2071: Fragments of War (8)

It was a silent kind of terror, and one Kai was unfamiliar with. Meeting a new fear was almost amusing, like finding a new friend.

Truth be told, Kai was a fearful person. He had always been stifled by fear… first by fear of failure, shame, loneliness, and rejection, then by fear of death, agony, loss, and tragedy.

And regret, most of all.

It was just that he had gotten better at ignoring his fears as time went by, to the point that people often mistook him for someone who was innately brave. But he wasn't — not at all like his friends and companions, who seemed naturally fearless to an almost reckless degree.

Take Effie, for example…

Noticing the strange state of Morgan, she did not even grow tense. Instead, she looked at the pot of stew with a wistful expression, seemingly only worried about it being overturned. Her hand, meanwhile, moved closer to the shaft of her spear, which lay nearby.

Or Jet. Soul Reaper remained where she was, leaning comfortably on a boulder. That woman truly knew how to look comfortable anywhere… her icy blue eyes were following Morgan intently, but her expression remained calm and relaxed. A little amused, even.

Aether and Bloodwave did not seem to notice the strangeness, but at least Naeve seemed to be a normal human. He had grown still, throwing a cautious look at the princess.

It was a relief.

Kai, meanwhile, furtively looked around to see if there were any reflective surfaces around them. It was no surprise that the first thing his mind went to were the Others… there had already been an incident where one of those beings assumed the form of a human, after all.

That time, they had only avoided disaster because of Kai. The copy had spent several hours with them, pretending to be Aether… and although they did not know it then, the thing was growing stronger with every instance of someone witnessing it, addressing it, and otherwise acknowledging it as the real person in any way.

It was just that, no matter what it said,its words were neither truth nor a lie. Kai sensed the strange and eerie discrepancy almost immediately after returning from his patrol — that was how they managed to destroy the Other while only losing torrents of blood instead of losing people.

Aether himself had slept through the whole thing, only learning that someone out there had been walking around wearing his face when the battle was over.

If Morgan had been replaced by the Other…

She was surrounded by five people, and had been for at least an hour. If this thing functioned in the same manner as the previous one, then its existence had already been acknowledged to a frightening degree.

Kai felt his heart beating wildly, but then took a deep breath and calmed himself.

No, that was not the case. Earlier, she said… that she knew her catch was good. Those words were true, which was different from how the words of the previous Other had felt.

Then again, maybe the first one had simply not reached the point of mimicking human intent yet.

Unlike this one.

Morgan gave Kai a dubious look and shook her head.

"I'm not the Other."

Noticing his startled expression, she chuckled.

"It was written all over your face."

The first statement was true, but the second was not. Kai hesitated for a few moments, then looked at his companions and gave them a small nod.

Effie removed her hand from the spear and used it to cover a yawn.

"Is it..."

Morgan nodded.

"Yes, it's ready. Help yourselves."

The seven of them shared the stew — most of it went into Effie's bowl, of course — showing a voracious appetite. Battling the Prince of Nothing day after day, for an entire month, was a good way to work up an appetite.

Effie was beyond herself.

"My, oh my. The seasoning is just perfect! Just like I prefer it... no, really, I couldn't have made it better myself!"

At least someone was feeling uplifted...

Eventually, the pot grew empty.

In the silence that followed, Kai spoke somberly:

"Today,the full moon will rise above the illusory Bastion. You know what it means, Lady Morgan — your brother will definitely come again, and his assault will be even more dreadful this time."

She nodded calmly, not at all as worried as he thought she would be.

At this point, Morgan had to be all out of hidden aces, so Kai really did not know where her confidence was coming from.

It was a bit infuriating.

He studied the beautiful princess of Valor silently for a while, baffled by her nonchalance.

To be fair, Morgan did not quite look calm. More like… too ragged and tired to care. How come she had changed so much in a few hours?

He cleared his throat and glanced at Jet.

This time, it was her who gave him a nod.

Kai continued:

"That was why we discussed it among ourselves. We think that we found a stopgap solution on how to stop him."

Morgan glanced at him with the familiar spark of amusement in her vibrant vermilion eyes.

"Oh?"

Jet sighed, then leaned forward and raised a hand. Soon, a beautiful hourglass appeared on it, woven out of a whirlwind of radiant sparks.

She studied the hourglass for a few moments, then said lazily:

"This here is a Supreme Memory of the Fourth Tier that the three of us earned not too long ago… in quite a troublesome battle. It will not really prevent our eventual downfall, but it can buy us another day, and hopefully reveal whatever strategy Mordret is planning to employ next."

Aether looked at her with a slightly dazed expression.

"Saint Jet… you killed a Great Devil?"

She grinned.

"The three of us did, sure. Why? Have you guys never killed a Great Devil?"

The young Saint slowly shook his head.

"Cousin Naeve slayed a Great Beast once. But no… I have only ever seen Great Abominations from afar, in my Third Nightmare."

Effie tilted her head.

"What are you talking about? We killed a Great Monster two days ago, when the lake became shallow. Whose meat do you think was in that stew?"

Aether blinked a couple of times.

"Oh… that thing was of the Great Rank? I'm sorry. I did not notice."

The huntress stared at him for a couple of moments, then threw her head back and laughed.

"Gods… are you sure you haven't slain a Great Devil or two in the past? Maybe you just failed to notice their greatness."

The young Saint seemed to blush a little and looked away.

Jet smiled.

"In any case. This Memory is a bit special. It can only be used once, but…"

Morgan leaned back and grimaced.

"But it can make a day repeat itself one time. Yes, I know."

She was telling the truth. She did, indeed, know.

Kai frowned.

Then, his eyes widened.

The way she had caught the pebble without looking… the way she looked, and the way she spoke.

Even the taste of the stew.

He smiled suddenly.

"Lady Morgan… you have already used the hourglass, haven't you?"

The princess stared at him for a few long moments, then sighed.

"In a way."

Things were suddenly making much more sense. Kai was excited.

"So, you are living this day for the second time?"

Morgan slowly shook her head.

She remained silent for a while, then said in a grim tone:

"No. Not the second."

For a few moments, everyone was silent.

Then, Effie snorted incredulously.

"I can't believe… that this is happening to me for the second time!"