2111 Mixed Signals  
  
'Damn… ation…'  
  
Sunny had fought all kinds of adversaries over his long and tumultuous career as a carrier of the Nightmare Spell — and more still after his sudden and inexplicable retirement from being one. Among them were powerful Nightmare Creatures, seasoned Awakened champions, and dreadful horrors he struggled to describe.  
  
But very few of them, if any at all, had managed to put this kind of pressure on him. At least not in recent years, after he achieved Transcendence and came close to the known pinnacle of power.  
  
The mysterious shadow was different from Nightmare Creatures, because it possessed the martial skill and deadly intelligence akin to that of a human.  
  
But it was also different from humans, because its mind was utterly alien, elusive, and filled with nothing but murderous, merciless killing intent.  
  
It was fierce and ferocious, but at the same time cold and calculating, focused entirely on slaying the enemy.  
  
It would have been commendable, really, if Sunny did not find himself on the receiving end of this deadly resolve.  
  
He evaded a vicious stab, only to receive a devastating kick and stagger back. Ignoring the sharp pain in his bruised ribs, he immediately moved, deflecting a slash that would have sliced his throat open otherwise. By then, an obsidian blade was already flying at his right eye, and as he tilted his head to avoid it, a knee slammed into his abdomen, making him let out a hiss.  
  
The mysterious shadow was like a dancer that could use all of its nebulous body as a weapon, making no distinction between its blades, fists, elbows, knees, or feet. Each precise blow was either potentially fatal or meant to open him to a deadly follow-up attack, flowing effortlessly into each other, and with the ghostly smoke obscuring its movements, Sunny could not allow his focus to slip even for an instant.  
  
The rain of attacks persisted without a split second of respite, all of them chained together like a ruthless, suffocating vice.No matter how much Sunny resisted, he could not gain the initiative — he could only defend himself feverishly, barely keeping up with the lethal onslaught.  
  
Wounds and bruises slowly littered his body. His armor was cut like paper, and his bones groaned under unbearable strain, on the verge of cracking. He was not bleeding, at least, but his two remaining shadows hands had long been sacrificed. Now, even his own hands were at risk of being maimed.  
  
'Aaah…'  
  
Dodging another blow, he growled and lunged forward, meaning to ram the mysterious archer with his armored shoulder. However, the enemy simply retreated like mist, then instantly counterattacked, nearly driving one of their knives into Sunny's temple.  
  
They clashed like two dark whirlwinds, moving across the shoulder of the shadow of Condemnation as it took another titanic step. The radiant veil of swirling essence was torn apart by the fury of their battle, and they were enveloped by soothing darkness once again.  
  
The thunderous cacophony tore apart the eternal silence that reigned the Shadow Realm, and the black sky shook from the terrifying power of their blows.  
  
As Sunny and the nebulous slayer fought with their weapons, another, hidden battle was taking place as well.  
  
It was the battle for the control over the ancient shadows that surrounded them.  
  
Sunny was pressing his authority, commanding the shadows to answer his call and descend upon the archer in a manifested storm. The archer, meanwhile, was silently pressuring them into remaining still.  
  
The mysterious slayer had even managed to exert influence on the manifested hands that Sunny used, making them if not useless, then at least unreliable — enough so that they had been destroyed one after another.  
  
Unlike the physical battle, this one was not fought with weapons or martial skill. Instead, it was fought by something else… will, perhaps. Since both fighters had a claim to command them,the shadows would follow the one whose authority was more tyrannical and uncompromising.  
  
By all accounts, Sunny had no business being equal to a Great… Supreme?... being in a battle of will and authority. However, he was the Lord of Shadows. This Attribute granted him a mandate to rule them, and marked him as a chosen of Shadow God. It served as the equalizer, allowing him to breach the gap separating him from the ruthless archer.  
  
For now, neither Sunny nor his enemy had managed to overwhelm the other's will and gain command of the shadows. It was an exhausting draw… but, still. Drawing with a being of Supreme Rank in a battle of will was not a bad result.  
  
Actually…  
  
Finally managing to land a glancing blow and push the enemy back for a moment, Sunny drew a hoarse breath.  
  
He wasn't even sure what this damned shadow's Rank and Class were. Unlike the dark drifters, the mysterious archer was not made from elemental darkness, so nothing stopped Sunny from trying to peer into its essence... he just had no opportunity before.  
  
Using the momentary lull in their fierce clash — which would only last a split second, no doubt — Sunny shifted his gaze and looked inside the mysterious shadow.  
  
What he saw startled him.  
  
'What the…'  
  
The mysterious archer was a shadow. Sunny was pretty sure that they were no different from Condemnation, a shadow that had entered the Realm of Death after the being casting it perished… albeit one that seemed to have retained more sense and sharper intent. Perhaps it had gradually become an actual shadow creature by refusing to be annihilated by the Shadow Realm over the ages.  
  
In any case, he had expected to see dark embers like those that burned in the depths of his own Shadows, or at best lightless Shadow Cores like he himself possessed. Maybe even nothing except the dark expanse of a vast shadow.  
  
But, to his surprise…  
  
A beautiful, radiant core burned within the mysterious archer, shining like a silver sun.It was not a Shadow Core — it was an actual soul core, brimming with actual soul essence instead of shadow essence, like what Sunny had.  
  
'What kind of situation is this?'  
  
He was a human whose soul was nevertheless like that of a shadow, while the mysterious archer was an actual shadow who walked around with a soul core burning in their chest despite it all?  
  
How was that possible?  
  
But then again… anything was possible.  
  
If a being as weird as Sunny could exist, then why couldn't the directly opposite being to him exist, as well?  
  
Regardless…  
  
What stunned him the most was that the mysterious archer only possessed one soul core, which meant that they were a mere Beast. Considering how obviously sentient the damned thing was, that probably meant that they were a shadow of a dead human.  
  
More than that, their Rank was… strange. It was neither Supreme nor Transcendent, but rather something in between. As if the soul of a Supreme being had been damaged and weathered, losing much of its past luster.  
  
Perhaps it had even been Sacred once… who knew? Sunny could only see the current state of the shadow, not what it had been in a pristine state.  
  
In any case, the mysterious archer was not a Sovereign. Not only because their power seemed to have been eroded by the thousands of years of being digested by the Shadow Realm, but also because they did not possess a Domain. And even if they had been human once, they weren't one anymore.  
  
So, Sunny had no idea what that thing was, really.  
  
Just… a strange, tenacious shadow that was far more insidious and lethal than it had any right to be.  
  
Nothing changed the fact that he had to kill it, though.  
  
And regarding that…  
  
Sunny had an idea on how to proceed.