1926 Enhanced Interrogation

A few moments later, Sunny led Cassie out of the stronghold. Since she was currently robbed of all her Abilities except for the Dormant one, she once again turned into the helpless girl he had once guided across the Forgotten Shore... which was both nostalgic and a little heartbreaking to see.

Sunny offered her his arm, and she took it tentatively. Their physical closeness earned him a few scornful looks from the passerby, who seemed ready to beat him up as if he was some kind of despicable philanderer... with a healthy dose of envy mixed into the anger, perhaps.

He was momentarily happy that Cassie could not see these reactions.

Ignoring the idiots, Sunny led her toward the Ivory Island.

'Essence exhaustion...'

Of course, it was the most obvious answer. He just failed to consider it seriously because Cassie, unlike Nephis and Sunny himself, had very rarely driven herself to that state before, if ever.

Which posed the question.

What exactly had made her burn so much essence?

The answer would have to wait until they were in a more private setting, though.

As they walked, Cassie asked quietly:

"Did something happen? I've been told that the King has left for the waking world. Considering how difficult it seems for him to do so... I assume that Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows had conquered the Citadel."

Sunny lingered with the answer.

Eventually, he said neutrally:

They did. However, there were complications: Cassie's grip tightened.

"What... what kind of complications?"

He grimaced.

It was not impossible for Master Sunless to know, but it was definitely a bit strange. Sadly, Cassie seemed to have been too agitated and left him no choice but to answer.

Sunny looked ahead somberly.

"There was... an ambush. Quite a devious one, so much so that it almost ended in disaster. Well, technically, it did. Several Saints of the Sword Army are dead."

He paused for a moment, and added:

"Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows are fine, though."

Cassie let out a shaky breath, then asked somberly:

"How?"

He sighed.

"Four daughters of the Queen, each a Transcendent of divine lineage. And four Reflections. They also..."

Sunny hesitated for a bit before finishing the sentence.

"They also knew too much, while we knew too little. There seems to be a powerful diviner among them, as well as a few talented spies hiding among us."

His tone was neutral, but it must have sounded like an accusation to Cassie. After all, she was the premier diviner of their small faction — no, of the entire Sword Army. This failure was, in no small part, the result of her personal failure to outperform the oracle of Clan Song... Death Singer, most likely.

It could be easily misjudged as an indictment of her inadequacy.

The delicate young woman grew quiet and did not speak again until they reached the Ivory Tower.

Sunny guided her to her personal quarters. As they were ascending the stairs, Cassie seemed to finally regain a little of her essence. She gently let go of his hand and walked the rest of the way on her own, tracing her fingers across the cold stone of the great pagoda's wall.

Hidden safely in her office and protected from any potential eavesdroppers by a few special Memories, they could finally talk. Luckily, Anvil himself was currently away, as well.

Cassie sat down in her chair and let out a heavy sigh.

"What exactly happened?"

Sunny leaned on the wall and crossed his arms, then said somberly:

"...They went after two Citadels at the same time. The army marched where we expected it to march, but a small team of powerful Saints went directly to our destination instead. They got there faster than us, as well... of course, we don't know if they lost anyone in the process, and how many. However, they killed the Great Terror defending the Citadel and claimed it. Needless to say, once we entered, we found ourselves inside Ki Song's Domain:'

With each word he spoke, Cassie's expression darkened. Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then continued:

"Worse than that, they were prepared to face me and Nephis in particular. Dark Dancer Revel and Moonveil managed to counter our Aspects almost perfectly. They might not have managed such a feat alone, but with Mordret's Reflections mirroring their powers, it worked. It... was a tough fight. I have not felt that pressured in a long, long while."

He slowly shook his head.

"We managed to drive them away in the end, but not without heavy losses. I even gained quite a valuable boon in the process. Still... it might have gone much better if you had not suffered essence exhaustion at the same time."

Finally, it was his turn to ask the questions.

"What did you do? How did you end up like that in the middle of the warcamp?"

Cassie did not answer immediately, troubled by what he had said.

After a while, she sighed and leaned back in the chair, touching her blindfold briefly.

"You mentioned that there are spies hidden among us."

Sunny nodded.

"I did."

Cassie's expression turned dark.

"I was... interrogating those spies. That was how I spent all my essence."

'Huh.'

He considered her words for a few moments.

"Since when have you become Valor's interrogator?"

A bitter smile twisted her lips. Cassie took a deep breath, then shrugged.

"Since Anvil decided to use me as one, I guess. The situation was... difficult. I don't know how Valor managed to sniff out and capture those spies, but they proved too seasoned and zealous to betray the secrets of their Queen. None of the Memories Valor usually uses to get the truth out of people worked, and their interrogators failed as well. Torturing these people would have been of no use, and so... I guess the King remembered that I can read people's memories. So, I was summoned."

Sunny scowled.

Cassie's Aspect did, indeed, make her a terrifying entity to those who wanted to keep secrets. However, violating the memories of captive people seemed like quite a vile affair, and one ill-suited for the beautiful Song of the Fallen.

The fact that Anvil had forced her to do something so dirty irked Sunny to no end. Not that he thought that Cassie was above doing such vile things... he was pretty sure that she would stop at nothing to achieve her goals, no matter how brutal or distasteful.

It was just that the King of Swords did not know that, so what right did he have to make such a demand of Cassie?

'That bastard. I'll kill him slowly one day.'

Or swiftly, from the shadows, and stabbing him in the back. Either worked.

Cassie, meanwhile, rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Reading someone's deep memories against their will can be an... intense process, for me. Especially if their mental resilience is high. That was why I had to expend a lot of essence to get the answers Anvil wanted."

She lingered for a few moments, and then suddenly smiled darkly.

"...But that was not the reason why I exhausted it completely."

Sunny walked over and sat on the chair across from her.

"Oh?"

Cassie nodded.

"No. The real reason is that I used that chance to get the answers I myself wanted. Answers about Song and Valor, which might lead us to learn more about the Sovereigns... perhaps even their weakness."

Her smile faltered, then disappeared.

"And I did. Although... it is only a thread. We will need to keep pulling it to find the truth."

Sunny leaned forward a little.

"And what exactly is that thread?"

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then raised a hand and pulled her blindfold off.

"It... will be easier if I simply show you."

He frowned, considering the implication of her words.

"You mean?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Before, I took a look at your Memories. Now, I will share mine with you, instead. If... if you'll accept them."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, suddenly reluctant to look in her beautiful eyes.

But then, he forced himself to gaze into them deeply.

His lips twisted into a dark smile.

"Sure. Why not?"

In the next moment, Cassie's eyes changed.

But Sunny once again failed to perceive the nature of that change, because he was suddenly pulled into a strange and stunningly vivid memory.