1380 Cage of Futures

In the darkness of the flood temple, 3 seconds passed.

Sunny was still falling into the water.

During that second, Cassie had lost count of how many times her slender body was broken and mutilated by the monstrous sybil.

A thought was much faster than a blade, but it had the same effect on the future as an action. Every time she mentally changed her plan of action, the immediate future changed, as well — and currently, Cassie was thinking with stunning speed.

'A step to the right.‘

'A step forward, high attack.’

'A step forward, low attack.‘

'A half-step...‘

She imagined a future and suffered the consequences, again and again. The sybil was too powerful, too sinister, too vile... but not insurmountably so.

Another moment passed, and finally, Cassie imagined the future where she did not die.

'Found it.’

In the approaching moment of time, she managed to evade the fury of harrowing tentacles unscathed and deliver a fatal strike. The Quiet Dancer whistled melodiously as she cut the air and plunged into the sybil's neck.

Cassie prepared to move...

But then, the fragmented future turned vague, disappearing.

Instead, there was more pain, more defeat, and more horror.

'Of course... thought so.'

She did not lose her composure because that was what she had been expecting. Cassie was not the only one oracle in this temple, after all.

The sybil had just as much control over the future as she did... much more of it, even. Just as Cassie finally found one path that led to her victory, the Defiled abomination destroyed it, pulling over other outcomes from the abyss of possibilities. Instantly, whatever chance the graceful young woman facing her had was gone.

Their unseen and motionless, but furious and chillingly violent battle continued. Another second had already passed.

'Faster, faster...‘

Cassie gritted her teeth, feeling her mind spinning feverishly. She had already found a path... knowing where to look, she would be able to find another one sooner. If the future was a battlefield, then she had just conquered a small part of it, gaining control of not only that single possibility, but also all possibilities similar to it. While simultaneously denying them to the enemy.

Now, all she had to do was to conquer the rest, until the sybil had no more futures to replace her death with.

'A half-step to the left, aim for the neck.‘

'A jumping start, aim for the neck.‘

'A half-step to the right, aim for the heart.’

A few more frozen seconds passed. The flooded hall quaked and groaned as dust and

streams of water fell from its cracked ceiling. The horror of the depths was shrieking as its flesh burned, long limbs lashing out madly to crush the hateful radiant. The Drowned were besieging Sunny and his Shadows, some of them dead, but much more still frenzied and full of bloodlust.

Cassie was standing motionlessly in front of the sybil.

In her mind, the futures where she lived, and the creature died, multiplied. With each one she found, finding the next one became slightly easier. But finding many was not enough... she had to have more, more. She had to have them all.

As her mind burned, spinning faster and faster, the abomination grew more furious, too. The influence it exerted on the future became much more oppressive and suffocating, forcefully drowning harmful futures and pulling beneficial ones to the surface.

And yet...

Despite that, Cassie was slowly usurping small areas of the invisible battlefield, one after

another.

Although both the blind seer and the Defiles sybil remained still, as if frozen, the air between them was crackling with pressure. The darkness boiled, failing to contain the gruesome violence of their clash. It felt as if the stone surface of the dais would crack and shatter from the aftershocks of the ruthless confrontation...

But, of course, it did not. Because the countless futures where the battle was taking place never happened.

Cassie... was conquering these unborn futures.

The sybil was able to manipulate probability to make only those outcomes that benefited her come true, so Cassie had to disarm the creature. She had to surround her enemy with only those outcomes that ended in the enemy's death.

She had to make the future into a cage.

'A lunge, followed by a feint, followed by a sidestep, followed by a thrust.'

'A false lunge, release the Quiet Dancer, simultaneous thrust and flanking attack.'

'A step forward, release the Quiet Dancer, dagger party turning into a slash, backstab.' Cassie died, and died, and died, each death more gruesome than the previous one. But slowly, more and more fragments of the future she perceived allowed her to live. The sybil was surrounded more and more by the outcomes that ended in death.

Her cage was growing smaller.

And smaller.

And smaller.

And smaller still...

...Down in the water, Sunny used the convulsing body of the Corrupted Devil to push himself to the surface and shot into the air. Landing on a pile of rubble, he tossed the fiend's severed head at an approaching abomination and followed up with a strike of the Sin of Solace, piercing the creature's heart.

After that, he had a second to breathe.

Turning swiftly, Sunny looked at the dais where Cassie was facing the sybil. He was both surprised and intensely relieved to realize that neither of them had moved, still.

'Strange...‘

Spreading his shadow sense through the battlefield, he allowed himself a split second to evaluate the situation. Nephis and the horror of the depths seemed to be in a stalemate… the abomination's body was too alien and vast for her to deal fatal damage to it, while the abomination itself was not smart enough to catch the supremely skilled and calculating human with a devastating strike.

His Shadows were in the middle of a furious battle. Neither Saint nor Fiend were seriously injured, although there were several dents on the infernal ogre's armor. Nightmare had avoided being seriously wounded due to his speed and agility, for now, but there was already blood on the tenebrous stallion's sable coat.

The two Echoes were mostly intact, as well. The sybil was cruelly vivisecting a Drowned champion, while the four—armed mannequin had lost one of his four blades. The latter Echo was struggling...

'No choice.‘

Sunny had to help Cassie, even if it meant abandoning the battle with the Drowned and throwing more pressure at his subordinates.

A moment later, he was already leaning to step through the shadows and appear on the dais...

But at that same moment, Cassie finally moved.

A split second before, she had been frozen like an ice sculpture, but then, abruptly, she was already in motion. Dashing forward with stunning speed, the blind girl danced between the surging tentacles, somehow avoiding each inescapable and lethal strike. Before Sunny could even blink...

The blade of the Quiet Dancer flashed once, and Cassie was suddenly behind the

monstrous Tyrant.

The sybil swayed slightly.

Her tentacles grew still.

Then, a thin stream of crimson blood flowed from a small hole in her neck.

As the invisible ripple spread through the flooded hall, the Defiled oracle swayed once

more...

And toppled into the seething black water.