1720 Hard Day at Work

Just a few minutes later, a majestic dragon with scales that resembled the midnight sky was flying over the endless sea of dunes, devouring distance with stunning speed.

Effie and Jet were on his back, looking south with somber expressions.

After a while, Effie sighed.

"The situation has already changed?"

Jet nodded.

"Yes. The city wall is breached. Western Quadrant defense forces are on approach, but the Call is wreaking havoc with their tech. The Awakened vanguard was attacked by one of the lesser Gate Guardians and managed to put it down, but their advance was stalled. So, we will arrive first."

Soul Reaper maintained a neutral tone, but Effie could see that she was in a grim mood.

"It's not your fault. Don't beat yourself up too much."

Jet glanced at her and smiled.

"My fault? Of course, it's not my fault. I am not someone who feels bothered by such things, anyway.

But despite her tough-girl routine and carefully constructed facade of a cynical salary woman, she was bothered.

Effie had gotten to know Soul Reaper Jet a bit during the Southern Campaign, but they became really close during the Third Nightmare. And in the four years since, their friendship and comradeship had continued to blossom.

Jet... was a professional, first and foremost. She wasn't really someone with a bleeding heart - the opposite, actually - but she took her responsibilities very seriously. As such, her cynical loyalty to the mission of preserving humanity was quite ironically much greater than the noble intent of most ardent idealists.

She had already been doing her very best as a Master. But now that Jet was a Saint- one of the five Saints serving the government - the scale and scope of her responsibilities were much greater.

While Effie and Kai mostly dealt with military and diplomatic issues, simply executing the orders, Jet was much more knowledgeable and experienced. As such, she was involved in the administration and decision-making process of the government, influencing what orders all of them received.

The government was in turmoil, too. It was in flux, drifting on the currents of history. Four years ago, the higher echelons of the government had made a decision to throw vast resources into rapidly developing its presence in the Dream Realm... where the future was.

That was why Effie was almost permanently stationed in Bastion, while Kal spent most of his time in Ravenheart.

Jet, however, had been against that strategy. She had insisted on keeping the government Saints in the waking world, spread across the three remaining Quadrants, to lessen the inevitable losses as much as possible... even at the cost of the future inferiority of the government's position in the brave new world of Domains and Sovereigns.

It was not that she disagreed with the notion that the future of humanity lay in the Dream Realm... it was just that she advocated for a different allocation of resources.

Sadly, she had failed to turn her opinion into policy.

If she had, the current disaster could have been avoided, or at least lessened.

Effie sighed.

"You're angry. I can smell that you're angry. Well, guess what? There's nothing better for treating anger than a good slaughter. And we'll be drowning in abominations in a few minutes, so... there's no day like today..."

Jet chuckled.

"You are right. Sure. But also... let's not use the word 'slaughter, okay? Makes me queasy,"

At that moment, Kai's pleasant voice resounded in their heads:

[Ladies, If you feel queasy and are going to be sick, please wait until I land, at least, Really, don't go around despoiling my scales... I have an image to uphold…]

Effie grinned.

"Oh? What about your Image? Who are you trying to Impress, Queen Song's daughters?"

The dragon didn't respond to her provocation. Instead, he lingered for a while, and then asked:

[How is Aiko doing?]

Effie sighed.

"Come ask her yourself. She's still pretending to be angry. Oh... but she's doing fine, by the way! Her new boss is kind, handsome, and treats her very well."

Kai answered nonchalantly:

[I'm glad. As long as she's doing well.]

A few seconds later, he asked in the same neutral tone:

[...Just out of curiosity, how handsome are we talking? What about his style? Who makes his clothes?]

Effie grinned and chose not to answer.

In front of them, the sea of dunes slowly turned into a desolate plain, with a vast, dried riverbed cutting it like an endless scar. Far away, on the opposite side of the immense chasm, a large city stood where the river's shore had once been, shrouded in haze.

Their banter abruptly stopped.

The city was burning, with towering plumes of black smoke rising into the plercing blue sky. Even from that distance, Effie could see the signs of cataclysmic devastation. The toll of human lives must have been terrible.

