1556 Dangerous Knowledge

Shadows suddenly danced across Cassie's beautiful face as she lowered the Guiding Light.

"That was because Torment had a message to deliver to me, so that her wish could be fulfilled. And that message could only be delivered face-to-face."

She took a deep breath.

"So, she infiltrated Fallen Grace and modified the shackles that bound Dusk. She also wrote an accord of what happened in the previous cycles and left it for me to read. Finally, she crawled into the Temple of Dusk and met me, delivering the message."

Cassie's voice turned cold, and her expression became ruthless:

"However, she was still a Defiled. And, unlike the Mad Prince, she did not have a whisper of Ariel to keep her from losing all of her humanity. All she had was a cruel weave of restrictions and commands to push her toward the desired outcome, and that weave was not flawless."

She looked at Sunny without any humor in her eyes.

"So, after completing the mission of delivering her message to me, she instantly attempted to consume me. She was still being held back by the authority of the Dread Lord, though, and so... she died by my hand, instead."

There was silence for a while. The ketch reached the shore of the icy island and scraped against it, coming to a stop.

Sunny stared at Cassie, his thoughts in turmoil.

'So... she knew everything, all along.'

It took him a long time to learn the truth about the Great River, the Source and the Estuary, the Six Plagues and their connection to the members of the cohort, and the purpose behind the schemes of the Mad Prince.

Of the Mad Prince and Torment, to be precise. The two Defiled horrors were partners in crime... in more than one sense. Even though Torment was barely a living being, from what Cassie had told him, her mind shattered and her will chained by the restrictions of her own creation and the authority of the Dread Lord.

In a sense... Sunny had been right. The Mad Prince had indeed a plan in place to remove Torment from the cohort's path. She had been used and discarded, sent to be slaughtered by Cassie in Fallen Grace. He did not doubt for a moment that the outcome of their fight had been calculated by the vile madman in advance.

The only thing he was not sure about was if Torment knew about it and went to her death willingly... or at least as much as she had been capable of exercising her broken will.

There were numerous questions on his mind, but two of them were the most important.

What was the message Torment had to deliver?

And why had Cassie not shared her knowledge with the cohort?

'The answer to the second question should be evident, by now.'

Whether Cassie intended to or not, she had let it slip. When she told him about the version of her from the previous cycle — the one that had eventually become Torment, turned into a Defiled abomination by the previous version of him — she said that the Cassie of the past had never intended to escape the Defilement.

That she had known what the future Mad Prince was planning, and allowed herself to be infected with the Defilement by him despite that.

Which meant... that Cassie had been scheming long before that happened. That she had needed to be Defiled, for some reason. Before escaping Corruption come the next cycle.

He gritted his teeth.

"So... you knew all along, and kept quiet? You did not share any of that knowledge with us, acting surprised when we learned the dreadful truths of this Nightmare? Did you not think, at least once... that maybe it would be good for us to know what we were getting ourselves into, before plunging ourselves into the sea of danger and suffering?!"

Cassie faced him calmly.

"Why? Because sharing my knowledge has worked so well in the past? Sure, Sunny. You of all people should know how dangerous knowledge is, what knowing something that you aren't supposed to know can do, and what revealing secrets can destroy."

She turned away.

"What would have changed if I told you? We would have still needed to go to Aletheia's Island. We would have still needed to go to Twilight. Sure, we could have prepared better for what was waiting for us ahead... but I am not omniscient. I only know that much. Would it have made a difference? Or would it have just made us complacent and arrogant, leading to our deaths?"

The blind girl smiled sadly.

"Most of all, would any of our preparations have been more thorough than what the Mad Prince and Torment had already prepared for us?"

She shook her head.

"So, I think I will keep my knowledge to myself. That way, at least, I won't be blamed for the decisions the rest of you make, when you make them."

Sunny laughed bitterly and stared at her, his eyes full of dark amusement.

"Oh... now you decide to keep your knowledge to yourself. Good, good. It's just a pity that you couldn't do the same on the Forgotten Shore, before turning me into a damned slave!"

He had not planned to bring the distant past up, but hearing Cassie say those words, all of the resentment he had buried in his heart suddenly flooded to the surface.

Perhaps it was not unexpected, though. All this time, Sunny had hated the fact that he was made a slave by Nephis. Nephis had not used that power against him, so that hatred of his was more of an abstract thing, born from the fear of what could potentially happen.

Not that it made it invalid.

Recently, however, the situation had changed. The harm Shadow Bond was doing him had turned from abstract to very real. Its existence was the thing that stood between him and Nephis like an impregnable wall, making the idea of them having a future together seem beyond reach.

That was what Cassie had taken from him, as well.