1586 Grey Sky

Sunny let out a long sigh and tossed the broken communicator away.

'I see.'

He felt a strange mix of profound relief and tense apprehension.

The reason for being relieved was obvious. Sunny did not know how many cycles it had taken them to conquer the Nightmare, but from what he had seen in the Estuary, it was at least thousands. Therefore, he had been secretly afraid to return to the waking world only to find out that humans there had gone extinct thousands of years ago.

That Rain, and everyone else he knew, were long gone.

Alternatively, the strange nature of the Great River could have resulted in them leaving the Nightmare in the time corresponding to where they were in relation to the Estuary — namely, in the Age of Gods. Which would have been terrible in its own right.

So, the fact that their Third Nightmare had taken no time at all, from the point of view of the waking world, was one of the best possible outcomes.

However...

It also meant that Sunny and the other members of the cohort had been sent to a continent where an unknown number of Great horrors were currently roaming freely.

Now that they were Saints... did they stand a chance in a battle against the terrifying creatures that had entered the waking world during the Battle of the Black Skull?

That was the reason Sunny felt tense.

'I wonder if we'll meet Skinwalker again...'

He smiled somberly, and then dissolved into shadows once more.

'At least I didn't miss years of Rain's life.'

Encouraging himself like that, Sunny continued slithering through the ruins.

After a while...

He finally reached the surface.

Sunny found himself on the slope of a vast crater, under a stormy grey sky. Even though the situation was more than a little ominous, he suddenly felt a strange sense of comfort.

It was a privilege many people never thought about, to have a familiar sky above their heads. To be home.

Without wasting any time, Sunny scaled the slope and escaped the embrace of shadows at the top of the tall mound formed by the crater. Standing there, he looked around, at what he had expected to be the ruins of an obliterated siege capital.

To his surprise...

The siege capital did not look particularly obliterated.

Sure, there were signs of destruction here and there, with a few buildings having collapsed... but Valor's stronghold seemed to have sustained the worst damage. Most of the city was still intact, and there were crowds of people moving through the streets in an orderly manner, escorted by the soldiers.

As Sunny assessed this scene, two details attracted his attention...

Both shaking him to the very core.

The first one was near the center of the city, where a large park sprawled. There... a giant Gate pierced the sky, dwarfing the tallest building in the siege capital. It was like a vertical fracture in the fabric of the world, instilling him with terror.

'Here, too? But why...'

Then, he noticed that there was something strange about the giant Gate.

It was entirely, utterly wrong.

Usually, the Gates looked like tears in reality, revealing nothing but vile darkness in their depths. But this one was different. Not only did Sunny not feel an instinctive revulsion toward the strange Gate, but there was also no darkness within it.

Instead, he could see to the other side.

There, clearly visible through the fracture of the Gate, a beautiful lake sparkled under bright sunlight. And from that lake... rose a magnificent castle.

It was Bastion.

Sunny was still struggling to comprehend that stunning sight when he noticed something else. There was an orderly column of refugees slowly entering the Gate.

He shuddered.

'That... that is impossible...'

A Nightmare Gate was not something one could enter. It was a door that only opened one way — from the Dream Realm into the waking world. Therefore, anyone trying to pass through a Gate from that side was destined to fail. More than that, approaching a Gate was lethal... Sunny had briefly brushed against one himself, in Falcon Scott, and it was a memory he did not wish to revisit.

So how could countless refugees be passing through the strange Nightmare Gate?

Was it even a Nightmare Gate? Or something else entirely?

The answers to these questions were, perhaps, connected to the second detail Sunny had been stunned to see.

And that one... was far more chilling.

Out there, far away from him, the great wall of the siege capital stood, broken and torn. Long spans of it had collapsed, and beyond them, a mountain of black flesh was rolling across the plain, devouring everything in sight.

There were no soldiers, no Awakened, and no lumbering MWPs on top of the damaged wall.

However, there was a single human there, facing the Great horror with indifferent resolve.

From that distance, Sunny couldn't see who it was, exactly. All he could tell was that it was a man. The man was stall, with broad shoulders, his posture as straight and sharp as a steel sword. A long vermilion cloak fluttered in the wind behind his back.

The man did not move, but the stormy clouds seemed to follow his will, flowing across the sky. A rustling haze connected the clouds with the crawling mountain of black flesh, as if rain was falling from the sky.

That rustle...

Sunny looked up, at the clouds that obscured the heavens like a grey veil.

'N—no... it can't be...'

It was only then that he understood that they were no clouds at all.

Instead, they were countless flying swords, enough of them to form a storm front, all moving with clear and hypnotizing, lethal intent.

The haze he saw in the distance was not rain, but thousands of swords falling on the colossal abomination like a bombardment of slaying steel, shredding and slicing its profane flesh apart.

Sunny paled, forgetting to breathe.

He suddenly realized who the man facing the Great horror was, what the strange Gate was, and why the siege capital had not been destroyed yet.

...The King of Swords had descended into the waking world.

And with him, the harrowing might of a Sovereign's Domain had descended, as well.