Kal, with his incredible sight, could see much more. He didn't say anything, but his silence suddenly seemed sorrowful and forlorn.

Effie gritted her teeth and looked away.

"Do you see it, Kai? Was the last transmission accurate?"

The dragon folded his wings and rushed toward the ground.

His voice was even.

[Yes. Seven Gates. Six of them Category Three... one Category Four. The Gate Guardian of the latter seems to be a Great Devil.]

He paused for a moment, then added:

[The city is overwhelmed, a horde of abominations is rampaging on the streets. The local garrison seems to have fallen.]

Jet closed her eyes for a moment.

"It's good, then."

Kai asked quietly, the emotions in his voice suppressed:

[Good?]

She nodded.

"Yes. If the abominations are rampaging, it means that there's still someone alive."

A moment later, the dragon landed on the ground, raising a cloud of dust. Jet and Effle jumped off his back and approached the edge of the dry riverbed's slope.

Out there below them, the hastily assembled army of the Western Quadrant was assembling into a formation to assault the fallen city. In front of the mundane soldiers, the battered Awakened vanguard was finishing off a wave of Nightmare Creatures that had wandered away from the burning ruins.

They had noticed the flamboyant landing of the great dragon, and were now looking back, cheering and waving their heads in the air.

Kai's fame preceded him.

Effie cracked her knuckles and asked, her voice uncharacteristically somber:

"A Great Devil... can we even handle something like that?"

All three of them had become immensely powerful after Transcending. The battles they had won were beyond count, and the Nightmare Creatures they had killed were beyond measure... and yet, they had never faced a horror like that before.

Only the Sovereigns had.

Facing a Great Devil was a first for them... and could very well become the last.

A relaxed smile appeared on Jet's face.

"What's the matter? If push comes to shove, we'll Just die. Well... the two of you will die. I'm already dead."

Above them, the dragon scoffed. His magnificent voice resounded above the desert, making Effie's heart tingle...

That was just something Kai's draconic voice did, even if he did not use his Aspect Abilities.

"Still. We should try to stay alive... well, Effie and I should. You just stay in one piece, Lady Jet."

She chuckled.

"Alright. As we've discussed before, Kai will support the Western Quadrant forces in their advance. Effie and I will spearhead the assault, push back the abominations, and engage the Gate Guardian. There's nothing else to say. Godspeed!"

The beautiful dragon nodded its great head, then pushed himself off the ground and glided gracefully toward the assembled army.

Jet looked at Effie, already summoning her scythe.

She lingered for a moment, and then said in a tone that was a little gentler than usual:

"But seriously... don't die, Effie, Nightingale and I can die, but you can't. You know why. There are people waiting for you to return."

For a moment, Effie felt her heart tremble... just like it did every time she went into battle.

It had been easy to risk her life before, when she was young. But now, she had things to protect, and people whom she did not want to and could not allow herself to leave. Every time death snarled in her face, Effie felt... guilt, and shame.

And fear.

What was she doing on the battlefield when her husband and son were somewhere else, waiting for her?

Why was she being so stupid when she could have remained safe behind a Citadel wall, in their idyllic cottage, allowing someone else to fight, and bleed, and die in her place?

But then, she remembered.

It was precisely because of Little Ling and his dad that she was here.

Because someone had to prevent the world from collapsing on their heads and burying them under the rubble. Effie didn't particularly trust someone else to not mess everything up, so she had to build a world where her son could live a decent life with her own two hands.

Thankfully, her hands were quite strong.

If you wanted to do something right, you had to do it yourself.

Looking at Jet, Effie grinned.

"Why do you always talk about dying, big sister? Not everyone is like you! I'm not planning on kicking the bucket any time soon. That would be such a tragedy... imagine all the food I would not be able to eat!"

Laughing lightly, she shook her head... And activate her Transformation Ability.

...A moment later, a titanic figure clad in polished steel rose from the dust, shining brilliantly under the incandescent sun.