1357 Long, Long Time

In front of them, sitting on the throne of Fallen Grace... was none other than Cassie. The delicate blind girl who had been their companion since the dire trial of the Forgotten Shore, and whom both Sunny and Nephis knew better than anyone else in the world did.

There could be no mistake.

Cassie had not changed much since the last time Sunny had seen her. She was still the same, with golden hair and beautiful blue eyes. The soft features of her lovely face were just as he remembered them...

But there was something different about her, too.

There was an obvious change, of course. Unlike how she was in the Nightmare Desert, Cassie looked hale and refreshed. Gone were the feverish gauntness, dark bruises, and cracked lips. Instead, her striking beauty had bloomed once more, soft and quiet yet making it impossible to look away. She was also wearing an unfamiliar red peplos, its thin flowing fabric draped gracefully around her supple figure and decorated with white accents.

But there was also a deeper, less obvious change to her. Sunny just couldn't put his finger on what it was, exactly.

Most importantly, Cassie was not Dusk of Fallen Grace ...Or was she?

He suddenly felt a chill.

"Cassie?"

At the sound of his voice, the blind girl slowly turned her head and looked down from her throne. Even Nephis, who rarely allowed surprise to show on her face, seemed dazed. She stared at the young woman who was... or at least looked like their friend silently, a storm of emotions hiding in her usually calm eyes.

The next moment, however, tension drained from her gaze, replaced by profound relief.

It was because Cassie smiled. Her wide, radiant smile set their hearts at ease.

It was a smile they knew.

"Sunny? Neph? You are finally here?"

The familiar sound and cadence of her familiar voice were just as they had been before, as well.

Sunny slowly exhaled and felt a strong desire to lean on something.

He had been both anticipating and dreading meeting Dusk. He had also been worried sick about the members of the cohort, and especially Cassie, since she was not as fierce of a warrior as the rest of them and more vulnerable than most. Even though Sunny had been suppressing these worries, they gnawed at his soul.

Now that the moment he had been dreading was replaced by an unexpected and joyous reunion, alleviating the gnawing worry, Sunny momentarily felt unbalanced.

Then, a million questions flooded his mind.

'Wait... why is Cassie here? Where is Dusk? Could Cassie have taken the role of Dusk in the Nightmare? Wait, then what about Torment? Why was she sent so much further downstream than Nephis and I were? How long has she been here? Where are the others? How...'

Sensing that he was on the verge of spiraling, Sunny forcefully put those questions aside. He would be able to ask them all to Cassie, anyway. As soon as they were able to talk freely...

As if reading his thoughts, the blind girl turned slightly and smiled at the soldiers who had escorted them into the temple. They looked at her with intense devotion, then lowered their gazes and bowed.

Cassie lingered for a moment, then spoke softly:

"The Children of Weaver are here. Please, leave. There are important matters I must discuss with them alone."

The old woman leading the soldiers looked up in protest. "But, my Lady! It... it might not be safe!"

The blind girl chuckled.

"I know, child. I know more than most, remember."

The elderly soldier looked away in embarrassment, recalling who she was talking to. She hesitated for a moment, then bowed her head.

"Forgive me, my Lady. I... I acted out of line." Cassie shook her head.

"No need to apologize. You only spoke out of sincere concern for me. Go and feel at ease... I also know these two. They will not harm me."

She paused for a moment and added:

"Oh... and you, Cronos. Don't think I don't know you're hiding behind a column, brat. You go as well."

An awkward cough resounded from somewhere behind, and the elderly teenager appeared in sight, scratching the back of his head.

"Ah... I was just... enjoying the splendor of the temple. Sorry, my Lady... I seem to have gotten carried away..."

Under Cassie's unseeing gaze, Cronos and the soldiers backed away and left the three of them alone...

Or so it seemed.

After the initial shock of the unexpected meeting receded, Sunny noticed two people standing in the shadows of the throne, both of them Ascended. They were an old man and an old woman, dressed in ceremonial robes. The woman wielded an unsheathed greatsword, while the man held a crimson silk cord in his hands.

Tracing his gaze, Cassie let out a quiet sigh.

"These are my guards. Don't mind them... they are deaf, and won't hear us."

Sunny was strangely disturbed by these words. Why did Cassie have two deaf guards? The whole situation somehow seemed... eerie.

At that moment, Nephis finally spoke:

"Is that old woman a teenager, as well? Are all your troops composed of children?"

The blind girl blinked a couple of times, bewildered, then shook her head.

"No? She is a few hundred years old." Sunny tilted his head, stumped.

"What? Then why did you call her a child?"

Cassie remained motionless for a while, then sighed deeply and lowered her head

Her voice sounded strangely hollow when she spoke, the words echoing across the white hall:

"It is because... I've been waiting for you two for a long, long time..."

In the silence that followed, both Sunny and Nephis froze. The terrible implication of what Cassie had said slowly seeped into their minds, making them realize that...

At that moment, the blind girl's shoulders trembled, and she suddenly exploded into bright laughter.

"Oh... oh gods. Sorry, I just couldn't help myself! I really did wait for a while... about a year, I think? I imagined this day a lot, and so... I just couldn't resist making this joke..."

Sunny and Nephis stared at her, stunned.

'Wha... what the hell? Who makes a joke at a moment like that?!' His eye twitched.

'Wait. Did she say a year?'

It had been less than three months since Sunny and Nephis entered the Nightmare. So, the time storm did indeed mess up their perception of time. Just not as direly as they had feared.

Cassie, meanwhile, had gotten such a good laugh at their expense that tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. Her hands had been laying on her knees before; now, she raised them to wipe the tears away.

And when she did, Sunny heard a familiar sound. It was the rattling of chains.

...There were golden shackles wrapped around Cassie's slender wrists, and a golden chain connected them. Wiping off her tears, the blind girl looked up with a smile and blinked. It seemed that she had noticed their confusion.

Cassie frowned a little, then touched her shackles and sighed.

"Oh... you guys don't know much about the sybils, yet. Right. I should explain."

She lingered for a moment, then glanced briefly at the two deaf Masters behind her.

One held an unsheathed sword, the other a silk cord. Her expression remained calm and relaxed.

"When I said that these two are my guards, I didn't mean that they guard me against danger. Instead... they are guarding the city against me."