1670 Welcome to the Jungle

The Fragment of the Shadow Realm was vast, its darkness drowning not only the surface of the dead god's sternum, but also swallowing a considerable stretch of the abominable jungle thriving in its hollow depths. The Dream Curse had lulled the Nightmare Creatures populating the area to sleep, so it was relatively safe.

Sunny and Nephis moved with sufficient speed, reaching the edges of the Fragment in a matter of hours. They could have been much faster, of course, but he used that time to teach her about the dangers of what lay beyond.

"The jungle is hidden from the gaze of the sky, but it is much more dangerous than the surface. The Nightmare Creatures of Godgrave are all born on the surface, yet only those who are strong enough to survive there descend into the Hollows. Here, they can exist indefinitely... in theory. In practice, they are all cannibals. The competition for water and nourishment is fierce, so the inhabitants of the jungle constantly fight and devour each other.”

Nightmare Creatures were known to battle among themselves - it was only in the presence of humans that they united to destroy the uncorrupted first. It was much worse in the Hollows, though, where every abomination was of a type that had to satisfy its hunger often. Life and death came swiftly, and only the most vicious ones lasted for a while.

His tone remained indifferent.

"Only the strongest and most fierce abominations get to descend into the jungle, and only the most ferocious of them get to survive here. It's a boiling pot of horror, where appalling monsters endlessly fight against each other, and only the most dreadful of them gets to live. As a result, the average power of a Nightmare Creature from the Hollows is truly daunting, and has been constantly growing for centuries."

Nephis sighed behind him.

"Doesn't it remind you of something?"

Sunny shrugged.

"It's a bit like a demented, accelerated version of evolution, I guess.”

She looked at a sleeping abomination nearby, a contemplative expression on her face.

"...I was thinking that they are just like us."

He remained silent for a moment.

"I'm not sure I follow."

Nephis looked away from the Nightmare Creature and used her sword to slice apart a thick vine that barred her path. Her voice sounded a bit wistful:

"The Spell sends human youths into the First Nightmare, and only those who are strong enough get to return. Then, it tosses them into the Dream Realm, where they need to constantly fight for survival. To grow stronger, they need to consume Nightmare Creatures... or each other. So, we humans aren't that different from the abominations of Godgrave."

Sunny smiled darkly. The parallel was indeed there, it was just that the pace of human advancement was magnitudes faster than that of the Nightmare Creatures here in the Hollows. What had taken the abominations thousands of years could very well be accomplished by humanity in less than a century.

The Spell was cruel, but effective.

He shrugged.

"In any case, this jungle is teeming with Great Nightmare Creatures. There are Cursed ones here, as well - I'll do my best to help us avoid them today. There are some Corrupted abominations too. These ones are too weak to contend against the stronger creatures, so they have developed many vile survival strategies."

His face twisted behind the onyx visor.

"Many are tiny and aim to burrow into your flesh. Most are venomous. Some lure their prey into a helpless state with mind attacks or illusions. Pretty much all of them are great masters of disguise, blending in with the jungle. Try to rely on your hearing more than you do on your sight... and if we encounter a swarm of vermin, don't hesitate to burn them all to ash."

Sunny's own most glaring weakness was that he did not possess means of dealing potent damage over a large area. So, he was vulnerable to vast swarms of tiny parasites. In that sense, having Nephis with him was a boon - her ability to control incinerating flames covered for his weakness.

They had always made a good pair in battle.

He smiled quietly.

"Everything I mentioned can be applied to the plants here, as well. This abominable jungle is just as predatory as the Nightmare Creatures populating it. So, be wary of things that seem like they can't move, too."

Nephis remained silent for a while, then said, her tone slightly amused:

"I see that you've chosen a lovely place to live, Lord Shadow. A bit deadly, though."

He chuckled.

"Don't you live in Bastion, Lady Nephis? That place is far more deadly, I think."

She didn't answer, perhaps expressing agreement.

Slowly, the impenetrable darkness around them receded. They were approaching the boundary of the Fragment.

Not long after that, the true appearance of the subterranean jungle finally revealed itself.

Sunny and Nephis stopped, looking at the wild expanse of vibrant forest in front of them.

The Hollows were mostly dark, but there were towering pillars of light falling from above here and there - those were the cracks in the dome of the ancient sternum. Currently, each was connected to the jungle by colossal tendrils of vines, moss, and vermilion growth, each functioning like a twisted sky bridge.

When it rained on the surface, great waterfalls fell from the cracks, washing over the jungle and causing devastating flash floods.

When the veil of clouds was torn, the vertical bridges ignited in a grandiose conflagration and turned to ash, which rained on the jungle and fertilized its soil.

The cracks in the bone weren't the only source of light in the Hollows, either. The jungle itself glowed with dim crimson light, many iridescent plants growing in the damp darkness. They were feeding on diffused sunlight through the vines extended to the surface, and then slowly released it, emanating light and heat.

The sight of it all was alien, eerie, and frightening.

But also darkly breathtaking.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Nephis dismissed her flames and studied the jungle for a few moments. Then, she closed her eyes and listened to it.

Eventually, she said:

"I don't think we'll make it in time if we proceed on foot. Should we fly?"

Sunny glanced at her and hesitated for a moment.

"I'm not that great at aerial combat... at the moment. Flying will be much faster, yes. But also much more dangerous."

Nephis thought it over, then nodded calmly.

"Then, let's fly…”