2288 Ember Queen  
  
The moment Slayer's first arrow hit the Milliрede Queen, Sunny saw the Great Tyrant clearly for the first time.  
  
She was quite enormous, her bulbous body encased in glistening black chitin and decorated with beautiful patterns of orange - red, as if inlaid with burning embers. The first segment of her carapace flared at the back of her head, making it seem as if the appalling creature was wearing a crown. She had no eyes, so the front of her armored head was flawlessly smooth before opening into a hideous, eerily human - like maw.  
  
That maw was now open, the last scream dying in its depths.  
  
The Millipede Queen was at least a hundred meters long, her segmented body quite thin in relation to its great length, and had been flowing across the tangled surface of the Burned Forest like a river of glistening darkness, her innumerable legs shredding the dead wood into splinters as she did. But now, the giant creature had come to an abrupt halt and fell in a mess of towering black coils.  
  
Her severed head was yet to hit the ground by the time Sunny heard a voice whispering into his ear:  
  
[You have slain an adversary.]  
  
He sighed in regret.  
  
Sunny had always missed the Nightmare Spell when the Handy Bracelet announced his kills. After all, unlike the Spell, this Memory of his was not omniscient - it did not know the names of the Nightmare Creatures he slayed, thus robbing him of the tantalizing tidbits of knowledge that were hidden in them. It was to the point that Sunny sometimes regretted that kidnapping Cassie and forcing her to whisper the names of all abominations he killed into his ear at all times was not an option.  
  
And now, the Handy Bracelet could not even gauge the Rank and Class of the slain Nightmare Creatures. That was because Sunny had built this particular part of the enchantment on an easy principle - the bracelet sensed how countless shadow fragments he received from the kill, and determined the nature of the slain Nightmare Creature accordingly.  
  
However, Sunny did not receive any shadow fragments when the Millipede Queen died. Not because it had perished to Slayer instead of him, but simply because all seven of his cores were already fully saturated.  
  
If he bothered to summon his runes, he would see a radiant…  
  
Shadow Fragments: [7000/7000].  
  
That had happened quite speedily after the Shadow Legion was unleashed upon the world, considering that every being killed by one of his shades was counted as his own prey. Well, and he had ventured into the Shadow Realm as well, hunting down shadows on its outskirts to hasten the process.  
  
Sunny was already as powerful as he could become. Now, killing enemies enabled his Shadow Legion instead of his soul.  
  
'I should probably redesign the Handy Bracelet…'  
  
There had to be a way to enchant his bracelet into drawing knowledge directly from the newly arrived shades instead of counting the shadow fragments. Who knew? Possibly it would even be able to learn more about them, that way.  
  
But now was not the time to contemplate interesting enchantments. The Millipede Queen's severed head fell to the ground in a rain of blood and broken chitin. Thousands of lesser abominations seemed to lose cohesion for a few seconds, then exploded into a mindless frenzy.  
  
The other Great Tyrants took note of their sister and rival dying, as well.  
  
Most importantly, Slayer had revealed herself to the adversary swarm. Now, she and Sunny were alone behind adversary lines, facing the frenzied flood of grotesque millipedes in solitude. Nevertheless, he was satisfied. He was ecstatic.  
  
'I won!'  
  
His victory over the Black Millipede tribe would not be cemented for a while - a few months, most likely - but it had been decided the moment the hideous Queen died. Now that her shade was in his Soul Sea, the power of the Shadow Legion would increase… and it would continue to increase exponentially as more Black Millipedes joined the ranks of silent shadows.  
  
The nests of their detestable tribe would fall. He considered summoning the Ember Queen - a name Sunny gave the slain Great Tyrant in the absence of the Nightmare Spell due to the fiery patterns on her black carapace - right now, but then decided against it. After all, the shades of lesser millipedes had already been dispelled. They would not be restored for a few days. So, her presence would not shift the scales of the battle in his favor today.  
  
Sunny watched the traumatic flood of powerful Nightmare Creatures rush at Slayer as a tide.  
  
'I think… they might be angry?'  
  
He smiled internally, happy with his harvest. Finally, after all this time, one of the Millipede Queen's was in his grasp.  
  
Slayer lowered her bow and allowed it to turn into a slender black chain, which wrapped itself around her wrist like an intricate vambrace. Then, she unsheathed her short swords and faced the frenzied swarm with cold, fearless malice.  
  
As if fighting thousands of Corrupted and Great Nightmare Creatures something worthy of her trepidation.  
  
'You can retreat now.'  
  
He had already accomplished the main goal of today's battle, so letting his Shadows sustain damage served no purpose.  
  
Slayer lingered for a few seconds. Her lips were hidden behind a veil, but he could sense her smile faintly - there was no joy in that smile, naturally, just a hint of cold and sinister scorn. Throwing one last look at the approaching millipedes, she sheathed her swords in one smooth motion and turned her back to them, moving with the elegance of a graceful dancer. The skirt of her light armor swayed, and a moment later, she was gone - summoned back to her cell in the dark replica of the Nameless Temple.  
  
Sunny himself stepped through the shadows and appeared by Saint's side, wrapping himself around her to bestow more power on the general of his Shadow Legion.  
  
The battle raged on for some time after that, even though the outcome was already clear. Saint and Nightmare slayed a few champions of the Black Millipede Tribe, while Fiend made a show of picking up handfuls of desperately struggling abominations and throwing them into his infernal maw. The gluttonous giant seemed quite happy.  
  
The most powerful shades distinguished themselves in the carnage, as well.  
  
Naturally, no one was more deadly than Sunny himself.  
  
His towering Shell clashed with the giant Great Devils - some of them even larger than their Tyrants. He had to kill a few, since his own Millipede Queen was going to need powerful protectors. And he did manage to destroy two of them before things turned for the worse.  
  
At some point, one of the Devils opened its maw and spat a long jet of boiling orange - red liquid, which splashed across Sunny's jade breastplate like a stream of radiant lava. To his shock, the surface of the Mantle actually began to melt, as if being eaten through by acid. Another Devil breathed out a cloud of ash that surrounded Sunny, then turned into a swarm of ghostly worms that wriggled their way into the cracks of his armor, penetrating the mass of the Shadow Shell to find his own shadow hidden deep within it.  
  
A third Devil emerged from the tangle below, wrapping its revolting body around his legs. The thousand scythe - like legs of the Great abominations were like a chainsaw, biting into the Jade Mantle with traumatic force. There were lesser millipedes burrowing into the flesh of his Shell, as well, having found paths inside through the cracks created by the Devils.  
  
Somewhat regretful, Sunny had to abandon the crumbling Shell and continue the battle as himself instead.  
  
Soon enough, the battle was over. His Shadow Legion was largely annihilated, and those of its champions that remained were drowning in the endless swarm of abominations. No matter how powerful they were, and how powerful Sunny was, they simply could not resist the sheer numbers of the Black Millipede tribe.  
  
So, not wishing to have to wait until his most powerful shades restored themselves, Sunny simply summoned them back into his soul, dismissed his Shadows, and escaped by using Shadow Step.  
  
'Damn it! All those soul shards,'  
  
If there one regret he had, it was that he would not be able to harvest the carapaces of the slain millipedes and their soul shards today. Instead, they would be devoured by their own kin, making the surviving abominations stronger and giving the remaining Queens enough fuel to birth more monsters.  
  
It was all going to be his in the end, though.  
  
Reaching the edges of the Burned Forest, both incarnations of Sunny stepped out of the shadows and smiled, satisfied despite suffering another defeat.