2103 The Ride of the Shadows  
  
Sunny was up against enemies whose power was well beyond his own. He was not sure what their Rank and Class were — if they could even be defined by these concepts — but both the Dark Ones and the nebulous slayer seemed far more threatening than most foes he had encountered before.  
  
Perhaps Sunny would have been willing to attack them openly if his own powers weren't restricted, but with the Shadow Realm limiting what he could do, he was wary and apprehensive about engaging his competitors in a direct confrontation.  
  
But that was alright.  
  
There were many indirect ways to achieve his goal, as well. Sunny simply had to take a page from the mysterious archer's book and use all the resources available to him as tools — tools, after all, were a force multiplier that allowed one to channel their power to a much greater effect than would have been possible otherwise.  
  
It was like Morgan of Valor had told him once, a long time ago, before the Battle of the Black Skull. At its core, war was simple. All there was to it was power, and application of power — the former was important, but the latter was paramount.  
  
The mysterious archer, for example, would not have been nearly as deadly without the arrows they had crafted from scavenged materials, which allowed them to apply all their dire power to a point as tiny as the arrowhead's tip.  
  
The problem was that there were not a lot of things around that Sunny could use. The Shadow Realm was a desolate land, after all. There was nothing here but an endless expanse of black hills...  
  
Or rather, there had not been.  
  
As the shadow of Condemnation marched forward like a walking mountain, too immense to even be seen in its entirety from where Sunny chased after it, his senses detected something far ahead. An anomaly that was different from the monotone desolation of the dark, barren land, and therefore promised possibility.  
  
Sensing the strange, monumental shape ahead, Sunny recognized its nature and took a deep breath.  
  
He had long discarded his shield. The manifested shadows were not eroded by the Shadow Realm as fast as the shadows of living beings were, but sustaining their shape was still a losing game. They crumbled slowly, eventually dissolving into darkness and becoming one with the land of death.  
  
It was not entirely impossible to use Shadow Manifestation here, but Sunny had to change his approach. Instead of manifesting shadows once, he had to constantly rebuild the crumbling construct, using more of the surrounding darkness — and therefore more of his essence — to fuel it.  
  
Luckily, an unceasing torrent of spirit essence was flowing into his soul here, so he had plenty to spare.  
  
Running up the slope of a hill with astonishing speed, he closed his eyes for a moment and remembered the radiant figure of Nephis as she descended from the sky, beautiful wings shining behind her like a halo of white light.  
  
He also remembered the demonic visage of Revel, and the furious battle they had fought at Vanishing Lake.  
  
He remembered using Shadow Dance to peer into the essence of their being.  
  
Then, cresting the steep dune, Sunny opened his eyes and leapt into the air. As he soared above the desolate expanse of black dust, the shadows moved around him, embracing him like a dark mantle.   
  
And then, the mantle of shadows manifested into a pair of tenebrous wings, the raven-black feathers glistening in the silver light of swirling essence.  
  
As they swung, a powerful gale rose above the desolate expanse, and he was propelled into the air with great speed.  
  
'I think… it's working.'  
  
Human bodies were not exactly meant to fly with the help of wings. After all, humans weren't birds — their entire anatomy, down to the composition of their bones, was different. People like Nephis and Revel had been bestowed their wings by the mystical power of their Aspects, and could therefore brave the skies with natural grace...  
  
But Sunny was different.  
  
He was quite adept at manifesting and controlling additional limbs with the help of his Aspect — that was how he was able to weave intricate patterns of essence strings with six hands. He also knew how to create Shells of flying creatures and was deeply familiar with the shape of a crow, so the anatomy of winged beings was not new to him.   
  
However, it was always easier and far more effective to build Shells in the faithful image of actual creatures, not create strange chimeras by mixing and matching parts of different ones, like what he was doing now due to being unable to follow his preference and assume the form of a swift crow.   
  
Nevertheless, the experiment was successful. Sunny had managed to teach himself how to fly with the help of a pair of mighty wings by combining his experience of controlling manifested limbs, familiarity with the shape of a crow, and intimate knowledge of how Nephis flew when assuming partial Transformation.  
  
As his black wings pushed ferociously against the wind, Sunny flew forward with astonishing speed. He had no problem maintaining balance and direction due to having spent plenty of time in the shape of a crow, as well — swiftly overtaking the colossal shadow of Condemnation and the figures battling for the right to consume it, he rushed ahead.  
  
As he did, the dark drifter whom the mysterious archer had severed from the body of Condemnation fell to the ground like a great tattered veil. Its vast form rippled, ready to slither back into the fight. Even though its tendrils had been severed, the creature did not seem severely wounded, already aiming to rejoin its feasting siblings.  
  
However, in the next moment, the gargantuan foot of the shadow of Condemnation fell on it, making the world tremble and splitting the earth. The creature of darkness was instantly obliterated, dissolving into a pool of elemental darkness.  
  
Sunny left the titanic shadow behind.  
  
Flying forward, he shot above the silent expanse of obsidian dust like a ghost, his winged figure utterly indistinguishable from the darkness of the black sky.   
  
Soon, he saw a massive shape in the distance.   
  
It stood out against the desolate expanse of dark hills due to its ivory color, stretching for a dozen kilometers or more.   
  
At first glance, the shape was quite repulsive, resembling a gargantuan millipede — a long and twisting white body was elevated above the black dust, unmoving, with countless limbs protruding along its great length in symmetrical pairs.  
  
However, it was not a millipede. Instead…  
  
It was the bones of a great serpent. The twisting white body was its spine, and the countless pairs of limbs were its ribs. Somewhere far ahead, its immense skull rested on the black dust, partially buried in it.   
  
That was what Sunny was aiming for.   
  
Folding his wings, he smiled darkly and dove to the ground.