1861 Homecoming

Thick fog shrouded the shores of a nebulous sea. Below it, waves continued their eternal assault on the indifferent barrier of land, dreaming of washing it away. They rustled quietly, just like they had rustled for eons. Not far away, the water was louder — there, a wide river fell into the sea, a deep inlet created by its estuary.

Currently, there was a group of riders moving along the shore. Their steeds were Echoes of slain abominations; their enchanted armor was damp with morning dew. Their vermilion cloaks bore the insignia of Clan Valor.

They were Knights and Squires who had been left behind to protect the fringes of the Sword Domain, currently on patrol.

As they approached the estuary, the leader of the patrol — a seasoned Knight in heavy armor — raised a fist to command the rest to stop. He took a canteen off his belt, drank some water, and then listened to the murmur of waves.

Dreadful abominations would come from the depths of the Stormsea sometimes and swim upriver, threatening the lands beyond. The weaker ones would be slain in the shallows by patrolmen like them, but if a truly powerful Nightmare Creature emerged from the depths, they would have to retreat and prepare to fight it at Rivergate, the fortress of Clan Dagonet.

The shores of Stormsea were a strange place. Nights here were much longer than they were deeper inland, and the stars were much brighter. The sun never quite rose above the horizon, drowning the world in ethereal twilight during the day. Time flowed slowly, and life seemed fleeting. In the mornings, white fog veiled the world.

The Knight frowned and gazed into the fog.

Today, the sea sounded strange.

"Summon your weapons."

The patrolmen did as he said. They Echoes turned to face the shore, each baring their fangs.

It seemed that a battle was upon them. Some felt tense because most of the Sword Domain warriors had followed the king to war, hoping to punish the wicked queen of Song. Others remained calm — no matter how many warriors had left, the garrison of Rivergate was still strong, and the fortress itself was still impregnable.

No matter what horror crawled from the sea, they would deal with it.

…A few moments later, however, their confidence was shattered.

The eyes of the warriors widened, and their faces paled. Even the Echoes seemed daunted, a few of them shrinking back in response to the fear of their masters.

A vast shadow appeared in the fog, towering above the shore like a dark mountain. Then, it drew closer, dwarfing the world.

The patrolmen had to crane their necks just to guess the scale of the vague shadow.

Their captain was petrified.

"W—wha…"

Before he could finish the sentence, the dark mountain was almost upon them, its shape finally revealed from the fog.

It was the bow of a titanic ship.

"Back!"

They did not have time to react before the world shuddered.

The estuary was deep, but not deep enough. The gargantuan vessel rammed the underwater slope of the shore at full speed, splitting it apart. A vast gorge opened in the ground, reaching far inland, and the triumphant waves finally had their dreams fulfilled — the roaring water rushed into the abyssal chasm, causing the river to change course.

For a few moments, the bow of the ship flew even higher, and then slowly plummeted down. When it fell, there was another quake. Countless tons of foaming water were displaced and thrown into the sky, and the titanic vessel slid forward hundreds of meters before finally coming to rest, beached and leaning slightly to the side.

The tranquil shore had turned into a scene of utter devastation. The scale of it was so immense that the human mind struggled to come to terms with it. The colossal ship lay on the sand like a dark mountain, rivers of water cascading down from its ancient hull. The barnacles encrusting the lower parts of it were like a map of bygone eras, glistening bleakly in the dim radiance of twilight.

The patrolmen had been thrown to the ground by the successive quakes. Still stunned and horrified, they slowly climbed to their feet. Some raised their weapons hesitantly, others tried to mount their monstrous steeds.

But all of them were staring at the monumental silhouette of the beached vessel.

That was why they all noticed when a human figure appeared on the bow, so high above them that it looked no larger than an ant.

The figure stood motionlessly for a few moments, gazing down. Then, it took a step forward and fell, landing on the tilted slope of the ship's hull. The figure slid down the ancient wood, gaining terrible speed, then pushed itself off its surface and plummeted down.

He landed into the shallow water with a splash, then straightened gracefully and took a step forward.

It was a man clad in dark leather armor. He was tall and slender, with pale skin and raven-black hair. His face was sharp and thin — not exactly handsome, but at the same time strangely beautiful. His eyes were like two pools of liquid silver that reflected the world back on itself.

His gaze was cold and chilling, as if a deep dark ocean was barely contained beneath the thin film of mirror-like silver.

Despite the fact that the man was alone, the crowd of patrolmen reeled back, each overcome by sudden dread.

He walked across the shallow water, surrounded by swirling mist, and stepped onto the shore. There, the man knelt, reached down, and carefully — almost tenderly — picked up a handful of sand. Ignoring the warriors of the Sword Domain, he looked at it for a while, then slowly made a fist and let the sand slip through his fingers.

His lips twisted slightly, forming a dark, bitter, terrifying smile.

Standing up, the man turned his gaze to the patrolmen and walked toward them with unhurried steps.

They gripped their weapons tighter.

The Knight who had led the patrol glanced at the titanic ship, then asked hoarsely:

"The Night Garden… who are you? Why are you here?"

The man answered in a calm tone:

"Me? I am Prince Mordret of Valor, the rightful heir of these lands."

The eyes of the Knight widened slightly, while Mordret added with a cold smile:

"And I am here to take what is mine."

The patrolmen shuddered.

Their leader gritted his teeth.

"It's you! You vile creature… the only thing that we will give you is death!"

Continuing to walk in their direction, Mordret laughed.

"I see someone has a very high opinion of himself."

His laughter stopped abruptly, and he pierced the Knight with an eerie, frightening gaze.

"But are you sure that you are worthy?"

A moment later, more figures appeared on the bow of the Night Garden.

Mordret smiled.

"Because I have thirteen Transcendent bodies on that boat. I am also the sole ruler of the Stormsea, the master of the Night Garden, and the owner of all the Citadels of the South. Well… I guess, technically, the Citadels belong to Queen Song. But why care about the technicalities?"

The Knight paled.

His hands trembled as he raised his sword, and a single word escaped from his lips:

"T—traitor!"

The smile disappeared from Mordret's face, replaced by infinite coldness.

In the next moment, something whistled in the air, and the Knight fell to his knees. His head rolled off his neck and fell into the sand, which was painted red by the torrent of steaming blood.

Mordret shifted his gaze to the remaining warriors.

He remained silent for a few moments, and then smiled pleasantly.

"One should not forget his manners, don't you think? Ah, but today is a special occasion. On such a special day, I am inclined to be forgiving. So... the rest of you may go. Go on, run away. Oh, and tell your masters…"

As the warriors of Valor slowly backed away, then turned to run, he watched them escape silently, and added with a dark gleam in his mirror-like eyes:

"Tell them that I am coming."

Mordret closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

"...I am coming home."