1379 A Step Forward

'What the hell is she doing?!‘

Sunny dodged a fearsome attack, feeling the wind raised by the abomination's spear throw his hair into disarray. As a chill crept up his spine, he sidestepped a black tentacle that insidiously shot at him from beneath the water, and prepared to dive into the shadows to come to Cassie's aid.

However, he did not get a chance to.

Right at that moment, the water which he had been using for footing suddenly tore free of his control. With no time to react, Sunny plunged into its cold embrace. This section of the dark hall was not flooded too terribly, but still, a moment later he was submerged up to his chest.

'Curse it...‘

Sunny did not have to look around to know what had happened. One of the Corrupted Devils leading the Drowned was targeting him, using some profane power to wrestle the dark waters from his control. He did not possess a Domain yet, after all, so whatever connection to the element the Crown of Twilight provided him with was weak and rudimentary.

The situation was not good. Currently, Sunny was only augmented by a couple of his five shadows and some of N eph's flame. Because of the synergy between the two, he was much stronger than he would have been otherwise — enough so to push his body through water with sufficient speed.

But not enough speed to keep the same frantic cadence of combat.

'That Devil has to die, fast...‘

Distracted by his own predicament, he had to delay joining Cassie in the battle against the sybil.

...Up on the dais overseeing the flooded hall, meanwhile, the Defiled creature and the blind seer continued to stand opposite of each other without movement. Only the sybil's appalling tentacles were swaying subtly, her monstrous figure reflected in the polished metal of Cassie's light cuirass.

Despite their inaction, the air between the two was swelling with an invisible tension. It was as though something utterly dark and dreadful was seething, unseen, beneath the fabric of the world, ready to explode and engulf the expanse of the flooded hall.

Cassie stood with her weapons lowered, her silver mask directed straight at the Defiled monstrosity. Her beautiful face was slowly growing paler and paler... but its expression remained calm and resolute.

Despite her body remaining motionless like an ice sculpture, her mind was in a state of utter havoc.

It was because she was using her Awakened Ability to its utter limit, well past it even. If Sunny was capable of reading thoughts, he would have known that the blind girl was in a state of absolute, pristine battle clarity. Time moved slowly for her, and a thousand thoughts were being born in her head each second.

Cassie was sensing the future... or rather, a multitude of futures.

Usually, she was able to perceive a few seconds into it. By activating her Awakened Ability, Cassie could enter a state similar to existing in two separate moments of time — one current, the other approaching. If she stumbled in the approaching moment, she could correct her steps and avoid falling when it became the current one.

Of course, such a way of existing was incredibly strange, disorienting, and mentally straining. It had taken her a long time to not only master this perplexing Ability, but also learn how to make use of it flawlessly.

Here in the flooded temple, however, the heavy comfort of her Aspect had been disturbed. Because of the bizarre influence the Defiled sybil was exerting on probability, turning it vague and chaotic, Cassie was torn between different versions of possible futures instead of one definite one. Instead of two moments in time, she existed in the present and in several fragmented variants of the approaching.

...Still, she had grown used to it, too.

An existence like this was arduous, but not impossible.

And now, she had to master and make use of it, as well.

'A step forward.'

In Cassie's mind, she took a swift step forward, and then dashed at the Defiled sybil with stunning speed. The Quiet Dancer flashed, diving under one of the deadly tentacles and aiming to hit the creature in a vital spot...

At the same time, it flashed to slice at the tentacle instead.

At the same time, the slender rapier was tossed aside, helpless.

At the same time, it sank into the abomination's flesh, but failed to do any serious damage.

And then...

Cassie stumbled, her attack missing the intended target. The dark tentacles wrapped around her entire body. Her bones shattered, ripping the flesh apart. She opened her mouth to scream in agony, only for a fountain of blood to flow out of it instead.

Death was not kind.

At the same time, the tentacle continued to move, ignoring the slender blade that had cut it. Its blow was so powerful that Cassie's skull split open, pieces of pink flesh and shards of bone falling into the dark water. She toppled to the cold stones like a broken doll.

The pain was harrowing, but swift.

At the same time, she felt something breaking through her armor, crushing her ribcage, ripping her heart and lungs into shreds, snapping her spine, and exiting from her back. Cassie's convulsing body was raised into the air and tossed aside, leaving a long bloody trail on the dais. The harrowing wound did not kill her instantly.

Drowning, she wished it had.

At the same time...

There was nothing in the future but terrible, inhuman, intolerable agony. Cassie was broken, torn apart, and drowned. The pain never ended.

But that was alright.

Thanks to her strange Ability, she had already survived dying ten thousand times. Every time she fought, she died countless times to emerge victorious from the fight. That was how she won.

...Back in the present, no more than a split second passed. She was still standing motionlessly, a calm expression on her face.

'A step to the left, then.‘

In Cassie's mind, she took a swift step to the left.