1790 Value of Regret

There was a single question at the root of the problem... why had the Thieving Bird stolen his fate? Sure, the loathsome thing seemed to be obsessed with everything that concerned Weaver. But Sunny did not think that it was the only reason.

After pondering the question for a while, he had developed a certain suspicion. He had lost the connection to the Nightmare Spell after becoming fateless, which meant that carrying the Nightmare Spell had something to do with one's fate. Perhaps fate was the medium through which the infection spread.

In any case, the creature which now possessed his fate... would therefore possess his connection to the Nightmare Spell, as well.

So why would the Thieving Bird want something like that?

To answer that question, one had to realize that the creature that Sunny had met in the Nightmare was not the real Thieving Bird. The real Thieving Bird was long dead. Instead, the odious thing he had run into at the Estuary was a replica of the vile Terror created by the Spell.

And a replica could only exist in the illusory realm of the Nightmare.

A carrier of the Spell, however... a carrier of the Spell would be expelled back into the real world once the Nightmare was over. They would have a way to go back.

So, Sunny had come to belleve that the real reason why the Thieving Bird wanted his fate was to become a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, and slip through the cracks of the illusory realm, finding a backdoor to reality.

If so, that would be the greatest prison break in history... quite a suitable feat for the greatest and most vile thief to have ever lived.

Very few creatures could find a way back into existence after having been destroyed for thousands of years, and in such an original way.

Therefore... the creature that had stolen his fate, and was now in possession of it, was not gone. It had not been erased forever by the collapse of the Nightmare. It was somewhere out there, in the real world, liberated from its illusory prison and free to roam the world, stealing anything that had caught its fancy.

Which meant that it could be hunted down and killed. And that he could get his fate back from it, somehow.

Sunny was nowhere near powerful enough to risk facing a Cursed Terror, let alone a Cursed Terror that neither gods nor daemons had been able to deal with.., even the Void Beings were said to have loathed the Vile Thieving Bird, which meant that they had suffered from its mischief as well.

The damned bird was a real menace…

More importantly, though, he didn't know if he even wanted to get his fate back. Despite everything, he wasn't sure.

Because there were strings attached to regaining his fate... both literally and figuratively. Some days, Sunny woke up and wanted nothing more than to be remembered. Some days, he woke up and felt that he would never give up his freedom, which he had paid for so dearly.

But Cassie deserved to know that there was a possibility, at least.

He sighed.

"There is a way. However..."

Sunny's voice turned heavy.

"There is a price to pay if one wishes to become fateless. There is also a price to pay if one wishes to become fated. And I... am not sure if I want to pay that price."

They reached the courtyard, where a lonesome tree stood, its leaves rustling in the darkness.

The tree was feeling much better after being tended to by Shakti. It was doing much better, in fact, than it had in the outskirts, even though there was no sun to shine on its leaves and bathe it in warmth.

The two of them looked at it in silence - Sunny with his own eyes, and Cassie as well.

After a while, she asked:

"Why did you plant this tree in vour Citadel?”

She was thinking about another tree, perhaps, one that he had burned on the Forgotten Shore.

It would be easy to imagine why the sinister Lord of Shadows would keep a tree like the Soul Devourer in his temple. However, this one was perfectly mundane, and did not even bear fruit.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then looked at the base of the tree's trunk. There, three lines were carved into the bark.

"...It's a memorial tree."

Cassie turned to him silently.

He smiled.

"A long time ago, I carved two lines into it, as a grave for my parents. Later, I added a third... as a grave for myself. This is my Citadel, and this is my grave. I think it's quite fitting."

Sunny lingered for a moment and added:

"I've never told you about it, so maybe you'll remember."

However, she did not. Cassie seemed distracted for a moment, and then said calmly:

"Should we proceed to the actual discussion, then?"

So she had known that about him, as well.

He smiled, and summoned the shadows, manifesting them into two chairs and a table. Soon, another avatar of his arrived, carrying a tray with tea and refreshments.

This one was the naughty shadow, and Sunny was not controlling him directly. That was why there was a subtle, but unmistakably lecherous smile on the bastard's face. He stared at the avatar with murder in his eyes, and the naughty guy hurriedly changed his expression.

He was even extra gallant when pouring Cassie tea.

Her face crumbled a little, and then she let out a melodious laugh.

"Sorry... I just can't get used to that ability of yours."

Sunny smiled.

"That's alright. Sometimes, I feel like I'm not used to it, either. Well, and sometimes, I feel like I am actually too used to it. It's a strange thing."

He sighed and dismissed the avatar.

"But then again, the very idea of normalcy seems more and more distant the further on the Path of Ascension we walk. As Saints, we are already far removed from what a normal human would be... some more than others. You must be experiencing it yourself, with the volume of alien memories you experience and the number of people you perceive the world through."

Cassie's Ascended Ability was not limited to vision. She shared all senses of her marks, so, in a way, she had experienced being young and old, strong and weak, sick and healthy, male and female. That kind of experience was not something a human would ever be privy to... and it must have changed her perception of herself, as well.

Sunny himself was living several lives at the same time. He knew that it had changed him. His three personas were quite different from each other despite being controlled by one mind... it was as much of an adaptation to differing circumstances as a defensive mechanism. Otherwise, the lines would become blurred, and he might one day become lost.

That was another reason why he was clinging to his secrets so desperately, feeling a strange reluctance to let go of the act.

Sunny leaned back.

"Sometimes I wonder what we will become, if we succeed. A Supreme being must be even further from being human. What about a Sacred being? What about a Divine one?"

He remained silent for a while, staring at his tea with a bleak expression. Then, he said somberly:

"There was a time when I harbored great hate against the Sovereigns. Because they were distant, because they were corrupt, because they treated human lives as currency and did nothing when people died."

With a deep sigh, Sunny straightened his back and looked at the rustling leaves of the lonesome tree for a while.

"And yet... haven't I spent these last few years doing nothing while people died? Such hypocrisy. Of course, I had my reason. Ultimately, it doesn't matter what a single Saint does - a pawn can struggle and strive, but the players are the ones who decide the outcome of the game. So, right now, I am biding my time to replace the morally corrupt players. It's for the greater good."

A sad smile twisted his lips.

"But then, I am sure that this is what the Sovereigns think, as well. That what they are doing, no matter how callous, is for the greater good.”

Cassie remained silent for a long time, then shook her head decisively.

"There is a big difference between us and the Sovereigns.”

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"There is?"

She nodded.

"Yes. It is that we are ashamed of our faults, while they are not. It might sound stupid, but that matters. It matters more than you can think."

He laughed.

"That's it? The only difference is that when we do something distasteful, we feel regret?"

Cassie shrugged.

"There is no need to think in absolutes. It is a fallacy. We also don't send assassins to kill little girls, or try to unleash Nightmare Creatures in populous cities. The extent of one's willingness to do despicable things for what they perceive as greater good is also important, not just the principle. More Importantly... we are also competent, while they are not. The end only justifies the means if you actually reach the end."

She hesitated for a moment, and then smiled.

"Or, if you prefer... one can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, but if they break the eggs and can't even make an omelette, then they shouldn't be allowed into the kitchen. Don't you think?"

Sunny chuckled.

"That... sounds pretty reasonable. Thanks for levelling with me."

He picked up the cup and took a sip of the fragrant tea, then leaned forward and smiled.

"Now, then. Shall we discuss the details of how we are going to make this omelette?”