1870 Career Advancement

Eventually, it was Sunny's turn to enter battle.

By then, the expedition force had already pushed the jungle many kilometers away from the slopes of the Collarbone Plain. A temporary camp was established near the system of massive lifts that the army had used to descend to the lowlands, and the soldiers from the first war party were fast asleep despite the suffocating heat, their tired bodies covered in sweat.

Flakes of ash were swirling in the air.

By then, Sunny had replaced Weaver's Mask with [Definitely Not Me], shaping the lesser Memory to resemble the Divine one. After some hesitation, he also commanded it to change the color of his hair to white.

It was a bit nostalgic. The reason for the sudden masquerade was entirely pragmatic, though.

After observing Nephis and Gilead lead their parties into battle, he realized that it was important to not only kill the Nightmare Creatures, but also to be seen killing them by the soldiers — the very sight of their commander fighting could instill the warriors with strength, provided that the commander was a menacing presence on the battlefield.

Both Nephis and Summer Knight were highly visible wherever they went. Nephis had her white armor, silver hair, and blinding radiance. Sir Gilead was simply made of light when he assumed his Transcendent form. Sunny, however, was like a mass of darkness when he fought. Considering his dire mobility, the soldiers would barely be able to tell where he was.

Therefore, he used the enchantment that [Definitely Not me] had inherited from Autumn Leaf to change the color of his hair. Hopefully, that was going to alleviate the problem somewhat.

Sunny had also discussed the upcoming battle with the Saints assigned to his war party. There were eight of them, all hailing from the vassal clans of Valor. He had no prior impression of most of them, except for Saint Rivalen of Aegis Rose — who was either the father of the young Master Tristan, whom Sunny had beaten in a duel once.

Saint Rivalen, also known as Shield Wall, possessed an Aspect that excelled in defense and terrain control. Both were useful qualities in a battle such as this, so Sunny had high hopes for him.

He had almost expected that the proud Legacy Saints would be reluctant to obey a stranger with no background like as himself, but they accepted his authority silently. The words spoken by Nephis seemed to have had the desired effect — all Transcendents were warriors tempered by countless life-or-death battles, and those who had met death respected strength above all else.

They were also professionals, and knew the importance of discipline for a military force. In battle, there was no time to second-guess your orders and question your superior — to survive, one had to trust their commanders and hope that those above them knew what they were doing.

Luckily, Sunny was well-versed in all things having to do with slaughter.

The war party set forward long before the agreed-upon time, marched across the scorching surface of the bone, and assembled into a battle formation behind the combat line.

Sunny was giving his last instructions to his Saints:

"...I'll remind you one last time. Remember — this is a marathon, not a sprint. There will be another battle tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, until we either reach the Second Rib or all die miserable deaths. In fact, the fighting will become much fiercer once we ascend the Reach, since the great Hollow inside it is much larger, and populated by much more harrowing things."

He stared at them from behind his dark mask.

"Don't be a hero. Preserve your bodies. Conserve your essence. Above all else, safeguard your life… you might think that it is a noble deed, to sacrifice yourself to save a thousand soldiers, but without your strength, ten thousand will die the next day. A living coward is more useful to me than a courageous corpse."

Saint Rivalen gave him a measured look, then sighed and shook his head.

"It's of no use, Lord Shadow. We are of the Sword Domain, which means that most of us have siblings, spouses, children, and friends out there among the soldiers. It is a reasonable thing, to sacrifice a few to save many… but if there is someone you treasure among those few, all reason goes out of the window. It is not a question of courage or cowardice, really, just selfish interest."

Sunny stared at him coldly.

"Keep your selfish interests to yourself, then. As a Saint of the Sword Domain, I expect you to prioritize the needs of the army above your own. If you fail your duty and jeopardize the mission out of misguided sentimentality, I might just kill you — as well as your siblings, spouses, children, and friends — myself."

Saint Rivalen seemed a little indignant. The gallant man ground his teeth silently, then gave him a stiff nod.

"None of us will jeopardize the mission, Lord Shadow."

Sunny looked away.

"Good. Now, prepare…"

He had to follow his own advice, as well. Not the part about staying alive and keeping a cool head, but the part about rationing his essence and treating the battle as a marathon.

Luckily, Serpent was with him, and would be able to replenish plenty of his essence as they went. However, Sunny still had to be conservative with what he did, and how intensely he fought.

In practical terms, this meant that he would not be summoning the Shadow Shell unless he absolutely needed to, and could not rely too much on Shadow Manifestation. Which was fine… Shadow Manifestation was mostly useful to deal with large amounts of weaker enemies, and he had an entire war party to do just that.

Sunny took a deep breath and looked at the furious battle raging ahead.

"Go!"

The Saints rushed forward.

Retreat was always the trickiest maneuver to perform without letting it descend into a massacre, but the Sword Army was trained well enough to perform it flawlessly. One Sunny and his Saints entered the fray, a war horn wailed across the jungle, and the exhausted soldiers of the second war party slowly disengaged, moving back and passing through the ranks of the third party like water through a sieve.

But Sunny did not see any of that.

Gaining terrible speed, he sent a pulse of essence into his muscles and pushed himself off the ground, soaring into an astonishing leap.

He shot over the battle formation of the second war party, the line of Echoes moving in front of it, and a wide stretch of the scarlet jungle beyond, landing with a thunderous boom on the crawling carpet of red moss.

Immediately, there was movement all around him, the jungle coming alive to consume and digest the invader.

Sunny reached into the shadows and pulled a black odachi out of them, raising it into a high stance.

Suddenly, it struck him that the humbly named "war party" was, in fact, larger than the entire First Evacuation Army, at least as far as the number of Awakened warriors went... and much more powerful.

And he was in charge of the whole thing.

'...If that is not a career advancement, then I don't know what is.'

Sunny extended his shadow sense far and wide, then took a step forward.

'Let's do a good job.'