2273 Shadow Clan  
The next morning, June returned to the government complex at the break of dawn. He had finished his business in the city and packed a bag as instructed, informing those who still bothered to check on him from time to time that he would be gone for a while.  
  
Awakened Kim met him in the depths of the complex, looking just as plain and unassuming as yesterday. This time, however, she was wearing a dark suit of combat armor. The armor, in fact, gave June pause.  
  
It was matte black and unembellished, looking neat, but entirely unremarkable at first glance. However, there was something about the armor that made him look again.  
  
June had a good eye for these things, so he could not help but notice the subtle signs of sublime craftsmanship - how flawlessly the armor fit her figure, how well it maintained the balance between rigidity and flexibility, thus providing stellar defense while remaining relatively light and not at all cumbersome... the artistry of how seamlessly it incorporated subtle elements of modern design into the time-tested archaic framework.   
  
Strangely enough, he could not identify the materials that had gone into crafting the armor. All he could tell was that they had come from Nightmare Creatures of the Corrupted Rank, and that there was an array of powerful enchantments hiding beneath the unassuming surface of the plain black armor.  
  
It was, for all intents and purposes, a masterwork.  
  
More than that, it was clearly custom-made as opposed to being bestowed by the Spell, which meant that Kim, a mere Awakened... was wearing a bespoke suit of Transcendent armor.  
  
June glanced at her with a distant expression.  
  
With her calm gaze, the mysterious woman looked quite comfortable and sharp in her black armor. She showed no sign of knowing or caring - that she was wearing an entire fortune on her body.  
  
Just who was Awakened Kim, really? What kind of funding did the nebulous force that had recruited her enjoy?  
  
As she turned to meet his gaze, June finally noticed something that stood out on the plain black surface of the black armor. It was a circular insignia in the shape of a coiled serpent.  
  
He studied the sharp-looking woman for a moment, then asked:  
  
"Awakened Kim... if I may ask, where were you assigned in Antarctica?"  
  
Was she a former member of the Special Reconnaissance Unit? Or maybe even one of the Irregulars companies, just like him?  
  
No... if she had really met his grandfather, then she would have been in the Antarctic Center. And apart from Soul Reaper herself, barely anyone from the First Irregular Company had survived. Everyone in Antarctica had gone through hell, but those people were said to have met the Devil himself.  
  
Awakened Kim shrugged.  
  
"Oh, I was just a pencil pusher."  
  
'Yeah... no way.'  
  
Somehow, June strongly doubted it.  
  
He did not press the issue, though. Instead, he pointed to the serpent insignia and raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Is that the enchanter's signature?"  
  
He was really curious to know which famous master had created this masterpiece.  
  
Awakened Kim glanced at the insignia and sighed.  
  
"Sort of. It's our... crest, I guess. Kind of defeats the purpose of being a secret organization, I know. But our boss and his foremost minion will not listen to my objections. Something about brand recognition and customer loyalty..."  
  
Shaking her head with an aggrieved expression, she headed into the depths of the complex and gestured for him to follow. As they walked, June asked:  
  
"Do I get to know who 'we' are now?"  
  
Awakened Kim nodded.  
  
"You will learn everything in the next few days. For now... know that we call ourselves the Shadow Clan. Our purpose is to perform delicate tasks that the Fire Keepers cannot undertake themselves. Gathering information, eliminating threats, dealing with special kinds of Nightmare Creatures. We are also responsible for establishing a secure base in a remote region of the Dream Realm, as well as for preparations against a potential hazard in the future."  
  
June raised an eyebrow.  
  
"What kind of hazard?"  
  
Awakened Kim pursed her lips.  
  
"I don't know.  
  
In fact, none of us know. That is because, as we were told, the nature of the hazard itself is such that simply knowing about it is dangerous."  
  
He blinked a couple of times.  
  
"How can we prepare to face a threat if we don't know what the threat is?"  
  
She smiled faintly.  
  
"By doing what our boss tells us: You'll understand when you meet him."  
  
They reached the gate of a massive cargo elevator: Awakened Kim entered a security code, and the gate opened slowly = a few moments later, it lowered behind them, an elevator started to move down.  
  
June was surprised. They were already quite deep underground, but there seemed to be an even deeper layer to the government complex. He subconsciously timed the descent, calculating the depth.  
  
