2209 Dark Waters  
  
"She's coming back!"  
  
The dark water boiled as the gargantuan horror rose from below. Its translucent carapace glistened like obsidian in the bright light of the luminous Memories, and the battered ships scattered, pushed aside by the turbulent waves.  
  
The creature was too large to discern its full shape. The people struggling to stay on the splintered decks could only catch glimpses of its harrowing visage: the enormous black eyes, the jagged line of a dreadful mandible, the forest of titanic limbs, the flexible antennae that reached almost a kilometer into the air...  
  
However, the ghastly depth dweller was not what made the people weary — they had battled plenty of terrifying abominations while sailing through the darkness of the Spine Ocean already, many of them far more dreadful and eerie than this one. The punitive expedition had lost most of its ship in the process, and plenty of warriors... but dying in a battle with Nightmare Creatures was a familiar thought to Awakened.  
  
The murderous demon that hid in the darkness above was far more unnerving.  
  
As the remaining forged Echoes tore into the dweller of the depths, breaking its carapace with steel fangs, their riders unleashed a barrage of harpoons and arrows into the cracks. Each was a powerful Memory capable of dealing immense harm — the Nightmare Creature sustained some dаmage, and while it was not seriously wounded yet, they managed to keep it away from the ships.  
  
"There!"  
  
Several brilliantly shining arrows shot into the air from the decks, chasing away the darkness.  
  
All darkness but a small formless mass of it.  
  
The mass of darkness was falling as it twisted to avoid one of the arrows, and was then torn apart by a bright beam of incinerating energy that shot from one of the decks.  
  
From within it, an enchanting figure was revealed.  
  
A beautiful fiend with alabaster skin and obsidian hair plummeted from the sky, her black wings folded to increase the speed. Her armor was torn and broken, and her mesmerizing face was painted by blood. Several arrows protruded from her sides, slowly collapsing into a rain of sparks.  
  
And yet, there was a chilling, cruel glint in the winged demon's onyx eyes.  
  
"Don't let her reach the ships!"  
  
But it was already too late.  
  
Revel was too close.  
  
She fell on the deck of the ship that had been washed away from the others at terrible speed, summoning her darkness at the last moment.  
  
The Ascended warriors scrambled to assume a defensive formation, the melee fighters rushing forward as their less resilient comrades stepped back. A wall of shields and a palisade of spears barred her path, sorcerous flames dispelling true darkness that shrouded her like a veil.  
  
The pursuers had long learned how to deal with her ambushes. She had managed to cull many of them at the start, eventually killing two of the Saints, but by now, every attack was a deadly gamble.  
  
It was too easy to get bogged down, surrounded, and cut down...  
  
However, that was alright. Because Revel was learning too.  
  
Usually, she would have shot past the deck, either severing bodies or catching an enemy or two to throw them overboard before disappearing into the darkness. But this time, she did not — instead, she simply crashed into the damaged deck like a cannonball, piercing it in a cloud of splinters.  
  
She pieced the entire ship.  
  
As cold water washed over her, a litany of shouts bloomed above the damaged ship.  
  
"She's gone!"  
  
"Damn it, the hull is breached!"  
  
"The cargo hold is flooding!"  
  
"She's in the water!"  
  
Revel spun and used her wings to push herself through the dark waters. Reaching the shattered hull of the ship, she used her claws to widen the breach, then sрun again and pushed herself off the enchanted wood, into the depths.  
  
Usually, the warriors of the Sword Domain would have been easily able to repair such damage to one of their ships. She would not have risked falling into the water, either, where the forged Echoes were waiting to tear her apart.  
  
But the battered fleet was currently being besieged by the underwater horror. The Echoes were away, trying to breach its thick carapace, and the ships were scrambling to stay at a distance.  
  
The vessel she had damaged would not sink, most likely... but they would take a lot of water, which would slow them down.  
  
And make them a sitting duck.  
  
Then, one of the four remaining Valor Saints would have to make a decision. They would either have to risk themselves to protect the damaged ship, or sacrifice it.  
  
Either way, Revel would get a chance to take down one more Transcendent.  
  
...If she survived that long, of course. She was not doing too well herself.  
  
Revel was strong, and Moonveil was strong as well. But it was just the two of them against seven Saints of the Sword Domain and their entire expedition. They had whittled the enemy numbers down over the long and harrowing voyage through the Spine Ocean... they killed some themselves, and killed others by luring the enemy ships into the maws of the horrors that dwelled in the darkness.  
  
But the enemy had whittled Revel and Moonveil down, as well.  
  
Their essence was exhausted. Their bodies were riddled with wounds. Their Memories and Echoes had been destroyed, and their supplies had long run dry. The dwellers of the depths were just as eager to consume them as they hungered for the souls and flesh of the pursuers.  
  
The Citadel was drawing closer.  
  
Revel knew that she would not be able to destroy the remains of the Sword Domain force before their ships reached the destination.  
  
So... the outcome of this nightmare would most likely be decided in a desperate three-way battle between the daughters of Queen Song, the Saints of the Sword Domain, and the guardian of the Spine Ocean Citadel.  
  
Whatever that horror was.  
  
Chances were, the Nightmare Creature that had made its nest in the Citadel would be the final victor.  
  
Gritting her teeth, she tore the remaining arrows out of her flesh and shattered them, feeling the poison that had coated the arrowheads struggle to paralyze her body.  
  
A powerful current threw her away as a severed antenna of the crustacean behemoth plummeted into the water from great heights, displacing countless tons of water.  
  
'No time to waste, now...'  
  
Folding her wings, Revel swam upward.  
  
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Some time later, she reached the crack in the dome of the dead god's spine that had served them as shelter last night. Dismissing her wings, Reven pushed her shredded body inside, fell on the uneven floor, and drew a laborious breath. Her Transcendent physique was already working on mending her mangled flesh, but even its staggering vitality was not enough to contend against the accumulated damage.  
  
Soon, a pale light ignited in the crevice, and she saw Moonveil.  
  
Her sister was sitting while leaning on a wall, her hands cradling a terrifying wound in her abdomen. She smiled weakly.  
  
"How was the hunt?"  
  
Revel tiredly shook her head.  
  
"They lost two ships. But they still have four Saints."  
  
She hesitated for a few moments, and then added quietly:  
  
"We will leave as soon as I replenish a little essence. The Citadel is only a few hours away, now..."  
  
Moonveil sighed.  
  
"Do you think we'll manage to defeat the guardian, kill the Sword Saints, and conquer it'?"  
  
Revel exhaled slowly.  
  
"Maybe... maybe not. We don't need to, anyway. Instead, we'll do what Seishan and Hel did — I'll stall the enemies, you'll find the Gateway and claim it."  
  
Her sister frowned.  
  
"...And just leave you to die?"  
  
Revel studied her face for a few moments, then laughed quietly.  
  
"Gods, it seems you really lost a lot of blood. What are you thinking about, fool? Once you claim the Citadel, it will become a part of Mother's Domain. And once it becomes a part of her Domain, she will deal with the Sword Saints — and the guardian. I just need to survive until then."  
  
Moonveil remained silent for a while.  
  
Eventually, she said softly:  
  
"Can you even manage that? I am warning you... don't even think about dying, Revel. I'll be very mad. Don't show your face in front of me if you do."  
  
Revel did not respond, sensing how little strength was left in her battered body.  
  
Finally, she smiled.  
  
"Alright. Since you insist…"