2228 Cloak and Dagger  
  
Left alone in the ruins of true Bastion, Effie sighed and summoned her spear, leaning on it as she waited for Mordret to come.  
  
Despite having just eaten Morgan's stew — which was surprisingly delicious, almost as if the cold princess had cooked it specifically to suit Effie's taste — she suddenly felt hungry again.  
  
Hunger was an old friend…  
  
'Ah, what a strange day.'  
  
Today was a strange day for everyone, but it was especially so for Effie, because she was experiencing it differently from Jet and Kai.  
  
That was because not too long ago — or rather, many days ago — a familiar voice had resounded in her mind, urging Effie to secretly return to the waking world. That had happened soon after Jest of Clan Dagonet attempted to kill Cassie, while she was on her way to be captured by the Queen of Worms.  
  
Back then, the seven Saints had all been ready to face Mordret and his Transcendent vessels once again. Effie placed her tether in the ruins of true Bastion, then used the commotion to leave the Dream Realm unseen. She rushed to the rendezvous point Cassie had mentioned, expecting to meet the blind seer herself.  
  
However, instead, the person waiting for her in an abandoned underground factory in the outskirts was none other than the Lord of Shadows.  
  
Effie returned to true Bastion after their meeting was concluded. Next thing she knew, she traveled back in time by a few hours — meaning that she had entered the loop, died, and returned to its start like everyone else, gods knew how many times.  
  
It was just that she retained her memories from before entering the loop for the second time now, which included the few hours of her first experience there, the meeting with the Lord of Shadows, and the things they had discussed.  
  
Stranger still, the signal she was supposed to receive days, or maybe even weeks after the meeting was already resounding in her head. Cassie's voice was weak and distant, as if she was struggling to pierce through some kind of interference to warn Effie, and she swiftly fell silent after delivering the message.  
  
It was so confusing that Effie's head hurt, but having been taught a bitter lesson by the Tomb of Ariel, she tried not to think about it too much.  
  
There was no time to think about anything too deeply, anyway.  
  
Effie had shared what she learned with Jet and Kai, and an hour later, here she was.  
  
All alone in the creepy ruins.  
  
Looking down, she studied the Black Beast Locket with a tense expression.  
  
'Can I really pull this off?'  
  
Somewhere in the illusory Bastion, an illusory moon was rising above an illusory castle. Once it rose high enough, a doorway between reality and the mirage would open in the heart of the ruins.  
  
Effie forced herself to smile.  
  
"Gods. What a mess…"  
  
\*\*\*  
  
The black dragon tore the vast expanse of the dark sky, the pale light of the shattered moon reflecting from his midnight scales. He flew with incredible speed, devouring distance with insatiable hunger. Perched on his back, Jet and Morgan were assaulted by powerful winds.  
  
Morgan was still paralyzed, but she could see where they were headed. Nightingale was flying south, leaving the lands surrounding the ruined castle far behind…  
  
He was flying toward the Stormsea.  
  
Soon enough, they left the broken lands behind.  
  
The crossing was sudden. One moment, they were surrounded by moonlit darkness, and the next, a pale light of dawn was bathing them in lilac splendor. The eerie visage of the shattered moon was gone, replaced by an empty and seemingly mundane sky.  
  
The world below was covered by the canopy of an ancient forest, and a river cut across it like a twisting ribbon.  
  
'...Why are they heading to the sea?'  
  
Before too long, Nightingale folded his mighty wings and plummeted toward the ground. Landing in a forest clearing, he remained motionless for a moment.  
  
Morgan was surprised to see Soul Reaper stand and jump from the back of the dragon, landing softly on the grass.  
  
Straightening, she turned and looked up at the great beast.  
The dragon opened his maw, and an otherworldly voice escaped from it, speaking strangely human words:  
  
"...Good luck."  
  
Soul Reaper grinned darkly.  
  
"Don't worry. I have two attempts, remember?"  
  
Nightingale remained silent for a few moments. Then, his mesmerizing voice resounded above the clearing once again:  
  
"Return alive."  
  
She laughed and turned away, waving a hand at him.  
  
"That... might be problematic."  
  
Morgan was feeling more and more bewildered, failing to understand why the three government Saints were splitting up, and what exactly was their goal.  
  
Before she could really scrutinize all the available information, though, the dragon spoke directly to her:  
  
"Hold tight, Lady Morgan."  
  
