1738 Crumbling Dam

The Gate crisis had come to an end just like that, leaving the government soldiers standing there in stunned silence.

In the end, none of them had to do anything to contain the Nightmare Creatures. The arriving reinforcements were shocked to see piles of corpses littering the ground - they had been expecting to dive into a dire battle, but ended up witnessing the aftermath of a chilling slaughter instead.

Of course, it was not as if they had nothing to do.

The park had been ravaged by the devastating battle, and the ugly fissure of the Nightmare Gate still shimmered in the air. Sunny looked at it with regret - there were not that many parks in NQSC, and this one would be unusable for the foreseeable future.

Unless a cohort of Masters challenged and conquered the Nightmare Seed, this place would never be safe for humans.

The initial tide of abominations had been obliterated, and the Gate Guardian fell. However, new Nightmare Creatures could emerge from the fissure at any moment.

The government forces would have to build a containment zone around the Gate, complete with powerful explosive charges and a fortified perimeter. Mundane soldiers and Awakened warriors would have to stand watch inside the zone at all times, participating in sporadic skirmishes every time an abomination wandered into the waking world.

Kai was looking at the Gate, as well, his expression grim.

In the decades since the descent of the Nightmare Spell, many of such containment zones had littered the areas populated by humans. There were many here in NQSC, too - and the more of them appeared, the thinner the government forces had to be spread.

The situation had only worsened after the Chain of Nightmares. It was comparatively easy to find cohorts of Awakened willing to challenge Second Nightmares and hopefully conquer it, closing the Gate. The one near Rain's school had long disappeared, for example.

But it was much harder to close a Category Three Gate, since only Masters could hope to survive the Third Nightmare. Even then, most did not.

And although the number of Masters humanity possessed had increased tenfold, and continued to grow with each year, the number of Gates of higher Categories was increasing faster.

Kai sighed and shook his head. His voice sounded a bit tired when he mumbled quietly:

"No rest for the wicked..."

Morgan, who had been conversing with the Master In charge of the government soldiers, glanced at him with curiosity:

"Oh? Will you lead the charge personally, Lord Kal?"

He smiled weakly, causing a few of the mundane soldiers to sway, and shook his head.

"I'm not sure. I'll have to discuss it with my superiors first."

She nodded in understanding.

"Well, for what it's worth. Clan Valor is willing to offer help, this time. After all, I didn't get to do anything despite showing up so confidently. My hands are itching for a fight."

Sunny was listening to them in confusion.

He was certain that none of it showed in his body language, and yet Nephis decided to explain.

"The government is trying to adapt to the new environment. Since there are too many Gates that can't be closed, they are constantly searching for a way to lessen the strain of guarding them all. The most effective method is to allow a Saint to follow the Call to the Nightmare Seed and cleanse the territory surrounding it from all abominations. That way, they won't be wandering into the waking world, at least for a while."

She studied the dark fissure of the Gate and added:

"I have participated in plenty of these cleansing operations myself, Many of the Legacy Saints have followed my example, as well, offering their services... especially those of the new generation, who hold me in high regard. Their battle experience is comparatively poor, so they see it as an opportunity to sharpen themselves. As long as the vicinity of the Nightmare Seeds is cleansed at set intervals, the strain on the government resources is lessened drastically."

Sunny stared at her for a while, then said in a cold tone:

"Sounds like trying to plug holes in a crumbling dam."

Nephis smiled faintly.

"Indeed. However, it also teaches the people who are sealing the holes how to swim."

Then, her expression darkened a little.

"But I agree with your sentiment. It is merely a stopgap measure."

Kai and Morgan walked over, catching the tail end of their conversation.

The charming archer smiled.

"As long as there are brave people who are willing to rise to the occasion, everything is not lost. We will continue to keep this world safe... or at least as safe as possible, Like you did today, Lord Shadow, Please, accept my sincere gratitude."

Sunny stared at him for a while.

Then, he nodded and said evenly:

"Fine. I accept it.”

Kal gave him a dubious look. Not knowing what to say, he turned to Nephis, Intending to thank her as well.

Should I do it, or not?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment, but couldn't help himself.

So, he added in a tone of indifference:

"Don't expect my help next time, though. I have a bad history with Nightmare Gates... the last time I happened to be near one, I ended up in a custody dispute with a Cursed Terror."

Encountering the Category Four Gates in Antarctica had led him to the Third Nightmare, after all, where he ended up meeting a certain vile bird.

Kai forgot what he was going to say to Nephis and stared at him numbly.

"A... a... a custody dispute?"

Sunny gave him a nonchalant nod.

"Yes. The Cursed Terror wanted its spawn back. Thieving scumbag."

The charming archer took a deep breath, looked at the sky, and then forced out a few words, his tone stifled:

"Ah. I... I see!"

He struggled to say something else, but Sunny interrupted him:

"By the way. Nightingale... it's a bird, isn't it? Huh. 1 dislike birds."

Kai froze, looking at him with a troubled expression.

Sunny stared at him for a bit, then leaned forward, raised a hand... and patted him on the shoulder.

"It's alright. I'll make an exception for you, Saint Nightingale. Since we're friends."

With that, he turned to Nephis and said without any emotion:

"I am ready to leave."

She was staring at him strangely.

Morgan was, as well.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"...What?"

The two of them glanced at each other, then shook their heads at the same time.

"No, no. It's just that... you have a unique way with words, Lord Shadow."

"Nothing."

The former was said by Morgan, while the latter was said by Nephis.

He smiled behind the mask.

"Curious, I've been described as unique twice today. I am starting to suspect... that it is not a compliment.”

Morgan smiled pleasantly and said in an exceedingly polite tone:

It isn't."

Shaking her head, he bowed to Kai lightly and turned away, heading for the PTV that had driven them here.

Sunny followed, giving Nephis a chance to say a proper goodbye to the charming archer. She caught up with them soon, wearing a complicated expression.

Or rather, her expression was as stoic as always. However, Sunny could feel a bit of tension hiding in the depths of her grey eyes.

They passed the military vehicles and approached the PTV. The Fire Keeper who had driven it, Sid, was already back - she had joined the volunteer Awakened before the Gate opened, intending to lead them into the battle.

Of course, their participation had not been necessary, in the end.

Sid was on her way to open the passenger door when Nephis stopped suddenly, looking at the PTV with a frown.

Sensing her unease, Morgan and Sunny stopped, too.

Morgan glanced at Nephis, raised an eyebrow, and asked with a hint of amusement in her voice:

"What's the matter?"

Neph remained silent for a few moments, studying the luxurious vehicle somberly. Then, she slowly turned away and looked at Sunny.

"Lord Shadow... I apologize."

He blinked a couple of times.

Was she apologizing for having dragged him to an opening Gates? No, Nephis saw the fight against the Nightmare Spell as a sacred duty of all Awakened. She would not have apologized for something like that.

What then?

Hiding his confusion, Sunny asked in a cold tone:

"What for?"

Her expression remained calm when she answered:

"It seems that I am about to be assassinated. Sorry for the inconvenience."

‘...What?’

Before Sunny could react, Sid unlocked the passenger door and pulled on the handle.

In the next moment, the PTV disintegrated in a blinding flash, and the roar of a deafening explosion thundered above the snowy park.