1737 A Walk in the Park

When the appalling darkness of the Nightmare Gate split reality apart, sunlight dimmed and turned strangely bleak, making the world look desaturated. A gust of cold wind rushed across the snowy park, as if the sky itself was being sucked into the black fissure. A moment later, an eerie shockwave rolled over the soldiers, making them stagger.

Neph's white cape fluttered in the wind, but none of the four Saints moved.

For a moment, the only being moving in the impact zone was Saint. She walked steadily toward the Gate, her graceful figure emanating the feeling of a cold, indifferent inevitability.

Kai stared at her back for a second, then cleared his throat.

"Your Echo seems really impressive, Lord Shadow. Stylish, too... such a chic and understated armor design... monochromatic in theme, yet rich and expressive instead of being dull. What a beautiful use of form and texture variation to counterbalance the lack of a dynamic palette... splendid, really! Wait... where was I?"

He paused for a moment, and then added with an embarrassed smile:

"Right. What I meant to say was... your Echo can stall the abominations and break their momentum. We will follow behind and engage the Nightmare Creatures when they get past her."

Sunny glanced at him and tilted his head a little.

"...Get past her?"

Kai hesitated a little, unsure of what to say.

"Yes... there is a high enough possibility that this Gate will reach Category Three, after all. Even if she is a Transcendent Echo... it might be a bit tough."

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

"Just watch."

He turned away and stared at Saint. Kai, Nephis, and Morgan had no choice but to follow his example.

In fact, Sunny felt a bit awkward, just standing there and doing nothing while Saint did all the work...

He would have summoned the Shadow Chair and sat down, but sadly, that chair usually stood behind the reception desk of the Brilliant Emporium. Anyone who had visited the dining hall could recognize it at a glance.

'Standing awkwardly it is, I guess.'

Out there in front of them, the first of the Nightmare Creatures appeared from the dark fissure of the Nightmare Gate, It was a hulking beast with a bulging body, terrifying muscles moving smoothly under its tough grey hide. The abomination's hind legs seemed underdeveloped, but its front limbs were grotesquely large, resembling craggy tree trunks.

Two vicious tusks curved upward from its jaw, as long as pikes.

The beast let out a deafening bellow and charged forward, the ground shaking from its heavy footsteps.

Saint did not slow down. She simply lowered her shield, meeting the abomination's charge head-on, midstride.

In the next moment...

The dreadful tusks hit the onyx shield and shattered. Next was the creature's head. Its skull burst like a rotten pumpkin, splattering across the snow in a crimson wave. The massive abomination collided with the shield and was crushed into pulp against its surface, only to be tossed aside by a flick of the wrist a moment later, falling to the ground in a lifeless, bloody heap.

It was as though it had used Saint to commit suicide,

Standing by Sunny's side, Kai blinked.

Nephis, who had seen the taciturn Shadow before, seemed unsurprised. Morgan was too shrewd to show a reaction, but her gaze had turned a little sharper,

Sunny smiled.

In front of the Gate, more Nightmare Creatures were born from the appalling darkness. A tide of them, each seemingly powerful enough to rip an armored vehicle to shreds.

Saint finally seemed to pay them attention.

Gripping her sword, she lunged forward and turned into a dark blur. A cloud of snow, ice, and torn ground exploded into the air from where her foot had pushed against the ground.

By the time the soldiers had registered that, she was already among the abominations.

To them, it looked as if a hurricane of darkness descended upon the tide of Nightmare Creatures, tearing flesh from bones and swiftly turning crimson from the haze of blood. A cacophony of howls filled the air, and severed bodies rained down on the snow, which was swiftly painted red and melted under the heat of harrowing violence.

Of course, the four Transcendents could follow the battle clearly.

To them, it looked quite different.

Instead of the hurricane of blurry darkness, they saw Saint wielding her sword with chilling grace, reaping a harvest of lives with each movement. Her swordsmanship was solid and precise, each step measured, each slash flawlessly efficient and inescapably lethal.

The black sword rose and fell, severing abominations in half. The onyx shield swung crushing their skulls and breaking their bodies. The sword was like the ruthless blade of a guillotine, while the shield was like an Impenetrable wall of polished black stone,

Saint was so tyrannical that even when surrounded by monsters and demons, she seemed like the true hellspawn. Despite the gruesome massacre she was perpetrating, her dark armor remained spotlessly clean, with not even a single drop of fetid blood landing on its onyx surface.

