1377 Battle in the Shallows

The ancient temple was quaking from the furious clash between the monstrous dweller of the depths and Nephis. Flashes of blinding white light and waves of incinerating heat tore the darkness apart, sending the deep shadows drowning the dark expanse of the flooded hall into a demented dance.

Sunny danced with the shadows like a specter of death.

Wreathed in a billowing black mantle, his figure had turned vague and elusive. He moved across the restless surface of the black water with stunning speed, no different from how he would have moved on solid ground. Sunny's attacks were lethal, unpredictable, and almost impossible to trace — it was as if he was nowhere and everywhere at once.

Due to his speed and the ability to step through shadows, it seemed that the dark figure wearing the fearsome black mask was in several places at the same time. So was the merciless blade of his jade longsword —hissing furiously as it cut everything in its path, the cursed jian cruelly reaped the lives of the Drowned.

Still... Sunny was struggling.

He was struggling enough to not want to admit it. Beneath the polished black wood of his mask, beads of sweat were rolling down his pale face. The Drowned were both powerful and dreadful adversaries... each of them was a Nightmare Creature strong enough to threaten the life of a Saint, let alone of a Master like him.

Their black tentacles allowed them to move at a speed that was no less stunning than his, and made their movements hard to predict. More than that, the tentacles were both supremely flexible and mighty enough to crush enchanted stone with ease. Being caught in their vile embrace meant certain death.

The creatures possessed a pair of human hands, as well. They were insidiously cunning and wielded their weapons with devious skill... worse than that, the Drowned feared neither pain nor death. They knew only a dark and cold resolve to see the enemy fall.

A foe like that was the worst nightmare of an Awakened, especially when there were so many of them.

And that was without even considering the eerie power of the sybil who was twisting the future in favor of the abominations. It was because of her influence that Sunny felt like he was not even one mistake away from dying, but rather one step behind staying alive.

'D—damnation.'

It was hard... too hard. Sunny was overcome by a bizarre sensation. He knew for a fact that he was just as skilled as he had been before venturing into the flooded temple, but at the same time, it was as if he was back in the crimson labyrinth of the Forgotten Shore — unsure of his footing and ignorant of how to wield a sword.

The sense of control and clear understanding he had become accustomed to were gone, replaced by uncertainty. His attacks routinely missed the intended target, while the enemies appeared where he had not expected them to be. Sunny felt like he was stumbling blindly in the dark.

He was enduring, for now, by expecting failure and imbuing his battle style with as much fault tolerance as he could. Several of the Drowned were already dead, their severed bodies floating in the water, while he was still in one piece. But how long would that last?

...Luckily, Sunny wasn't alone.

He had powerful allies to rely on, as well.

Saint was the first to join him in the slaughter. Her graceful figure was surrounded by something much darker than the shadows populating the ancient temple. Jumping into the water, which reached up to her waist, she slammed her round shield into an attacking Drowned Warrior, shattering his spear and bones. Her dark blade moved lightlessly, severing a tentacle that was trying to wrap itself around her arm, and then plunging into the creature's neck.

A moment later, the taciturn knight lunged forward, a tall wave rising behind her. Augmented by one of Sunny's shadows and the Stifled Scream, Saint seemed more than capable of fighting in the water. Moving with the calm precision of a flawless battle machine, she descended on the Drowned like a deathly calamity.

Her ruby eyes blazed with indifferent menace.

Fiend was only a split second behind her. The infernal ogre was also empowered by one of Sunny's shadows... however, he had also been bestowed with a measure of Neph's flame. Unlike the taciturn knight, who could not be augmented by the flame because of her affinity to true darkness, the gluttonous Shadow seemed to benefit from it especially due to his affinity to fire.

The incinerating glow of his fierce eyes and terrifying maw, which was usually red, had turned pure white. It was as though an incandescent star was burning beneath the glossy black silver of his fearsome armor.

The training Fiend had been receiving from Saint was not wasted, either. His movements were not quite like those of a seasoned battle master, but still showed a chilling level of skill. Using his long arms and dagger-like claws, the steel devil tore into the flesh of the Drowned, gruesomely

ripping them apart.

While the taciturn knight seemed to have been able to adjust to the eerie influence of the sybil due to her sublime mastery of combat, Fiend simply gave up on trying and chose to overpower the enemies with brute force instead. A barrage of blows rained on his polished black armor, but none of them were able to dent it yet, let alone pierce it.

When the infernal ogre found himself surrounded and in danger of being pulled under the water, he simply used Shadow Step to escape and savagely attack the enemies from behind.

Just like Sunny's other two Shadows, Nightmare received the help of a shadow as well. The tenebrous stallion leaped high into the air and landed in the midst of the Drowned, using his fangs, horns, and hooves to crush and savage them. His sable coat was glistening in the bloody darkness, and the fearsome aura of dread emanating from him made the abominations sluggish.

The Drowned were a whole Rank above the dark destrier... but several Classes below him. Empowered by the shadow, the darkness shrouding the flooded hall, the fear of his enemies, and the army of nightmares residing in the lightless abyss that served him as a soul, the dreadful stallion was more than capable of holding his own in this fight.

That said, Nightmare was not a creature suited best for direct combat. He was mostly relying on his speed and agility to stay ahead of the enemy while savaging them with his attacks. It was also not easy for him to lull enemies of a higher Rank into slumber. While insidious and terribly destructive, his Dream Curse required time to infect its victims.

Nevertheless, it seemed that all the Drowned in the temple were suffering from the initial stages of its effect. It was as though they were all slightly drowsy, their movements lacking full force and precision. Nightmare was helping not only himself, but also everyone else fighting against the Defiled sybil and her minions.

Cassie's Echoes joined the battle, too.

The clockwork man jumped into the water, his movements both fluid and strangely jarring. The four blades held by the artificial Echo spun, slicing and dicing the flesh of the enemies. Most of the strikes were stopped by the armor of the Drowned Warriors, but not all of them. Dark blood flowed into the cold water.

The Echo of the Defiled Sybil attacked, as well. Slithering eel-like tendrils extended from beneath her red skirt, and the slender figure, which once seemed like a human, suddenly rose high above the battlefield. Moving with terrifying speed, the creature lunged forward and grabbed one of the demons, rising the abomination above the water.

As soon as the Drowned Warrior peered into the Echo's eyes, his body convulsed. An indescribable sound escaped from the mouth of the demon, followed by a fountain of blood. A moment later, the lifeless body was tossed to the side like a rag doll, and the Echo was already moving to find the next victim.

The battle raged, making the water boil and shaking the ancient temple. Only two figures remained aloof and motionless in the flooded hall.

Once was the Defiled sybil, who observed the bloodshed from a distance. The other was Cassie, who was observing the sybil.