1863 Shadow Commander

Of course, the battle did not end with the death of the appalling Great Monster — it was only just beginning. Sunny remained calm and collected as he extended his senses across the vast battlefield, submerging himself into its violent immensity, and determined his next prey.

In moments like these, he had to be strategic. Every step had to be deliberate, every action had to be precisely calculated. He had to be effective, but above that, he had to be efficient — both in his own actions and in how he used the people and tools at his disposal. Otherwise, the battle formation would not be able to contend against the overwhelming force of the enemy sooner or later.

The authority vested in him was great, but the threat facing the war party was greater. If he wanted his army to prevail, he had to be surgical in how he moved around the battlefield and had to command his champions with both finesse and foresight.

Luckily, Sunny already possessed a decisive advantage when compared to other generals — his detailed, comprehensive, and instantaneous awareness of everything that was happening on the battlefield. While not as blatant as his other powers, his shadow sense was a miraculous ability. It was, perhaps, the one power that made him seem like a demigod the most.

'...I'm a general now?'

Sunny left the smoldering remains of the Great Monster behind and rushed to his next appointment. It was to help Shield Wall deal with the Corrupted Tyrant that the Saint was struggling against — which would take a few minutes, at most.

After that, the battle turned into a blur.

He moved across the battlefield like a shadow, emerging from the darkness to clash with the most dangerous foes spawned by the scarlet infestation. Ghastly beasts, vast swarms of abominable vermin that flowed like a tide, grotesque plants that sprawled across hundreds of meters, waiting for prey to walk into their hungry maws or grabbing them with thorny vines… after a while, Sunny felt his curiosity wane.

He could not even be bothered to remember the endless parade of deadly horrors he had to destroy, let alone wonder what they were called. All he wanted was to cut them down as swiftly and safely as possible, then move on to the next crisis.

As time went on, Sunny was drawn into the cadence of the battle. He should have grown tired, moving slower and with more caution — but instead, he had only become more ruthless, deadly, and domineering.

His black odachi was like a harbinger of death and devastation. Wherever the figure in onyx armor appeared, severed corpses fell to the ground, and blood flowed like a river, quenching the boundless thirst of the scarlet moss.

He felt as if rust was falling off his joints, tendons, and mind. It had been a long time since he had an opportunity to temper himself in this kind of combat — dire, daunting, and relentless. Most importantly of all, he was fighting alone, devoid of the support of his Shadows and any augmentation.

Sunny had grown used to relying on his overwhelming strength in the last few years. His strength was usually enhanced manyfold by the shadows, Saint and Fiend were always fighting by his side, and more often than not, he faced his enemies while embraced by the soothing darkness of a Shadow Shell.

It was such a change of pace, to face death armed with nothing but his sword, his skill, and his cunning once again. Such a battle was a dire challenge, but not an unwelcome one… rather, it was strangely nostalgic. Sunny was almost enjoying himself — or rather, he would have if not for the fact that there was no space in his mind for any unnecessary emotion or thought.

His mind was on the verge of overloading, as it was. In this state of extreme and endless mental strain, everything became sharper, clearer, and more vivid. The past and the future disappeared, leaving only the present to exist. People often called it a state of flow — however, Sunny did not agree with such a definition. The word flow suggested something calm and tranquil, like smooth water.

But what he felt was harsh and violent, full of a furious desire for destruction.

Like raging flame.

'Let's burn, then…'

The world around him was burning, anyway.

As the war party advanced forward, the soldiers set the scarlet infestation aflame. There was no other way to destroy it — no matter how many Nightmare Creatures the soldiers killed, no matter how many trees and slithering vines they cut down, the jungle itself was a ghastly predator. Every blade of grass and tuft of moss was either deadly itself or was potentially hiding a lethal threat.

Therefore, each legion had at least one centuria composed of Awakened with a high affinity to fire. Their job was to cleanse the white bone surface from the scarlet infestation after the worst of the fighting was done.

The war party clashed with the Nightmare Creatures, cut them down,

then set the jungle aflame and advanced once the scarlet taint was reduced to embers and ash.

The air was suffused with unbearable heat.

Sunny and the Saints, however, were fighting ahead of the battle formation. Therefore, they often found themselves surrounded by smoke and fire, fighting the most dreadful abominations amidst the burning jungle. The world was like a dark, fiery hell… if hell was sprawled on the bones of a dead god and wanted to consume them.

Despite that, the eight Saints under Sunny's command remained undaunted. He had to give credit where credit was due — these men and women were made from sterner stuff. Even though even a Transcendent was not safe in the dreadful hell of Godgrave, and all of them were struggling to contend with the dire perils of the scarlet jungle, none flinched in the face of danger.

Instead, they held fast and tenaciously overcame one nightmarish challenge after another, showcasing stalwart excellence.

Each was a force to be reckoned with… better yet, each was unique, possessing powerful Aspects, mighty Transcendent forms, and fearsome battle arts — especially the minority of them who had become Saints before the Chain of Nightmares, and had therefore spent much more time coming into their power.

Sunny was not arrogant enough to tackle every obstacle personally. He knew that he had to pace himself, but more importantly, he knew to use the best available tool to solve a problem.

Just like in the case of the Great Monster he had slain at the start of the battle, the fact that he could defeat an enemy did not mean that he was the best person to do so. His Aspect was inherently flexible, but depending on the situation, someone else could very well be a more optimal choice to deal with it — like Fiend had been in the clash with the Black Tiger.

Sunny was not a lone warrior today. He was a commander.

Therefore, he used the tools at his disposal — the Saints — with calculated finesse and frugal efficiency. Time, effort, and human lives — those were the resources he could not waste, and had to make sure that as little of them as possible was expended.

…Of course, the most effective tools at his disposal were his Shadows.