1555 Partners in Crime

The ketch was drifting in the current, slowly being pulled toward the icy shore. Cassie remained motionless on the helmsman's bench, her hand resting on the steering oar's handle. Her unseeing gaze was distant.

After a while, she sighed.

"I guess I should explain it from the start."

A crooked smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"That would certainly be nice... considering that you have arranged for this moment for that exact purpose."

By then, he had plenty of time to realize that Cassie had manipulated the events of the previous days for the exact purpose of having this conversation this Sunny away from the ears of their companions.

Why? What did she want to achieve? And why now, just before the final battle of this Nightmare?

Did they have to talk alone because the Mad Prince and Torment had orchestrated this entire cycle of the Great River alone?

He was about to find out.

Sunny felt a lot of pressure drain from his heart, knowing that Torment was gone and the only obstacle between the cohort and salvation was the harrowing, but mindless First Seeker. But, at the same time, he was on edge because of what was happening between him and Cassie.

The ease with which she was revealing her secrets was... ominous.

The blind girl remained silent for a moment, then picked up the Guiding Light and rested it on her shoulder, the light of the radiant crystal affixed to its top illuminating her face.

"I did not lie when I said that I only saw darkness in my visions after entering the Nightmare."

Sunny shifted slightly.

'Why is she bringing that up?'

Cassie smiled.

"However, that was not because of the nature of the Tomb of Ariel itself. Rather, my inability to perceive its secrets was engineered by Torment. My abilities were suppressed with the help of a sorcerous item. You should be able to guess what that item was."

Sunny's eyes narrowed. An image appeared in his memory... the image of golden shackles wrapped around Cassie's hands, connected by a golden chain.

The chain she had broken before leaving Fallen Grace. The blind girl nodded.

"Yes. Those shackles were worn by Dusk, and therefore, they were on my wrists the moment I entered the Nightmare. Dusk had not created the suppression enchantment, though... instead, it was Torment. She had countless years to prepare for my eventual return, after all."

Sunny raised an eyebrow, his gaze turning grim:

"Why break them, then?"

Cassie shrugged.

"Because I needed to, in order to survive what was to come. Aletheia's Island, Twilight... we would not have made it out alive if my powers were crippled. So, it was worth the risk. Plus, the visions come to me in my dreams. And your Shadow, Nightmare, has been destroying my dreams one after another. So, I was safe from learning the truth of the Estuary as long as we were together."

She paused for a moment and continued, her voice growing quieter:

"My past self — one who was destined to become Torment — did not have that luxury, though. In her own cycle, she managed to create the suppression enchantment to protect herself from the truth. But she knew that the Mad Prince was coming for her, and she could not escape him."

A strange smile appeared on her face.

"Then again, she wasn't planning to. She did, however, create several countermeasures to achieve her goals even after her soul and sanity were consumed by Corruption."

Cassie pointed at the silent Echo sitting by her side.

"This Echo is not very powerful, you see. Because most of Torment's power simply cannot be used by an Echo. Her power has to do with memories, with remembering and forgetting... something that Echoes aren't capable of. So, she put restrictions into her own mind, turning herself into a broken person who acted according to a set of predetermined choices. Almost as if creating a crude, miniature version of fate."

She shook her head.

"Of course, that alone was not enough to escape the madness of Corruption. No matter how well she prepared, the Defilement was going to turn her into a being who could not be controlled. Unless, of course, she received help from the Mad Prince, who was able to preserve a fragment of his humanity thanks to that loathsome wraith of yours. With his help, she could truly turn her Defiled self into an instrument of her will."

Sunny shifted slightly and asked, his voice full of doubt:

"And how did they accomplish that? How could a Defiled Saint be controlled?"

Cassie faced him and remained silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"How else? By making the Dread Lord use his authority against her, of course. The Mad Prince added fuel to the paranoia the tyrant of Verge felt toward Torment, and then put the idea of what commands to give her into his mind. Therefore, two of the Plagues became capable of resisting their vile natures, to a degree. And thus, Torment and the Mad Prince became perfect conspirators."

She moved the steering oar slightly, turning the ketch so that its bow faced the nearing shore of the ice island.

"After the Plagues reached the Estuary and used it to invade the next cycle of the Great River, the two of them meticulously prepared the playing field for the arrival of us, the new challengers. Eventually, the Mad Prince trapped two of the Plagues on Aletheia's Island, and two more in Twilight. Then, he finished the Key of the Estuary and entered the Source, becoming you."

Sunny looked at her somberly, then shifted his gaze and glanced at the Echo of Torment.

"Why didn't Torment do the same, then? Why remain and come into contact with you? Why attack you, forcing you to kill her?"

Cassie's expression turned cold.

She lingered for a while, then smiled darkly.

"The Mad Prince had to enter the Source to make sure that you possess the Key of the Estuary at the start of the Nightmare, thus protecting you from the truth harbored by the Sin of Solace. Perhaps he could have created a Memory that contained both the suppression enchantment and the enchantment that would allow it to be transferred to me at the start of the cycle. But... one of the two had to stay behind."