn't hard for him to get the blind seer to agree to his conditions.

She could not stay for long, either - at least not without risking her absence being noticed by someone from Clan Valor. Cassie did not want to attract their attention to Sunny, yet, or maybe ever. That suited him fine, as well.

‘What a strange birthday I'm having this year...'

When Cassie left, Sunny was once again left alone in the Brilliant Emporium. The city had grown dark, and a peaceful silence settled over the lake. He could see the magnificent castle shine with enchanted lights in the distance, the lanterns reflecting in the calm water like stars.

...Of course, that castle was just an illusion.

Or rather, not just an illusion, but a very special one. The kind of illusion that was, for all intents and purposes, real - more real than reality itself, even. Most of the people who lived inside the castle did not know the difference, since it did not affect their lives,

But Sunny knew,

There was a different kind of place hidden behind the beautiful, towering edifice of Bastion. A much more somber and terrifying place than what everyone was familiar with.

That was where he wanted to get to with Cassie's help.

...There were six strongholds depicted on the map Nether had left in the Ebony Tower, each connected to one of the daemons. After visiting the tower once more and reading more of the forbidden runes surrounding the map, Sunny was keenly interested in exploring each of these strongholds. One could even say that the shape of his life depended on it.

The Ivory Tower had once belonged to Hope. The Tomb of Ariel was the burial site of Oblivion. Sunny had already visited these two places, but the other four...

Nether's own seat of power was hidden in the Hollow Mountains. He had barely survived crossing over them, and was not nearly powerful enough, yet, to dare delving into the darkness that dwelled below them. True darkness was the natural enemy of shadows, after all.

Which left only three daemonic strongholds for him to explore. Coincidentally or maybe not quite so each of them was now a Great Citadel ruled by one of the most powerful Legacy clans.

The Jade Palace, now known as Ravenheart, was connected to the Demon of Dread. Sunny had been searching for a way to Infiltrate Queen Song's palace, but without much luck. It was guarded too well.

The seafaring Citadel of the House of Night, meanwhile, was temporarily out of reach - he did not have a spare avatar to go there.

More precisely, quantity was not the problem. It was just that sustaining avatars cost him essence. The Lord of Shadows remained manifested permanently, but that guy also spent most of his time inside the Fragment of the Shadow Realm. Out there, the spirit essence was rich and nourishing - unless his third avatar was battling powerful abominations, he was like a perpetual essence generator.

The avatar accompanying Rain mostly hid in her shadow, but had to be controlled at all times. In the end, Sunny was maintaining a positive balance between expending and replenishing essence while constantly keeping these two versions of himself going, with plenty left in reserve for unexpected situations. Sending an additional avatar to Stormsea would have put a strain on that balance.

So, he had decided to leave the Great Citadel of the House of Night, which was connected to the Demon of Repose, alone for the time being.

Which only left Bastion, which had once belonged to the Demon of Imagination.

Sunny did not know much about that particular daemon, but he or she seemed to have possessed truly fantastical powers. From what he could tell, the Demon of Imagination had been a master of illusions. Anything imagined by that daemon was like a mirage, and those mirages could easily become reality... or even replace it.

Bastion had always seemed like an illustration from a fairy tale, and in a sense, it was. The beautiful castle, the tranquil lake, the picturesque land surrounding it all of it had been conjured from the imagination of the ancient daemon. The Demon of Imagination was long dead, but the illusion that replaced reality still remained.

It had even become home to millions of people.

Sunny could not find what he was looking for in the pretty mirage, though. He could only find it in the harrowing reality hidden behind it.

That place could only be entered during a full moon at least by those who did not rule the illusory Citadel. That was why he agreed to meet Cassie again then.

There was plenty of time left before the next full moon, though, which would give both of them plenty of time to digest the situation. Cassie had a lot to think about, no doubt.

And Sunny did, too.

Throwing one last glance in the window, he yawned and went about closing the Brilliant Emporium. When everything was done, Sunny walked into his bedroom and fell on his bed.

Despite the modest size of his room, the bed itself was large and opulent. It was carved from pale polished wood, with elegant engravings decorating the columns that supported the silk canopy. It was much too comfortable for a simple plece of furniture, and looked like something that belonged in a palace Instead of a cozy cottage.

And it did. This was the very same bed Sunny had slept on in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, a lifetime ago. He had brought it back with the help of the Marvelous Mimic after being gone from civilization for three years among other things.

Sunny put his head on a pillow and closed his eyes. Soon enough, he fell peacefully asleep.

The last thought that crossed his mind was rather bitter:

'Damnation... she forgot to order a Memory!’

It was such a shame. He had hoped to get a bunch of soul shards out of Cassie…