1358 Beautiful Chains

Nothing about the situation made sense... Sunny and Nephis tentatively came to terms with the fact that Cassie had replaced Dusk of Fallen Grace, but now they were struck by yet another revelation.

Sunny did not know why the blind girl was shackled yet, but his mind had already entered a state of battle readiness... just in case. Not showing any emotions, he briefly glanced at the two deaf guards.

The sword and the cord they wielded were suddenly much more sinister. If the guards were meant to protect the city from Cassie...

Then the sword was meant to cut her down, while the cord was meant to strangle her.

'How strong can these old Masters be?'

Sunny was mentally calculating the swiftest way to kill them guards when a sudden thought sent a chill running down his spine.

His first impulse had been dictated by the deeply ingrained desire to protect Cassie... but why were the guards there, in the first place?

Looking at the beautiful young woman sitting on the white throne, wearing golden shackles, Sunny had to wonder if he should be thinking of a way to protect himself from her, instead.

She sighed.

"You don't have to worry. I'm not in danger, nor do I represent danger. It's just that... well, it's a long story. I'll explain. But first..."

Standing up, Cassie smiled and descended from the dais.

"Let me climb off that throne. It feels really odd to be looking down on you from up high."

She approached them with light steps. Her delicate figure was accentuated by the vibrant red fabric of the archaic dress, which contrasted starkly against the white marble of the grand hall. Her movements were swift and graceful... before Sunny could really decide whether he should be on guard or not, Cassie was already near.

She raised her shackled hands...

And gave Nephis a tight hug.

"I missed you... I really missed you guys a lot."

She held Neph in an embrace for a few moments, then sighed and let go. A bright smile bloomed on Cassie's face. Turning to Sunny, she hesitated a bit, then gently gripped his arm with both hands.

The golden chain rattled quietly.

"I'm so glad that you're here."

He froze, then awkwardly patted her on the hand.

'What, I don't get a hug?'

But then again, that was not the kind of relationship he had with Cassie. What kind of relationship did they have, then?

Sunny was really not sure. If he had to describe it with one word, though, it would be... complicated.

Still, she seemed to be sincerely happy to see him. He felt the same way, too.

"We're glad to be here, as well. But... do you mind explaining what is going on? Starting with why you are chained, please."

Cassie's smile dimmed a little. She hesitated for a moment, then nodded and turned away.

"Sure. But not here... this hall is too oppressive. Follow me."

After exchanging a glance, Sunny and Nephis followed the blind girl out of the great hall and into the depths of the white temple. The two old guards did not seem concerned by the fact that their ward was moving around freely. They simply walked behind them silently, carrying the sinister sword and the silk cord.

The presence was rather ominous, but Cassie did not seem to mind.

Together, the five of them entered a grand staircase, which led them to a smaller one. The blind girl was navigating the maze-like interior of the temple with practiced ease... which wasn't that surprising, considering that she must have spent a whole year here. Sometimes, she traced the marble walls with her hand, but mostly she simply counted her steps and moved by memory.

Eventually, they ascended a tall tower and emerged onto an open platform. There was a massive brazier in its center, with a pyre of white flame rising high into the crimson sky from it... this was the flame they had noticed from afar, and which guided them to Fallen Grace.

Cassie lingered in front of the brazier for a few moments, bathing in its heat. Her expression turned a little distant.

After a while, she said quietly:

"...Right. I don't need to maintain the flame anymore."

Turning around with a smile, she gestured to a small table that stood near the aery railing of the platform.

"Please. Sit down. You must be tired after spending so long on the River."

The table was brimming with fresh fruit, crystal pitchers of wine, and

savory snacks. Cassie did not have to ask them twice, since Sunny and

Nephis were indeed tired after the long journey, hungry, and parched.

Soon, the three of them were sitting around the table, enjoying the refreshments.

From the height of the temple's spire, the whole of Fallen Grace was revealed to them, as well as the fiery expanse of the flowing water painted in a million shades of red by dusk.

Looking at the surreal sight of the endless crimson river, Sunny couldn't help but notice how damaged and incomplete the city looked. It was indeed as though it had been cut in half, with many of the island-ships either missing or taking a position in the flotilla that was clearly not meant for them.

Taking a sip of fragrant red wine, Cassie sighed and turned to face Fallen Grace, as well. She was holding the glass with both hands, careful not to let the golden chain get in the way.

Eventually, she said:

"...I entered the Nightmare around a year ago. It was very disorienting, as you must have experienced yourself. Especially once I realized that I had taken the place of Dusk, the sybil of Fallen Grace. Dusk... I don't know how powerful she was, exactly, but she must have been at least a Transcendent. While I am not."

Sunny nodded somberly and added in a low voice:

"The last sybil."

The blind girl turned to him with a strange, fragile smile.

"Yes. The last. Although... I wasn't so at the start."

Nephis frowned, feeling a dark undertone in Cassie's voice.

"Wasn't so? What do you mean?"

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, her face turning solemn. Then, she said:

"The sybils were oracles once. The revelations they received came from the gods. But then, the gods grew silent... and, one after another, the sybils turned to another source of knowledge. The Estuary. What revelations do you think they received from there?"