1362 No Other Choice

Some time later, the three of them were walking across the pier, followed by an excited crowd. The two guards were not far behind, either — they never left Cassie's side. The golden chain was ringing softly with each step she took.

The elderly citizens of Fallen Grace were overflowing with joy at the sight of their young and beautiful priestess, though, seemingly oblivious to the ominous meaning behind the golden shackles. The news of the arrival of two Outsiders had spread throughout the city, as well.

The mood was festive.

Sunny studied their faces through the shadows, then turned to Cassie and said silently:

"You seem to be very popular. They absolutely adore you."

A faint smile appeared on her face.

"...It's Dusk, not me. And how could they not? She was a wise and benevolent ruler, not to mention a champion of the city. It was because of the sybils that the River People could defend themselves against the Defilement. Most importantly... I am both the most powerful Awakened and the only Outsider left in Fallen Grace. If they lose their faith in me and their love for me, then all they'll have left will be despair."

She let out a wistful sigh.

"They only love me because they have no other choice."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, somewhat stunned by how cynical that statement sounded. It bothered him a great deal, for some reason.

Then, he shook his head.

"Still, you must have done a lot to earn their trust. Surviving a year in the Third Nightmare could not have been easy. Especially alone."

He had already seen Fallen Grace and its people. They were not the kind of force he had hoped to find... and while Cassie had not gone into detail when describing her attempts to defend the city against the attacking Defiled, it was easy to surmise that protecting it was more of a burden than a boon.

Her days must have been filled with countless battles and narrow victories. It was a miracle that Fallen Grace still stood.

She smiled.

"Ah... well, yes. After the initial chaos, I led the remaining warriors into battle many times, and killed many abominations. It was indeed not easy. But I wasn't really alone."

Cassie gestured to the crowd following them at a respectful distance, as well as at the two silent guards.

"The people of Fallen Grace might have grown weak, but they are valiant and brave. I also had several Echoes to assist me."

'...Right.'

Neph had once brought back a powerful Echo from the Nightmare Desert , a Fallen Demon with six arms. That Echo had been given to one of the Fire Keepers before his cohorts challenged a Seed of Nightmare. She would have arranged for a powerful bodyguard or two for Cassie, as well.

Sunny tilted his head.

"How strong are your Echoes, exactly?"

The blind girl remained silent for a moment.

"You already know the Quiet Dancer. Her power is augmented by a special Memory I received from Valor, albeit not by much. There is also an artificial Echo Neph procured for me from the clan, as well, equal in power to a Fallen Monster. And... there is an Echo I earned here in the Tomb of Ariel myself. A... Transcendent Beast, of sorts."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Of sorts?"

Cassie let out a quiet sigh.

"It's the Echo of the senior sybil I killed. I try not to summon her where the citizens of Fallen Grace can see."

Sunny flinched a little. After a few moments of silence, Nephis suddenly spoke, her voice even:

"You alone should be enough to deal with two Masters. With a Transcendent Echo, those guards of yours stand no chance whatsoever. What is the point of them following you around?"

Cassie smiled sadly.

"...Yes. There's no real point. I can easily kill them, and I can easily break out of these chains. They know it perfectly well. But they are loyal and devoted to their duty... and so, I remain in chains out of respect for their devotion. Isn't it sad? The fact that I am only guarded by two Masters should tell you everything you need to know about how desperate Fallen Grace's situation is. Unless we act, it will be swallowed by the Defilement soon enough."

Sunny sighed, trying to imagine what had happened to the real Fallen Grace... and real Dusk. He knew that the last sybil had been buried at sea, her body eventually becoming the vessel of a Corrupted Terror.

The existence of the Terror of L049 was proof that the civilization of the Great River had met a sorrowful end.

And it would meet it again if they failed to conquer the Nightmare...

Just then, they reached the end of the pier and walked across a wooden plank to the deck of the ghostly ship. The crowd stayed back, with only the two guards following them aboard the ancient vessel.

Cassie froze, lowering her hands and staring into nothingness with her beautiful blue eyes. After a while, he said softly:

"Sunny... can you look at the sacred tree?"

He did as he was told, belatedly realizing that the blind girl must have used her Ascended Ability to share his perception. Although he didn't feel anything, it also felt strangely... violating.

There was no harm done, but for someone as secretive as Sunny, sharing was an uncomfortable process.

'I wonder if she sees the bastard.'

He threw a furtive glance at the Sin of Solace, who stood motionlessly below the tree, and suppressed his discomfort.

They walked around the ship for a while, allowing Cassie to study both its exterior and interior. She was the person who knew the true Chain Breaker best, after all, so they needed her judgment to rid themselves of doubt.

Eventually, the blind girl stopped near the sacred tree and gently placed her palm on the white bark.

After a few moments of silence, she sighed and turned to them.

"It's the Chain Breaker. I am certain."

Sunny and Nephis grew somber.

They had suspected as much, of course... but still, a slight hope that it was merely a similar vessel still lived in their hearts.

Now, it was utterly extinguished.

Cassie pointed here and there, describing her findings.

"...the essence channels are severely damaged, but their shape is unmistakable. I repaired them myself once, after all, so I know every small detail of how Noctis had carved new enchantments into the older ones created by the Fire Hunters. It's his ship... our ship. There are many differences, but the core is the same."

Sunny grimaced.

"But how the hell can it be here? And how did we end up finding it?" The blind girl hesitated, then somberly shook her head.

"That, I cannot answer."

He closed his eyes, then rubbed his face tiredly.

'What the hell is going on... what the hell has been going on from the start of this damned Nightmare? There are too many unexplainable things!'

Sunny's tolerance for mysteries was at its limits.

Cassie lingered for a few moments, then suddenly spoke: "I can tell you one thing, though."

Both Sunny and Nephis looked at her, waiting.

She pointed to the deck below her feet and smiled.

"...I think I can repair the enchantments again. If you give me some time, the Chain Breaker will be able to fly once more."