2069 : Fragments of War (6)

In a world submerged in eternal darkness, a pale light was shining on the vast expanse of flowing water. However, it was unable to penetrate the dreadful depths of the subterranean ocean, reflecting from its surface like the map of a night sky.

The gentle light was emanating from a beautiful woman who was sitting lonesomely on the rough surface of a stone cliff, looking at the dark water with a distant expression. She was delicate and lovely, with a slender build and a soft, enchanting face. Her hair was white, and her eyes seemed to glimmer with the afterglow of pale moonlight.

The corpses of the drowned lay scattered around the radiant beauty, staring into the darkness with empty eyes.

She was Moonveil, one of the seven Transcendent princesses of Song.

Looking into the distance, Moonveil sighed and turned her head slightly, listening to the darkness.

There were few sounds in the silence of the subterranean ocean. The distant hum of the great waterfalls that fed it, the tranquil murmurs of the flowing water, the eerie song of the powerful winds. The splintered pieces of a broken ship scraping quietly against the jagged stone.

And there, coming closer, another sound…

The powerful beating of someone's mighty wings.

Before too long, another figure landed on the cliff, wreathed in darkness.

It was a beautiful demoness with flawless alabaster skin and tenebrous eyes, her silken hair falling down like glossy obsidian. Two horns crowned her head, and her black wings folded to wrap themselves around her shoulders, hanging down like a leathery cloak.

Revel was effortlessly carrying a human corpse, drops of water falling from it to the wet stone. Considering her towering height, it looked like a toy in her pale hand.

She placed the dead man gently on the ground and straightened, looking at him with a somber expression.

Moonveil sighed.

"...No survivors?"

Revel lingered for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"No. And I don't think that I'll find any more bodies, either… whoever is missing was probably swallowed by whatever it is that dwells in these cursed waters."

The expedition the two of them led had departed from the Hollows of Breastbone Reach during a rainstorm. Overcoming countless perils, they navigated the treacherous network of rivers permeating the flooded jungle on an enchanted ship. Both Revel and Moonlight had to test the limits of their power, not holding anything back… even then, it was barely enough to survive.

Then, they crossed into the Hollows of the Second Rib and followed the powerful currents across its dark length, eventually plummeting down toward the Spine Ocean.

The journey had been long and difficult. Simply keeping the ship from being torn apart or crushed by the current was a tall task… and then, there were all the abominable monsters populating the hollow expanse of the titanic rib. There was the jungle itself, too — the vast fields of man-eating seaweed, the slithering vines hanging from the darkness above, the island-sized water lilies that enchanted the sailors and then swallowed the enthralled humans with terrible maws…

The closer to the Spine they traveled, the worse it became. They lost many good men and women before even reaching the subterranean ocean.

But they did reach it, in the end.

It was just that the ship had been shattered during the tumultuous crossing, and the crew had been drowned in the dark waters or killed by the creatures dwelling in the depths.

Now, the two of them were all who remained.

They stayed silent for a while, looking at the drowned corpses.

Eventually, Moonveil sighed.

"It's of no use. Mother's authority does not reach here, so they won't rise."

Revel lowered her head somberly.

The ship was destroyed, the crew was dead… and worse than that, they could not even retreat.

That was because the Call of Nightmare was assaulting their minds like a demented litany of ghostly cries, indicating that there were Seeds blooming somewhere beneath the surface. The Spine Ocean was a deadly trap, preventing them from retreating back into the waking world.

There was no way out.

Moonveil smiled.

"So, what? Are we going to die here?"

Revel glacned at her sister, who looked like a delicate doll in front of her towering Transcendent form, and shrugged.

"We might."

Moonveil chuckled.

"Is it strange that I feel relieved to know that I'll die beyond the reach of our mother's authority?"

Revel frowned.

"Yes. Of course, it does… you are her daughter. She would not have turned your body into a puppet."

Her sister sighed.

"I guess you are right."

With that, she looked around and asked in a curious tone:

"Do you think we can escape?"

Revel considered the answer for a few moments. Eventually, she nodded her horned head.

"I doubt we can climb back into the Second Rib. Even if we do, we won't survive the journey back to the Breastbone Hollows. The rainstorm has long passed, so the rivers would have dried out… it's a fool's errand."

She looked south.

"No, our only chance is to find the Citadel, conquer it, and use its Gateway to return to the waking world safely. So, that is what we must attempt to do."

Her expression darkened.

"However… there is a complication."

Moonveil titled her head a little.

"Our pursuers? Have you seen them?"

Revel smiled darkly.

"Yes. They are a few dozen kilometers away. Their ships were destroyed while crossing into the Spine, as well, but many more of them have survived. They have plenty of monstrous aquatic Echoes — some natural, some artificial. It's an entire fleet."

The Sword Army had sent an expedition into the Spine Ocean, as well. However, while Revel had been sent to conquer the Citadel, it was merely a secondary goal for them.

Their main goal was to kill Revel, and they were equipped well to achieve it. There were seven Sword Saints and a small army of Masters pursuing the daughters of the Queen, including a member of one of Valor's branch families. The forged Echoes brought by them into the subterranean ocean were both well-suited for braving its dark expanse and fearsome.

…Now, the members of the pursuing expedition were trapped in the spine of the dead deity, just like Revel and Moonveil were.

Revel looked at her sister for a while, and then smiled.

"Veil… I suddenly had a thought."

Moonveil raised an eyebrow.

"Is it, perhaps, a sane and benign thought of forgetting all our grudges and differences to form a pact of camaraderie with the Saints of the Sword Army? To fight side by side with fellow humans as allies and survive in this harrowing place together?"

Not receiving an answer immediately, she sighed.

"Uh-on."

Revel looked in the direction where the enemy was gathering their forces, hidden by darkness, and said evenly:

"It strikes me that, while the Song Domain can grow stronger by conquering the Spine Citadel, the Sword Domain can grow weaker by losing these seven Saints and the Citadels controlled by them. So, even if we die here… as long as we die after making sure that they die first, the situation on the surface will still improve in our favor."

Moonveil closed her radiant eyes for a moment.

"Ah… I see. As expected."

She rose from the cold stone and looked where Revel was looking, as well.

After a while, she said:

"But why can't we do both? Kill the Saints... and conquer the Citadel. Wouldn't that be better?"

Revel smiled darkly.

"Yes. Let's do both… brave this dark ocean, survive the pursuers, and take the Citadel. Why settle for anything less?"

Spreading her wings, she lifted her sister off the ground gently, and then leaped into the air.