2098 Prodigal Shadow Returns  
  
Sunny prepared himself for battle before opening the gate of the Shadow Lantern.   
  
He had no idea what would happen when it opened, after all. The mysterious archer had been able to send an arrow flying through the gate the last time — so, there was no guarantee that the unknown creature would not be able to escape the Shadow Realm itself if given an opportunity.  
  
The battle could happen once Sunny passed through the Gate of Shadow, or it could happen right here, in the basement of the Brilliant Emporium. He had to be prepared either way.  
  
Of course, there was also the possibility that nothing would happen.  
  
A considerable amount of time had passed since Sunny's last attempt to explore the Shadow Realm. It was quite possible that the mysterious archer remained in the vicinity of the closed portal, waiting patiently for the door to open once again, but it was also possible that they had moved on.  
  
However, Sunny highly doubted that the archer had left.  
  
Firstly, it was because he himself would have remained in place, laying patiently in an ambush. Secondly, it was because of the nature of their first encounter.  
  
Had the mysterious archer simply happened to be near the entrance to the Gate of Shadow when Sunny stepped through it? Perhaps. But it was far more likely that they had been waiting there on purpose, and for quite a long time — maybe having noticed the shadows Sunny used to send into the Lantern and call back at some point.  
  
 Looking at his avatar, he took a deep breath.  
  
"If something happens, summon me back immediately."  
  
The avatar smiled crookedly.  
  
"Why? If I am slow to react and you happen to die out there… who knows, maybe I'll be the new original body. Wow, that sounds nice."  
  
Sunny frowned.  
  
"What are you talking about, bastard? If the original body is destroyed, all you shadows will become homeless. Then, the universe will evict you into the Shadow Realm, where you'll be repurposed into six pretty clouds of essence. So, don't you try anything!"  
  
Then, he used the avatar to scoff at himself.   
  
"Are you sure, though?"  
  
Sunny looked at him, unamused.  
  
"Ah, whatever. I'm tired of talking to myself."  
  
With that, he hesitated for a few moments.  
  
He wanted to manifest Serpent into its Soul Weapon form, but was not sure if his Shadows would be harmed by the Shadow Realm. It was a world where shadows were dissolved into pure essence, after all… even he himself would start crumbling as soon as he stepped inside, so what about his loyal minions?  
  
'What was Shadow God even thinking…'  
  
Why make his realm so inhospitable to his own children?  
  
Shaking his head, Sunny manifested a shield out of the shadows populating the basement and gave his avatar one last glance before turning serious.  
  
"I'm off."  
  
Then, he commanded the gate of the Shadow Lantern to open, turned into a shadow himself, and slid into the dark chasm.  
  
A few moments later, he found himself in a familiar, beautiful, harrowing land.  
  
Swiftly assuming a corporeal form, Sunny crouched atop a tall mound. There was a desolate expanse of dark hills stretching in front of him in all directions, covered in darkness. There was no grass, no trees, no moss, and no flowers — no sign of life at all, just stillness and silence.  
  
The ground was covered in a soft layer of fine black dust, and above him was a pitch-black sky. There were no stars and no moon, just a seemingly endless expanse of darkness, illuminated by the beautiful silver radiance of the distant essence storms.  
  
There in the distance, tumultuous clouds of essence moved and swirled, as if carried by ghostly winds. The radiant currents were like beautiful rivers of starlight that illuminated the desolate land, making the immense, ancient shadows populating it flow and dance.  
  
Once again, Sunny was stunned by how breathtaking that dark sight was.  
  
But it was also dreadful, because he could sense the destructive fury of the essence storms even from a distance. It was both daunting and eerie, making him feel the chilling touch of primal fear.  
  
At the same time, Sunny felt a flood of spirit essence flow into his soul, and a new strength permeate his body. Here in the Shadow Realm, he was within his source element. He was more powerful here than anywhere else, despite the many restrictions placed on him by the somber nature of this land.  
  
The shadows that surrounded him were indescribably ancient and unfathomably deep. Their tranquil, slumbering indifference made him feel calm and at peace.  
  
But it was all an illusion.  
  
There was no peace in this desolate realm, and no reason to feel calm.  
  
Almost as soon as Sunny appeared, a tiny mote of light rose from his arm and slowly drifted into the sky… that was the sign of his soul slowly being undone.  
  
He gritted his teeth.  
  
His visit to the Shadow Realm would be a race. The longer he remained here, the more shadow fragments he would lose — and if he lingered for too long, his soul might very well collapse entirely. So, his task was to absorb fragments faster than he was losing them.  
  
And to do so, he had to find something to kill.  
  
Which promised to be a dire task. After all, Sunny was stripped of most of his powers at the moment, all alone and lacking knowledge.  
  
Dark arrows could start flying at him from the shadows at any moment.  
  
…But they didn't.  
  
In fact, when Sunny looked around, he realized that the surrounding landscape had changed drastically from the last time he saw it.  
  
The surrounding hills had collapsed, and the ground was cracked. Here and there, great shards of obsidian lay buried in the black dusk, many of them shattered and by some terrible force. It was a scene of great devastation, making him feel like an essence storm had recently passed through this area.  
  
But when he looked closely, he felt like that wasn't the case. Instead… it seemed as if a furious battle had taken place here not too long ago.  
  
There was no sign of the mysterious archer, if they had even survived the devastation.  
  
Staring at the vast expanse of upturned earth, Sunny lowered his shield a little.   
  
He was quite stumped.  
  
'What the hell happened here?'