1871 Shadow of Death

Sunny allowed his shadow sense to expand like a tide, enveloping the entire battlefield. The battle line established by the previous two war parties stretched across many kilometers, so an avalanche of information instantly poured into his mind, threatening to overwhelm him.

There were tens of thousands of soldiers, each using a unique Aspect. Awakened, Masters, and Saints. There were countless abominations, as well, ranging from lumbering monstrosities to vast swarms of tiny vermin. There was the jungle itself, too — moving, growing, hungering.

The clash of it all made a myriad of shadows dance in a staggering mayhem of motion, making Sunny draw a heavy breath.

Luckily, he had long learned how to deal with his Transcendent senses. Staying in the outskirts of NQSC had been a harsh lesson, but an effective one — Sunny knew how to cast the net of his perception wide, but only pay attention to important details.

After all, people were not usually overwhelmed by looking at a busy image. They simply saw what they needed to see, and filtered out the rest.

A few heartbeats later, he was aware of what was happening across the entire battlefield. It did put a strain on his mind, but in return, the level of awareness Sunny now possessed was unmatched — a priceless quality for a military commander.

The second war party was retreating, the third party was advancing. Summer Knight and his Saints were disentangling themselves from the enemy and leading their retinues back. In turn, Sunny and his Transcendent champions were supposed to cover their retreat.

'Good. Good…'

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

Life had been so complicated lately, but battle… battle was simple. It was kill or be killed, with nothing between.

The jungle was boiling with abominable life all around him. Even though it had only recently crawled back to the surface from the Hollows, the scarlet foliage was already thick, and all kinds of creatures were rushing in his direction.

His war party had its work cut out for it, but these infantile horrors were not for him to deal with.

Some distance away, spread out in the jungle, the Saints were already engaging with the enemy.

Sunny took another step forward, and his shadows suddenly split, separating into three inky silhouettes.

Then, the inky darkness surged.

A graceful stone knight rose from one shadow, two ruby flames igniting coldly behind the visor of her helmet.

She raised her round shield and calmly struck its rim twice with the blade of her black sword.

A towering fiend forged from black silver rose from another, his carapace littered with blade-like spikes. Each of his claws was like a razor-sharp dagger, and infernal flames were burning with hungry malice in his demonic eyes.

Finally, a great serpent slithered from the third shadow, its body like an endless onyx wall. The serpent twisted its neck, which was like a black tower, and its enormous head rose above the jungle, observing the sea of scarlet moss and dense foliage from far above.

A moment later, the three shadows rose from the ground, fusing with Saint, Fiend, and Serpent.

Immediately, there was a change. Saint's armor shone with dark radiance, and wisps of dark smoke seem to rise from beneath it. The flames burning in Fiend's eyes grew more intense, but were painted a darker and more sinister hue. Serpent, meanwhile, seemed to grow even more solid, the gemlike surface of his onyx scales seemingly absorbing light.

Sunny gestured with his black odachi.

"Go."

Saint silently moved toward the left side of the battlefront. Serpent slithered toward the right side like a torrent of darkness. Fiend remained in place, exhaling two jets of red flame from his nostrils — in the coming battle, he would be the centerpiece of the entire offense.

Sunny, meanwhile, dissolved into shadows.

He had no particular spot in mind for himself. Instead, being aware of the entire battlefield and capable of teleportation, he would be moving from one peril to another and assisting the other Saints.

'Eight hours…'

Eight hours of relentless combat was a little bit too much, even for him. It would have been fine if that was the end, but the push to the Breastbone Reach had only just started. The next couple of weeks would be a hellish trial… one more for his collection of vile ordeals.

'There.'

He sensed it through the shadows — an especially dire presence barreling through the scarlet undergrowth toward the loose formation of the war party, not too far away from him.

The abominations of Godgrave were strange creatures. They were born weak, but became incredibly powerful and ferocious in a matter of days, or sometimes even hours, by battling and devouring each other.

The most fierce, ruthless, and lucky of them became strong enough to descend into the Hollows, away from the annihilating radiance of the sky,

and compete with the dreadful abominations dwelling there for a spot in the nurturing twilight. The Hollows were so dangerous because there was no natural limit to the lifespan of the Nightmare Creatures there — only their own savage instincts and hunting abilities.

The jungle on the First Rib had been burned away recently with the help of Saint Tyris, so most of the abominations facing the expedition force were still comparatively weak. However, there were exceptional cases even among them. The most dire danger, though, were the old Nightmare Creatures that had lost the competition for food and resources in the Hollows.

Driven by hunger and desperation, they sometimes climbed back to the surface to satiate their hunger by preying on the weaker abominations.

Their situation might have been desperate, but their power and experience could not be underestimated. The Awakened soldiers had no hope of standing in the way of these old monsters, so they had to be eliminated at all costs.

The creature Sunny had senses was one of these seasoned predators.

Emerging from the shadows, he barred the path of the vile creature. One look at it, and Sunny's expression turned somber.

'A Great Monster.'

The Great Monster was gaunt and weakened, its body covered in festering wounds. Its power seemed to be greatly diminished, and honestly, it looked on the verge of toppling to the ground, dead. The Hollows must not have been kind to this dreadful creature in recent years — or maybe even decades.

But a dying beast was often the most dangerous. There was a feverish gleam in the bloodshot eyes of the abomination, and a hint of predatory cunning in its demented gaze.

Sunny himself, meanwhile, was not in his best state. His three shadows were out there accompanying Saint, Fiend, and Serpent, so he was devoid of any augmentations. All he had was his raw strength as a Transcendent Terror.

And his skill.

And, of course…

'My will.'

He was the shadow of Death, after all. If he willed something to die, his determination had to be worth something.

'Then, die.'