1799 Back to Civilization

Sunny returned to the outskirts.

After years spent in the wild reaches of the Dream Realm, NQSC was like an explosion. Sunny almost fell to the ground after being assaulted by a myriad of movements and sensations. There were sounds, scents, and countless scenes. Most of all, there were shadows... a vast legion of them, all moving and changing, surrounding him like a boundless whirlpool.

Overwhelmed by them, he spent several days hiding in an abandoned room at the top of a ramshackle dormitory hive.

His mind wasn't ready for the sensory overload of being among hundreds of millions of people subduing his shadow sense, he waited for a while, slowly preparing himself to face humanity again.

Gradually, Sunny let his senses lose. First to envelop a few levels of the dormitory hive, then all of it. Laying in the darkness, he could feel thousands of humans go about their harsh lives, observing their sorrows, joys, and struggles.

Then, his shadow sense extended outward, enveloping the outskirts one street after another.

At some point, Sunny felt as if he was an invisible, omniscient deity. The area he could perceive was too vast for his mind to concentrate on each shadow, to witness every person - and yet, there was no better way of throwing himself into the half-forgotten feeling of being human.

Slowly, the feral grip of solitude that the Dream Realm had on his mind loosened. Sunny remembered how to be a person again.

His status in the waking world was... questionable. He didn't really exist. A nice family was now living in his terrace district house. He had no money, nо citizenship, and no home.

Which was pretty much exactly how it had been, back in the days of living as an outskirt rat.

A very familiar situation.

Of course, Sunny himself was entirely different from his younger self. He was a Saint now, which meant that he wasn't just a rat... he was the strongest, most vicious and fearsome rat in the world. The loftiest rat there was.

A true rat king.

The outskirts themselves had changed, as well. They were much emptier, as if someone had culled the population of this miserable place in the past few years. Sunny knew that many of the most disenfranchised people of the waking world had been seduced by the lure of the Dream Gates - one of his incarnations had followed Rain to Ravenheart, after all. But knowing and seeing were two different things,

'Even this place can change, huh.'

He felt… uprooted, somehow. But it was a good thing, for this part of his part to have changed.

Moving in the shadows, Sunny found a better place to stay and thoroughly washed himself. Then, he procured a cheap communicator and a sizable sum of credits. Things that had been insurmountable for him as a kid were easier than breathing now.

He did not have to scrounge for food and shelter. He did not have to fear the other humans populating the city slums.

He could survive here with no effort whatsoever... live as lavishly as he wanted, even.

But what was the point if the world was already falling apart?

Sunny did not care about the bitter past. It had no hold over him anymore.

He... had outgrown the outskirts.

After getting himself in order, Sunny sighed, turned into a shadow, and reached for the tether.

His original body was still tethered to the Ivory Island... of course, the Ivory Island had long left the Chained Isles by now, and the Crushing was no more.

With its departure, the force keeping the flying islands afloat had weakened significantly, accelerating the demise of the region. The Sanctuary of Noctis was situated at the edge of the Chained Isles, so it was still safe, However, more and more islands fell into the Sky Below with each year, In a few decades, most likely, there would be none left, erasing the last remains of the Kingdom of Hope.

Except for the Ivory Tower itself.

Sunny had expected to find himself above Bastion, but it seemed that Nephis and Cassie had been sent out to accomplish a mission. The beautiful island was moving across the sky of the Sword Domain, and the Fire Keepers were preparing for battle.

Sunny did not disturb them and jumped off the edge, unnoticed.

Turning into a crow, he glided to the ground and watched the Ivory Island drift away.

Then, with a sigh, he summoned Nightmare and climbed into the saddle.

Funnily enough, his destination was in the north.

Sunny had plenty of time to consider the situation while getting his bearings in the outskirts, and although he did not have a concrete plan yet, he knew that one place would play a great role in the approaching war.

A Death Zone known as Godgrave.

So, that was where he headed.

Of course, to get there, he had to cross most of the Sword Domain first.

Strangely enough, the journey was relaxing.

Sunny had spent so much time braving the deadliest regions of the Dream Realm that the territories conquered by humans seemed peaceful and safe. As long as he remained vigilant, nothing here could seriously threaten him.

Granted, the Dream Realm was still dire and full of dangers. Overconfidence was still an insidious killer, and one mistake could cost him his life, it was just that the scale of that mistake had to be quite significant now.

Nevertheless, Sunny enjoyed the feeling of being at the top of the food chain. He rode Nightmare while four of his shadows served as a stealthy vanguard, circling him at a distance. That way, he was alerted of any danger long before it could pose a threat.

Sunny avoided the human settlements, but sent his shadows to observe them and collect the news from time to time. He was learning more about the current situation in the two worlds, and slowly working out the basics of a plan.

...A couple of weeks later, a mountain chain barred his path. It was much less impressive than the dreaded expanse of the Hollow Mountains, but still had a bad reputation. When Sunny was a small child, these mountains were the northern boundary of the human enclave in the Dream Realm.

After Valor's northward expansion, though, they were simply a natural barrier in the heart of the Sword Domain now.

Sunny studied them with a slightly surprised expression. Not because of their historical significance, but for an entirely different reason.

These mountains...

'No way.’

He recognized them.

The steep rocky slopes were barren, and sharp ridges were covered in snow. There was one mountain that towered above the rest, though...

Jagged and lonesome, it dwarfed other peaks of the mountain chain, cutting the night sky with its sharp edges. A radiant moon bathed its slopes in the ghostly, pale light.

It was the Black Mountain from his First Nightmare.