1640 Harrowing Reality

The sky was black, with pale stars shining coldly in the distance. They were much paler than the bright constellations of the illusory realm, though, because there was something brighter in the night sky, spanning its vast expanse.

The fragments of the shattered moon.

The moon was up there, above him, but it was viciously broken into countless pieces. Some of them were vast, like jagged continents, floating in the forlorn darkness. Some were infinitely small, painting the sky like clouds of starlight vapor. The trail of moon shards formed a heavenly river that stretched beyond the horizon, illuminating the hidden world with ghostly light.

The sight of it was both terrifying and humbling. Sunny did not know what kind of blow could have been so harrowing as to fracture even the moon... or if the moon had been broken from within, like the shell of a cosmic egg... all he knew was that seeing the broken sky filled him with a deep sense of terror.

He rarely felt true fear after becoming a Transcendent, but the true face of Bastion was one of the few things that could still make him shudder.

Looking away from the celestial river, Sunny gazed at the distant castle. The castle existed both in the illusory world and in the terrifying reality. However, while it stood tall and proud in the former... It was a desolate ruin in the latter.

The mighty walls had collapsed. The tall towers were toppled. Bastion was like a mountain of fractured white stones, the shape of a once-magnificent citadel barely recognizable in its ghastly crookedness. Here and there, one could still recognize the lines of partially unscathed buildings and courtyards, but they only seemed like an epitaph on a towering gravestone.

Across the lake, where the thriving city had been a moment before, a monumental wall of towering dark trees rose to the broken sky.

The illusory Bastion had been surrounded by a forest once, too - a forest that was one enormous living being, a horrid Titan with which the Knights of Valor had waged war for decades. Eventually, it was Anvil, still a Saint back then, who had destroyed it.

But here in the hidden reality, the forest was untouched, and there were many creatures inhabiting it that were much more terrifying than that Titan had been.

Because the real Bastion... was a Death Zone.

In fact, there were dreadful beings dwelling in the deep, dark lake as well.

There was one thing in common between the real Bastion and the beautiful mirage created by the Demon of Imagination, though, Both in the illusory castle and the real castle, enchanted lanterns were shining softly in the darkness of the night.

Granted, there were much fewer of them here.

'I need to hurry.

The real lake was much more dangerous than its copy. Sunny was capable of facing its inhabitants in a battle, but he wasn't capable of doing so unnoticed. And so, he dove down once again, falling like a stone into the depths of the cold water.

The bottom of the lake was much different in this hidden, true world. Out in the illusory Bastion, it was rather mundane, covered by mud and rare stones.

Here, though...

A drowned city rested on the bottom of the lake. The graceful buildings were constructed from the same white stone as the castle, and their empty windows were like dark eyes that watched Sunny as he passed by. The city must have been beautiful once, but now it was cold and empty, with signs of horrible devastation visible on every street.

The streets themselves were littered with bones.

Countless human skulls lay on the cracked cobblestones, looking like pale fungus. Sunny did not know what doom had befallen the people of the drowned city, but he made sure to lighten his body and swim instead of walking on the ancient roads. He did not want to disturb them, and knew that it was dangerous to do so, on top of that.

The city was built at the foot of a tall mountain, which was now submerged in water, with only its peak rising above it. The ruins of the great castle lay on that peak

That was also where Casale was supposed to be waiting for him, too.

Sunny calmly traversed the fallen city, making sure to hide from its current Inhabitants. There were plenty of harrowing Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the drowned ruins - he had studied their habits and hunting grounds before, but abominations of higher Ranks were supremely unpredictable.

Luckily, Sunny's ability to remain unseen and unsensed in the shadows had become much more potent since his days in the Dark City, so even these horrors could not easily spot him.

He moved closer and closer to the mountain. From time to time, grotesque carcasses appeared from the darkness, each impaled by a single straight sword.

This was Anvil's work - his domain extended into the real version of Bastion, as well, and although the King of Swords did not rule the entire area, he was the master of the ruined castle. Anything that tried to crawl out of the water and challenge him ended up dead.

Knights of Valor were often battling Nightmare Creatures in the forest, too. However, they were doing so without the support of their king. That was because he used the dark forest as a crucible to forge better warriors for his army-the dreadful abominations inhabiting it were the whetstone against which Valor's elites were sharpened.

Sunny heard that after Antarctica, Morgan had been sent into the forest and ordered not to return until she redeemed her mistake. She eventually emerged from it two years later, as a Saint.

He did not know if this was true, and couldn't ask, because this information wasn't supposed to be known to any outsider to begin with.

...His preparations had not been in vain. Sunny followed a predetermined path and managed to reach the mountain without disturbing any of the Nightmare Creatures or stumbling on any of Anvil's swords. Finally, he ascended the steep slope and cautiously surfaced near the ruins.

There were lanterns burning high above, on the remnants of the broken wall, and human silhouettes patrolling its length. They were Knights of Valor the best of the best, each of them at least a Master.

Another human silhouette was standing on the edge of a toppled tower that lay on the ground, its roof protruding into the lake. This one did not carry a luminous lantern, waiting patiently in the darkness.

It was Cassie. Illuminated by the pale light of the shattered moon, motionless like a statue, her delicate figure looked even more arresting. Her beauty had already been breathtaking... here in the hidden realm of true Bastion, it seemed simply enthralling.

And yet, strangely enough, Sunny felt his gaze wandering away from her.

Somewhat surprised, he realized that it was her presence... unlike most Saints, it did not demand attention, but instead dampened it. It was really... more akin to absence than presence.

Perhaps it had been for a long while, but he simply did not notice it.

Forcing himself to concentrate on the slender figure, Sunny silently emerged from the water and walked over to Cassie. He made no noise whatsoever, and yet, she turned her head slightly to face him.

"You've come."

Sunny dismissed the Quintessence Pearl and smiled in the darkness.

"Of course. It's not polite to make a lady wait. And I am nothing if not polite... one could say…”