1643 Unseen

Sunny had contemplated the ways Cassie could get him Inside the castle. From using a secret passage through the ruins to using her intricate knowledge of runic sorcery to Interfere with the defensive array, there were many potential methods for someone as resourceful as her to choose from.

What he had not expected was that she would, indeed, simply stride inside without paying the elite forces of Valor any heed.

Cassie simply walked forward at a mild pace, poised and elegant. Her calm steps were unhurried. She did not try to avoid the light of the enchanted lanterns or hide from the patrolling knights, acting like noting was the matter.

And yet, despite Sunny's presence, no one paid her any attention or barred her path.

The powerful Ascended guarding the castle shivered slightly when her gaze fell on them, their expressions turning slack for a moment. Then, they stepped aside and silently continued on their way, as if both Cassie and Sunny had somehow turned invisible. Not, not invisible... impossible to focus on or remember.

The memory of seeing the strange pair was completely erased from the minds of the elite warriors of Valor, replaced by a false recollection of nothing notable happening.

It was rather impressive.

And deeply disturbing.

Sunny was walking behind Cassie, so he could not see her eyes. He wasn't sure he wanted to, either.

Looking at her delicate back, he could not help but remember the suffocating despair and cold dread of LO49. The sinister powers of the Transcendent Terror that had consumed the station were eerily similar to what Cassie was now capable of. There were differences, of course, but the resemblance was there as well.

'Ah. I hate mental attacks.’

From the Forgotten Shore to the desolate expanse of Antarctica, these were the kinds of powers he was wary of the most. There had been creatures who left him broken and bleeding, barely clinging to life, but it were the insidious beings who influenced the mind that had given him the deepest scars. Luckily, Sunny's resistance to mental attacks was now incomparably high.

Still, he wondered what Cassie would be capable of if she went all out and fully unleashed her power. Another scene surfaced in his mind... the scene of the battle in the drowned temple of Fallen Grace, where they had fought against the Defiled Sybil and her enthralled guardians.

Back then, he had seen the Echo of Torment fight against the Drowned... of course, Sunny had not known her true identity, yet. There had been a moment when the Echo raised one of the demons above the shallow water and gazed into its eyes- the abomination's body convulsed, an indescribable sound escaped from its mouth, and its lifeless body was tossed aside like a rag doll.

In that short moment... had the Echo burned all of the demon's memories away, turning the Drowned warrior into a mindless shell of a living being?

Speaking of, where was that Echo now?

That was not the most sinister aspect of Cassie's power, either. Having your memory wiped clean was frightening, true... but having it changed without your knowledge was much more terrifying. Could she enthrall people into becoming her marionettes? Turn loyal soldiers into zealous traitors? Create witnesses to non-existent crimes who sincerely believed in the truthfulness of their testimonies, so that no telepathic Aspect could disprove them?

The loss of one's identity was somehow more frightening than the loss of one's life.

Her Aspect was simply too insidious.

...In hindsight, perhaps the Knights of Valor were lucky to only have their memories manipulated a little.

'I know that there are limits and conditions to her power, but still... she must have hidden it really well, to not be included in the highest tier of Saints.’

Sunny looked around, studying the ruins of true Bastion. It was hard to say because of how damaged and dilapidated the castle was, but it seemed somewhat different from the illusory version. Currently, they were still on the remains of the outer wall. Below it was an ancient scene of devastation, with a few relatively intact sections of the ruin towering above.

At that moment, Cassie spoke in a calm tone:

"The true castle is hidden in the reflection of its illusory counterpart. If one knows how to look, they might glimpse the truth when looking at the lake. The false Bastion is a relatively safe place now that the Knights of Valor have eradicated most abominations around it. The true Bastion, however, is fraught with peril."

She paused for a moment.

"Whatever you do, do not drink the water from the lake. Do not look at reflections, and if a reflection moves strangely, walk away immediately. Above all else, do not answer if a reflection speaks to you. It will perceive it as an invitation."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

'Good thing I am always wary of mirrors thanks to Mordret.'

"Does it have something to do with that guy?"

Cassie understood who he was talking about without having to hear a name. She shook her head lightly,

"No, It is simply the nature of this place. The creatures in the lake are deadly, and so are those in the forest. However, the things that come from reflections are the most dangerous, because they are too strange and we know too little about them. We call them the Others."

She took a few more steps and continued calmly:

"We must be wary of the Others, but we also must be wary of the King. I can shelter you from the gazes of his servants because their swords are sheathed and slumbering. But if you see a sword that is drawn... hide Immediately. You must possess some ability to hide yourself - otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to traverse the lake."

Sunny nodded, prompting Cassie to add:

"You did well to come unarmed. Do not summon a sword of your own while you are here, even if it wasn't forged by Valor. Oh... and take this."

She handed him a smooth pebble without turning around. Sunny took it and noticed a complicated weave of elegant runes carved into its surface. The pebble felt slightly warm to the touch.

Cassie explained:

"This is a token that will allow you to pass most of the defensive enchantments. A counterfeit one... I made it myself. So, don't lose it."

She took a deep breath and then added, a hint of tension finally finding its way into her voice:

"If you do, the two of us will end up being invited to an audience with the King. One that we will remember for the rest of our lives..., our short and painful lives, that is."

Sunny smiled darkly, remembering the sight of Anvil facing that Great Titan in Antarctica.

He knew that the two of them would meet eventually. But it was too soon to meet the King of Swords, for now.

"Is he really here?"

Before Cassie could answer, a loud sound rolled across the ruins, disturbing the silence of the night. It was deep and melodious, ringing across the dark lake like thunder.

The sound of a hammer falling on an anvil.