1356 The Last Sybil

Sunny studied the old woman's armor, hesitated for a few moments, then looked at the Chain Breaker with doubt.

He felt rather impatient to meet Dusk of Fallen Grace, but reminded himself to keep calm and take it one step at a time.

"...We've yet to moor our ship."

The old warrior bowed again.

"Everything will be taken care of."

'How convenient...'

These ancient soldiers did not seem like much of a threat. The old woman was an Awakened, but the rest were mundanes. Sunny had no doubt that he would be able to escape any ambush or trap they could potentially lure him into... and it didn't even seem like there would be a trap.

Still, he didn't like the idea of leaving their only means of escaping Fallen Grace behind.

...That said, if Dusk had really anticipated their arrival, wouldn't she have also anticipated his reluctance? If she knew that he would be wary of a trap, wouldn't she have been able to construct a trap insidious enough to fool Sunny?

Suddenly, he was full of apprehension.

'Damnation...'

Sunny had mostly been blessed by finding himself on the right side of people with prophetic powers. Now that he was about to meet an unfamiliar oracle, though, he fully realized how terrifying of an enemy one could be.

His unease wasn't helped one bit by the fact that he had actually already met Dusk of Fallen Grace once... in a way. There were deep scars left on his psyche by the Terror of L049.

'Whatever. What else can we do, demand that she comes to meet us here on the pier?'

After exchanging a glance with Nephis, Sunny shrugged and followed the group of soldiers deeper into the city. The old man who had greeted them joined, as well, which caused an irritated sigh to escape from the lips of the old woman in charge of the soldiers.

"Cronos... why are you tagging along with us, kid?" The old man simply smiled.

"Why, I'm the one who greeted the esteemed guests first. Surely, they'll feel better having someone familiar escort them!"

The leader of the soldiers shook her head and didn't say anything else. The old man... Cronos... seemed satisfied and hurried to keep up with them.

'Kid? How ancient is this woman, to be calling a fossil like him "kid"?'

As Sunny was escorted through Fallen Grace, he couldn't help but look around with a somber expression.

Everywhere they went... they were only met by old people. Ranging from elderly to ancient, the inhabitants of Fallen Grace all had white hair, wrinkled faces, and frail bodies of people living out the last of their twilight years. They went about their business with careful steps, and looked at Sunny and Nephis with amazed expressions.

He thought that it was because of their status as guests in the city at first, but then realized that it was simply because they were... young.

Apart from Sunny and Nephis, there was not a single young person in sight.

'They are all Riverborn.'

Sunny frowned, pondering the implications of this simple realization.

Riverborn did not age with the passage of time — instead, they aged by moving upstream from the place of their birth. The process was supposed to be gradual, happening over the span of generations as the city migrated into the future to allow new families to be formed. Therefore, there had to be a mix of people of different ages on the streets, just like there would be in a normal city.

So what did it mean if everyone here was... no, looked old?

It meant that Fallen Grace had migrated far upstream for a reason other than ushering in a new generation, at some point. Killing the older population and thrusting everyone else into decrepit old bodies as a result.

Sunny's face grew somber as he looked at Cronos, one more time.

...It might have been that the leader of the soldiers had called him a kid not because she was incredibly ancient, but because the old man was actually a child, or a youth no older than Sunny and Nephis at least.

He hesitated for a few moments, then asked cautiously:

"...Cronos, was it? Say, how old are you?"

The old man smiled, his face turning into a labyrinth of deep wrinkles.

"Oh, I am seventeen, my lord! Uh... I'll be seventeen in a few days, to be precise. But who's counting?"

Sunny inhaled deeply, disturbed by the cheerful tone of that answer.

Nephis seemed to have figured out the reason for why everyone in Fallen Grace looked so old, as well. Hearing Cronos confirm it, she frowned.

"Then why aren't you at the House of Youth?"

As the words left her lips, the face of the old woman leading the soldiers darkened. While Cronos lingered, she answered in his stead:

"...It's because we lost them. We lost the entire downstream half of the city during those dark days. And if it wasn't for the Lady, we would have lost the other half, as well."

At the mention of Dusk, an expression of deep reverence and love appeared on the faces of Cronos and the old soldiers. But there was also something else, hiding behind the devotion. A hint of... sorrow? Fear? Guilt?

It was at that moment that they reached the point that should have been the center of the city.

However, it was its edge instead.

There was nothing but empty water where countless island-ships should have been. The rope bridges leading to them had been cut, their remnants singed and floating aimlessly in the water. The closest buildings to the edge bore scars and burn marks, some of them tilting sideways or laying in piles of mostly disassembled wreckage.

It was as if the whole city had been dissected into two halves, one still drifting on the crimson waves, the other long gone, lost to the unceasing pull of the past.

'So that's how it is...'

Fallen Grace had indeed migrated upstream, escaping an attack. A large part of it had been lost in the process... both in terms of island-ships, and people.

Sunny looked away with a grim expression. "Was it because of the Defiled?"

The old woman chewed on her lips, then nodded with a strange darkness hiding in her eyes.

"Yes... a Defiled. Something like that."

After that, she remained silent.

Soon, they reached an island-ship that floated a small distance away from the rest of the city. It carried a beautiful palace built of white stone, with tall columns and a spire that rose high into the scarlet sky, crowned by a pyre of pure flame.

That was the source of the white spark they had seen from a distance.

Crossing the expanse of crimson water, Sunny and Nephis ascended the wide stairs leading to the gates of the palace and were welcomed by rows of soldiers just like the ones who had escorted them here — wearing white armor with red sashes, decrepit, and old.

All of them bowed deeply as the small procession passed them. Finally, the gates of the temple opened in front of them.

Sunny felt an old fear grip his heart.

He was finally going to meet Dusk face-to-face... again.

Soon, they were led to a grand hall filled with white marble, flowing water, and tranquil silence. There was a tall dais in the center of it, with an elegant stone throne standing on it.

Dusk of Fallen Grace, the last Sybil of the Estuary, was sitting on that throne.

Sunny froze.

The first thing he registered was that Dusk looked young... very young. She was the first young woman they saw in Fallen Grace.

She was also enthralling, with a petite figure and an exquisitely beautiful, delicate face. Her hair was like pale gold, and her stunning eyes were pure blue.

Those stunning eyes looked upon the world but didn't see anything, because the beautiful young woman was blind.

Of course, Sunny knew her well.

Stunned, he raised a hand and asked in a trembling voice:

"...Cassie?"