2070 : Fragments of War (7)

A shattered moon shone upon a shattered castle. The castle had always been a ruin, but now it was reduced to rubble. The rubble used to be surrounded by a deep lake, but now, the lake was gone.

Its bottom had been revealed, in all its mystery and horror.

Standing on the mound of debris that had once been a great rampart, Kai was looking down. Far below him, ancient ruins glistened in the pale moonlight. They were covered in mud and seaweed, but he could still recognize the shapes of beautiful stone edifices and smaller buildings beneath the mud.

The castle stood on a mountain, and there was a prosperous and sprawling city surrounding the mountain… or had been, once.

Others would not see, but Kai did. Buried in the mud, hidden in the darkness of the ancient buildings… there were human bones. There were too many of them to count. Myriads of skulls were staring at him with empty gazes, as if blaming him for being alive.

Millions of people must have perished here once, a long time ago. Some of the skeletons were intact, and some were crushed. He did not know what had killed the inhabitants of the ancient city, but whatever it was, their deaths had been sudden and brutal.

Perhaps it was the great flood that had drowned the city, burying it under the mass of water for thousands of years.

Perhaps the great flood had happened on the same day the moon had been shattered.

Looking at the drowned city that sprawled across the entire basin of the lake, Kai wondered if there was a similar ruin at the bottom of the real Mirror Lake.

No… this was the real Mirror Lake. The Bastion he was familiar with was merely an illusion.

It was still strange to think about that.

Letting out a heavy sigh, he looked away from the ruins of the ancient city and turned his gaze to the sky.

The shattered moon was always the same, and Kai knew better than to stare at it too much. It could not tell him anything about time, anyway… however,he knew that there was going to be a full moon in the illusory version of Bastion today.

Which meant that, for a short time, reality and illusion would overlap a little, allowing for passage from one to another.

...Which meant that if Mordret wanted to infiltrate the capital of the Sword Domain, he had to do it today. There would be another battle, without a doubt… and a much more ferocious one than all the previous ones.

If that was even possible.

The ruin of the castle had not been turned to rubble without a reason, after all, and the bottom of the lake was not revealed by accident. For the past month, Kai and the other Saints whom Morgan of Valor had recruited were battling the Prince of Nothing in this dreamlike land, slowly changing the very landscape of true Bastion.

Even the ancient forest on the other side of the hollow lake was now charred and devastated, its outer edges burned to ash.

The bitter clash between the children of the King of Swords had been like a cataclysm, eroding the very land that was supposed to be their birthright. Looking at the scene of utter devastation surrounding him, Kai could not help but feel relieved that Morgan had decided to hide the illusory Bastion away and repel her brother's siege in this desolate place. Otherwise, the loss of life would have been more unbearable than during the Southern Campaign.

He had not seen a battle that calamitous yet… except maybe for the siege of Verge, where they had faced the Defiled Legion and the abominable First Seeker. That one, he still saw in his nightmares sometimes.

Miraculously, the defenders of Bastion had held their ground for an entire month. It was partially due to their own resolve and prowess, partially due to how tenacious Morgan of Valor and enchanted body were, and partially due to sheer luck.

But mostly, it was because of the battlefield she had chosen.

Here in true Bastion, harrowing creatures whom Morgan called the Others dwelled.These nebulous beings inhabited reflections, and therefore, the powers of her brother were stifled.

Kai and the other defenders had only encountered the Others a few times, and even then, it had almost cost them their lives. But Mordret had to face these strange and alien beings every time he wanted to use the powers of his Aspect, which meant that he was fighting a war on two fronts.

One war against his sister and her Saints, and another war in the reflections.

That was why he had not been able to crush the defenders of the ruined castle yet despite his appalling power... yet... and that was why Bastion had not already fallen into the hands of the Song Domain.

At least that was how it seemed on the surface. Kai, nevertheless, felt uneasy… he somewhat knew Mordret, after all, having conquered two Nightmares and fought in Verge together.

When did that man not have a scheme hidden up his sleeve?

Something was not how it looked here, but Kai did not know what, and had no evidence to prove his suspicion.

In any case, Bastion could not fall. The Sword Domain was currently in a desperate situation, and they could not allow it to collapse just yet.

Looking down, Kai rubbed his face tiredly and soared into the air, flying smoothly to where a fire was burning in the heart of the ruins, and the tantalizing aroma of food was rising above an alloy pan.

As he landed gently on the ground and greeted the other Saints, a strong gale of wind crashed into the remains of a crumbling wall protecting the fire, and a small pebble fell from it into the pan.

Before it could plummet into the fragrant stew, however, Princess Morgan raised a hand and caught it without ever looking up. Her reaction was just as fast as one would expect from a Saint, but it was her senses that amazed Kai. Did she catch the pebble simply by hearing it brush against air, or was there a Memory she possessed that granted her complete awareness of her surroundings?

It was a good catch regardless.Having a dirty pebble fall into their stew would have made the meal less enjoyable.

Kai smiled and opened his mouth to say something.

But before he could, Morgan spoke first:

"Good catch. I know."

He looked at her blankly.

Letting out a sigh, the princess raised her head and looked at him with sunken eyes.

"...It will be ready in a few moments."

Her usually sharp gaze seemed a little dulled, and she looked a little disheveled. Morgan of Valor had always been neat and collected, maintaining flawless decorum and cold composure even in the middle of most dreadful fights. Her tidiness was a bit compulsive, even.

But now, her clothes were in disarray, and her beautiful raven hair was begging for a brush. She looked drained and exhausted — quite understandably so, considering that they all were.

It was just that, when Kai had seen her several hours ago, Morgan seemed much more full of vitality.

Looking at her now, he frowned.

Something… was wrong with Morgan of Valor.