2230 Lord's Gift  
  
Effie moved slightly, shifting her weight away from the spear to be able to raise it quickly, if need be.  
  
Looking at Mordret calmly, she said:  
  
"Actually, I'm also curious. Why are you still wasting your time here? Don't you know that your father is currently fighting Ki Song? If you don't hurry up and make yourself scarce, she'll kill him all on her own. That'd be pretty sad, right? I mean, since you're obsessed with revenge to a demented degree."  
  
Mordret's smile widened a little.  
  
"Oh, thank you for your concern. To be honest, I'll be pretty inconsolable if someone kills him before me. Incensed, even… and very, very cross with the person who robbed me of the pleasure of killing him myself. No need to worry, though — I'll depart for Godgrave as soon as I'm finished here."  
  
He looked at Effie with an openly disdainful expression.  
  
"...Shouldn't take me long to sort things out, anyway."  
  
She grinned.  
  
"You say that, but in all these years, you've never once dared to try crawling into my soul. Everyone goes around being all scared of Your Royal Highness, Prince Mordret of Nowhere, but I always suspected that you're all talk and no bite… well, figuratively speaking. You know, some of us were actually hunting Nightmare Creatures and fighting for survival each and every goddamn day while you sat around in a perfectly safe prison cell, doing nothing."  
  
Effie chuckled.  
  
"Even Morgan is better than you — and she literally carries her silver spoon wherever she goes, mind you. She was brave enough to leave her soul wide open, at least… and yet, what have you done despite receiving such a brazen invitation? Nothing at all. In all these months, you had not challenged her to a soul duel. Why, because doing so would have actually put your life at risk? The rest of us have to take that risk all the time, you know. Aren't you nothing but a coward?"  
  
Mordret continued to look at her with a pleasant smile.His strange mirror-like eyes seemed to shine in the darkness with the pale radiance of the reflected moonlight, making him look quite eerie.  
  
"How unexpectedly eloquent. Are you per chance stalling for time, Saint Athena?"  
  
Effie smiled darkly.  
  
"...Oops. You caught me."  
  
He shook his hеad.  
  
"Quite a clumsy attempt. What is your plan, anyway? Surely, you are not planning to fight me and my distinguished collection of Transcendent attires alone. That'd be a bit too much, even for someone as unwise as you."  
  
There it was, the moment of truth.  
  
The moon must have already climbed quite high above the illusory Bastion.  
  
Effie took a deep breath.  
  
"It sounded like you called me a fool. If a madman calls someone a fool, though, that ought to be a compliment... right? Oh, by the way, Your Highness… I wanted to ask. Do you remember the Lord of Shadows?"  
  
Mordret's smile grew a little forced.  
  
"The Lord of Shadows? Ah, I do… he gave me quite a fright, the last time we met. An unusual man, to say the least. What about him?"  
  
Effie shook her head slowly.  
  
"Well, it seems that you left an impression, as well. Enough so that he wanted to send you a little gift."  
  
Surrounded by the towering figures of his Transcendent vessels, Mordret allowed himself to frown slightly.  
  
"A gift, you say? He shouldn't have."  
  
As his vessels moved, Mordret asked pleasantly:  
  
"What is the present?"  
  
Effie took a step back as she activated the Black Beast Locket and summoned what was hidden inside it into the world.  
  
'I can't believe I let that creepy bastard talk me into this…'  
  
Her locket contained the Beast Farm, and it sometimes served as a mobile base for the Wolf Army, as well.  
  
At the moment, however, there was something else taking residence there.  
  
Something that made her skin crawl, and cold sweat run down her spine. As if she was sitting on a bomb.  
  
Effie flashed Mordret a wide smile.  
  
"Oh, nothing much… well, see for yourself."  
  
In the next moment,something massive appeared on the rubble between her and Mordert, obscuring him from view.  
  
It was a towering mountain of grey flesh overgrown with scarlet moss, a hundred revolting limbs extending from it like a dreadful forest.  
  
The moment it escaped the locket, Effie suddenly found herself unable to breathe.  
  
A terrifying presence crashed into her, pressing her into the ground. Her eyes widened, and an involuntary groan escaped from her lips.  
  
She couldn't even look directly at the creature, afraid that her mind would be harmed by what she saw — not that she would, determined to avoid looking at it at all costs.  
  
Well, it wasn't every day that one found themselves mere steps away from a Cursed Demon.  
  
A Cursed Demon who was already awakening from unnatural slumber, having been somehow lulled to it by the Lord of Shadows.  
  
The forest of revolting limbs stirred, and countless monstrous eyes suddenly opened all across the grey expanse of the harrowing being's formless body.  
  
...Effie was already running away by then, headed for the point in the ruins where true Bastion and its illusory copy were connected.  
  
Mordret, however, was a few moments too late to react. It took him that long to realize what he was looking at, to begin with.  
  
But it was already too late by the time he did — precisely because he had looked.  
Because there were creatures in the Dream Realm that could sense someone's gaze, and gaze back.  
  
The Cursed Demon became aware of Mordret at the same time as Mordret became aware of it.  
  
Effie sensed the ruins shudder and felt a deafening noise wash over her as she ran.  
  
'...Don't look back.'  
  
Either the Cursed Demon would kill Mordret, or it would not. Either way, the Prince of Nothing would be preoccupied for a while — hopefully, until the battle in Godgrave ended.  
  
Unleashing a Cursed One in the heart of the Sword Domain was… a suboptimal choice, to say the least.But Effie would be able to switch true Bastion and its illusory version back after conquering the Citadel, thus making the former a prison for the terrifying creature and containing it within the Great Mirror.  
  
They were desperate enough to take the risk, and Mordret was dangerous enough to take no chances.  
  
Using all her incredible physical prowess, Effie ran across the ruins like a bolt of lightning.