She could finally move again.  
  
…Frustratingly, it was only to fulfill his second command.  
  
As Morgan grasped the midnight scales, Nightingale soared into the sky once more. He flew south, flying faster and faster…  
  
Then, she felt it.  
  
The unmistakable sensation of traveling between worlds.  
  
Suddenly, the landscape below changed. The ancient forest was gone, replaced by the endless expanse of concrete, glass, and alloy — by the vast labyrinth of NQSC.  
  
'He returned to the waking world?'  
  
Just as Morgan thought that, though, she felt the fabric of reality ripple around her once again, and NQSC disappeared like a mirage.  
  
An alien sky surrounded her from all sides now, full of frigid winds and dancing snow.  
  
'He… used his tether. Wait!'  
  
Her eyes widened.  
  
Nightingale had come with her to Bastion. But before that… he had been anchored in the Song Domain.  
  
And he had never replaced his tether.  
  
Looking down, she saw a stone city clinging to the slope of a towering volcano. A great bridge connected the volcano to a snowy mountain, and at its end, a magnificent palace of black obsidian stood, surrounded by a raging blizzard.  
It was Ravenheart.  
  
'What…'  
  
Morgan's chest swelled with wariness and fury.  
  
There was even a sense of betrayal.  
  
Was Nightingale going to bring her as a gift to Song?  
  
Was their mysterious scheme nothing more than a ploy to switch sides and ingratiate themselves to the Queen of Worms?  
  
The dragon flew above the city, then fell through the blizzard, landing heavily on the great bridge. His terrifying talons scraped agaist the ancient stone, and a moment later, Morgan suddenly found herself suspended in the air.  
  
The dragon had disappeared.  
  
As she fell down, Nightingale — now in his human form — caught her, held her in his arms for a second, then helped her stand.  
  
He was wearing his armor of ivory scales, already summoning his weapons.  
  
The black palace… and its guardians… were just ahead of them, obscured by the raging snowstorm.  
  
Morgan was suddenly able to move again.  
  
'What the hell is going on? Ah... I don't even know anymore…'  
  
It definitely did not seem like Nightingale was preparing to surrender.  
  
Instead, he looked at her, hesitated for a few moments, and said:  
  
"Lady Morgan, I know that it will sound presumptuous, after what we've just done to you. But I… would really appreciate your help."  
  
She looked at him darkly, considering cutting his head off right then and there.  
  
It would be a bit sad, to rob the world of that face… but also quite satisfying.  
  
Of course, she did not forget to activate all her defensive charms, determined to not fall into the trap of his voice so thoroughly once again.  
  
"Help with what? What exactly are you three planning?"  
Nightingale remained silent for a bit, then looked in the direction of the dark palace tensely.  
  
Finally, he took a deep breath and said:  
  
"Well. I... intend to conquer Ravenheart."  
  
Morgan blinked, struggling to maintain her composure.  
Nightingale, meanwhile, continued.  
  
"Most of Song forces are far away in Godgrave, but I have no doubt that the Queen left a few of her most powerful puppets behind. There are the human defenders to consider, as well… it will be a dire battle, no doubt.   
  
I am determined to win it even if I have to fight alone, but I would feel much better if you were fighting by my side."  
  
He turned to her, hesitated for a moment, and added awkwardly:  
  
"I am sorry for taking the chance to face Mordret away from you. But, Lady Morgan. There can still be a silver lining — after all, he has not won yet. And even if you failed to stop him from taking Bastion, wouldn't helping conquer Ravenheart instead be a kind of victory, as well?"  
  
Morgan stared at him silently.  
  
The Queen of Worms had sent her brother, Mordret, to conquer Bastion — the Great Citadel of Clan Valor. Morgan herself had been sеnt back to stop him… but Nightingale was offering her to help him conquer Ravenheart, the Great Citadel of Clan Song, instead?  
  
That… that…  
  
Was deeply ironic and completely insane, but also made a strange kind of sense?  
  
It would not be an easy thing to accomplish, though, with or without her.  
  
Morgan raised an eyebrow.  
  
"What about the other two, then? What are they doing?"  
  
Nightingale looked at her with surprise.  
  
He lingered for a few moments, then said neutrally:  
  
"Why, what else? Effie is in Bastion, while Jet is approaching Night Garden. They are going to conquer the other two Great Citadels, of course…