Awakened Kim spoke by his side:  
  
"The Shadow Clan is primarily based in the Dream Realm. You will be anchored at our Citadel - our work takes us all over the two worlds, though, so be prepared to travel a lot. Needless to say, it is preferable if no one notices our presence. In case contact with other humans is inevitable, though, you will be provided with a suitable cover identity."  
  
June scratched the back of his head.  
  
"Wouldn't it be problematic, to be anchored to a Citadel in a remote region of the Dream Realm if we need to travel a lot?"  
  
She chuckled.  
  
"Don't worry about it. Our boss can bring you to where you need to be. The Citadel itself can travel, as well."  
  
So the mysterious boss was a Saint - only Saints could transport people between worlds, after all.  
  
But mоre importantly...  
  
'A Citadel that can travel?"  
  
June suddenly had a suspicion.  
  
"The Nameless Temple?'  
  
The Citadel of the Lord of Shadows was known to be able to move. It had disappeared mysteriously a few days after the sinister man's death people assumed that Lady Nephis bestowed it to one of her Saints, but nobody knew for sure.  
  
The Lord of Shadows... Shadow Clan...  
  
June looked at Awakened Kim with suspicion.  
  
No one knew where the Lord of Shadows had come from. Considering his great power and vast resources, though, there had to be some sort of faction standing behind him - it was simply unthinkable for a solitary Awakened to achieve all these feats alone.  
  
The Lord of Shadows was dead now, having without a doubt left behind a masterless faction. People assumed that it had been quietly obliterated by the Ivory Tower, but what if Lady Nephis assumed control over its members instead?  
  
Nephis assumed control over its members instead?  
  
That would explain a few things.  
  
"How many members does our clan have?"  
  
Awakened Kim looked at him calmly.  
  
"Around two hundred. Half of us are operatives, the other half is involved in information gathering, logistics, and construction. Don't worry, though, most of us are friendly people. You'll fit right in, Corsair. Just... apart from the boss, you need to be wary of three individuals."  
  
June tensed a little.  
  
"They are?"  
  
At the same time, he shook his head slightly, bewildered.  
  
The elevator was still descending.  
  
'Just how far down are we going?"  
  
Awakened Kim spoke in a serious tone:  
  
"First and foremost... our Mayor, Aiko. Also known as the Shadow Fairy. If she starts demanding rent money or charging you for mission supplies, cоme find me. I can't guarantee that I can stop her, but I'll at least try to distract her."  
  
June stared at Kim, trying to understand if she was joking.  
  
Surely, she was...  
  
But why was her tone so somber?  
  
Meanwhile, she continued:  
  
"Second is our princess, Rain. She's actually wonderful... but our boss might kill you if he catches you looking at her funny. And just so that you know, being killed by our boss is not an escape from suffering. It is merely the beginning..."   
  
June coughed.  
  
'Don't look at the princess funny. Got it.'  
  
But what if she started looking at him funny?  
  
June was not very self-absorbed, but he knew that he was quite a handsome man. Tall, cold, with black hair and blue eyes... he had been known to get a lot of attention from women. Which was actually a bit of a detriment in his profession.  
  
So, June suddenly felt uneasy.  
  
'Princess of Shadows... yeah, I'd better stay away!'  
  
"Who's the third?"  
  
Awakened Kim gave him a long look.  
  
"The third is a man called Luster. If you hear him talk nonsense about the female members of our clan, come tell me immediately."  
  
June's expression soured.  
  
"Why? Does he have unsavory habits?"  
  
He hated people like that.  
  
Awakened kim lingered for a bit, Then suddenly let out a laugh.  
  
"No... he's my husband. I'm going to give him hell at home."  
  
June's calm and collected expression cracked for a moment.  
  
At that moment, the elevator finally stopped.  
  
The gates slowly opened, revealing a vast underground chamber.  
  
The chamber was cylindrical in shape, the ceiling towering somewhere far, far above. June guessed that it used to be a water reservoir, now empty and repurposed for some other use.  
  
The scale of the underground reservoir it was still quite daunting.  
  
However, he was in no mood to pay any attention to the size of the secret chamber.  
  
Because at its center... something that should not have existed stood, towering at hundreds of meters in height.  
  
It was a black rift in the fabric of reality, full of cold, impenetrable darkness.  
  
At first, June tensed, assuming that it was a Nightmare Gate. However, he did not hear the maddening whispers of the Call...  
  
Which meant that it had to be something entirely different.  
  
It was a Dream Gate.