1359 See no Evil

Sunny suddenly paled. 'Wait. No way...'

The runes describing the Shroud of Graceless Dusk resurfaced in his memory...

[There, they found solace, safety, and shelter. In time, the voices of the gods grew silent one after another, leaving behind only a vast and dreadful silence. That was how the sybils embraced the Estuary, and that was how they fell.]

He looked at Cassie somberly and said, his voice slightly hoarse: "The... Defilement?"

The blind girl nodded sadly.

"Yes. The Defilement spread from the Estuary, consuming Verge, the city of the Seekers. And from there, the Defiled slowly moved upstream, threatening to devour all other settlements on the Great River. The sybils and their people waged a war against them for a long time. Eventually, most of their cities fell — some fell to the Defiled... but not all."

Her beautiful face looked forlorn for a moment. Cassie sighed.

"The sybils were truly formidable at the height of their power. It was no coincidence that they had managed to guide their people through the horrors of the Doom War and enter the Tomb of Ariel unharmed. Even the Defiled found it difficult to conquer the cities reigned by the sybils... how would they not, if the defenders knew the secrets of the future?"

She paused for a moment and took a small sip of the wine.

"But the very thing that gave the sybils power ended up becoming their undoing. The most stalwart cities... they fell to the sybils themselves. Because they were corrupted by the glimpses of the Estuary and succumbed to the Defilement, letting the rot spread from within."

The blind girl sighed again, then shook her head.

"A year ago, there were three sybils in Fallen Grace. One was already Defiled, and entombed in her temple. Of the other two, Dusk was the junior. The senior sybil... she had hidden the signs of Corruption from everyone until it was too late. The day she lost control was the day I took Dusk's place."

She lingered for a moment and gestured to the city below.

"This is what I managed to preserve. I was able to rally the defenders of Fallen Grace and slay the Defiled sybil. But, by then, much of the city had already been lost. Much worse, the seals containing the other Defiled had been broken. And she... she was a much more terrifying creature than the other one. All I could do was abandon the contested island-ships and

evacuate the remaining ones as far upstream as I could."

Cassie smiled faintly and raised her hands, allowing the golden chain to ring.

"Hence, these shackles. And the deaf guards. I am the ruler of this city, but at the same time, I am a threat to it... or so the River People think, since they don't know that I am not truly Dusk. I was afraid that my own affinity to revelations would place me in the same danger the sybils had been exposed to, but funnily enough, I turned out to be immune to it. Can you guess why?"

Sunny and Nephis looked at her silently, not knowing what to answer. Sunny was a bit confused.

'I get why Nephis is not in danger of becoming Defiled. Her soul is incorruptible... but how can Cassie be immune, as well?'

He shook his head.

"I'm not sure."

She chuckled, then pointed to herself. "It's because I'm blind."

Her beautiful blue eyes gazed upon the world, unseeing. Cassie sighed softly.

"Whatever it is that the sybils saw in their visions of the Estuary, I can't see. That is why the truth of the Estuary can't corrupt me... or at least, can't corrupt me in the same way it corrupted the sybils. In the visions I had before entering the Tomb of Ariel, I usually had sight. But ever since coming here, all I see is darkness. Who knew it would be a blessing?"

She smiled and moved her hands slightly, allowing the golden chain to fall back onto her lap.

"Anyway. I knew that you would arrive eventually, but I did not know how long it would take. So, I remained in Fallen Grace and defended the city from the attacks of the Defiled. It was... a long year. What took you so long?"

Nephis leaned forward and grasped Cassie's hand. White sparks glinted in her calm grey eyes.

"You did well, Cas. I'm sorry. We entered the Nightmare much further upstream, and it took us a long time to travel into the past. We encountered a time storm on the way... which is why, while a year has passed for you, it was only a few months to us."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then added:

"But you must have known that already, right? It was thanks to you that Ananke knew to meet us and point us in the direction of Fallen Grace."

A strange expression appeared on Cassie's face. He frowned, confused by her reaction.

"What? What's wrong?"

The blind girl hesitated.

"I'm sorry... but who is Ananke? And what do you mean she knew to guide you to Fallen Grace? I'm afraid I don't understand."

Sunny and Nephis exchanged a somber look. After a moment of silence, she asked carefully:

"...Was it not you who sent a dream message to the Priestess of Weave? To warn her of our arrival?"

Cassie simply shook her head.

"Send a dream message? I don't even know how to do something like that, let alone who the Priestess of Weave is. I also wouldn't have known where you were. Are you saying that there was someone who did?"

Sunny suddenly felt an ominous premonition.

He was somewhat convinced that it was Dusk who had sent Ananke instructions to meet them and guide them to Fallen Grace. Now that he knew that Cassie had taken the place of the last sybil, though, and she was not the mysterious being pulling the strings of the Nightmare from behind the scenes...

There was a small possibility, of course, that Dusk had arranged everything before being erased from existence by Cassie's arrival. But it was infinitely small... had the last sybil even existed in the Nightmare? Why would the Spell extend its timeline beyond the point where the challengers entered?

And even if it had, what were the chances that Dusk not only knew of her nature as a phantom conjured by the Spell, but also everything about the challengers and their task?

Close to zero. However...

If not Dusk or Cassie, then who could have possessed both a deep knowledge of the future and enough insight to manipulate it?

Sunny gritted his teeth, disturbed.

"Not only did they know when and where we would enter the Nightmare, but also a great deal more. It was how we ended up finding the ship... the Chain Breaker. And making it all the way here."

Cassie seemed stunned.

"The... Chain Breaker..."

She remained silent for a while, then shivered and said, her voice glum: "Well, then... maybe it was Torment."