Her dreadfully beautiful battle art was like an elegant dance, allowing her to weave between the falling bodies without becoming stained by their filth.

The tide of abominations collided with her and came to a shuddering halt, dissolving into a haze of blood right in front of the stunned soldiers.

Morgan took a deep breath.

"Lord Shadow, this Echo of yours... is quite fearsome."

Kai nodded slowly.

"Yes, indeed. You must cherish her a lot."

Sunny gave them a short glance, then turned back to face the Nightmare Gate.

"...Actually, she is the second weakest among my servants"

Which was technically true - after all, among his Shadows, only the Marvelous Mimic was lower than Saint in Rank and Class. Of course, Sunny would not bet money on any of his other Shadows surviving in a battle against the Onyx Saint.

He wasn't even sure that he would survive something like that, if push came to shove.

Kal stared at him with wide eyes, prompting Sunny to smile behind the mask.

"The... second weakest?"

He nodded.

"I killed the original as a Sleeper, after all. It was a long time ago."

The beautiful archer paled.

"S-sleeper? You killed that... as a Sleeper?"

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then shrugged.

"Sure. Come to think of it, among the Nightmare Creatures I killed as a Sleeper, she was one of the weakest as well."

Saint had been a mere Awakened Monster back then, and Sunny had killed plenty of abominations of higher Rank and Class on the Forgotten Shore... including a Great Devil. So, if one only took pure strength into account, Saint had indeed been in the lower tier of the creatures slain by him there.

Kai opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

Finally, not knowing what to say, he turned away stiffly,

Sunny chuckled Internally.

'Ah! I missed teasing this guy!’

In front of the Nightmare Gate, Saint had mercilessly obliterated the first wave of the abominations.

The same fate awaited the second wave, and the third. Not a single Nightmare Creature managed to escape her blade.

Observing the scene of chilling carnage, Sunny couldn't help but feel a little wistful.

He remembered vividly the first time he had encountered a Nightmare Gate. How desperate he had fought, and how impossible the task of stemming the tide of abominations had seemed. In the end, he would have failed if not for Jet's timely arrival.

Yet, this time... the Category of the Gate was one Rank above the one he had defended against as Mongrel. However, Sunny did not even have to move a finger. Just one of his Shadows was enough to contain the threat, and he did not even have to bestow the full augmentation of all his shadows upon her.

So much time had passed, and so many things had changed. Some for the better, some for the worst.

Sunny secretly glanced at Nephis and Kai as the Gate Guardian finally emerged from the fissure.

The creature looked like a mountain of grey flesh, its towering body brimming with bulging muscles, sharp tusks, bloodied spikes, and ghastly bone armor, It bellowed furiously, making the entire park quake.

A Corrupted Tyrant, from the looks of it.

Standing on a pile of corpses, Saint glanced at it and finally deigned it necessary to summon the elemental darkness from her heart. A dark aura enveloped her black sword, and a cold chill ran down Sunny's spine.

Her ruby eyes flashed with furious crimson light.

The Tyrant surged forward, and at the same time, the black blade slashed the world apart.

‘...Now who's showing off?'

A thin line slowly revealed itself on the towering abomination's powerful body, cleanly dividing it into two vertical halves. Then, it slowly oozed blood.

The Tyrant stumbled, then slowly crumbled to the ground, its body falling apart into two bloody chunks.

The Handy Bracelet spoke into Sunny's ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Tyrant.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

These were the only fragments Sunny had received from this fight.

Looking at the carcasses of the massacred Nightmare Creatures, which piled high in the suddenly silent park, he sighed.

'What a waste.’

Saint stared at the bleeding chunks of the dead tyrant with indifference, then turned and glanced at Sunny.

Receiving his nod, she took a step back and dissolved into shadows.

A few moments later, creepy and crazy silently returned to him and fused with naughty, who had been pretending to be a normal shadow all along, resting leisurely on the ground beneath his feet.

Sunny looked at Morgan and remained silent for a moment.

"My apologies. I'll try to give you an opportunity to witness my prowess some other time.”