1875 End of Shift

The soldiers of the third party had been anxious before the battle. Of course, they were — Godgrave was like a feverish nightmare, and most of them had already witnessed the chilling horrors of the scarlet jungle. Now, with Princess Morgan gone and the Sword Domain itself in jeopardy, an air of doubt and uncertainty hung over the army.

However, the main reason for their anxiety was the identity of their commander.

The Lord of Shadows had a fearsome reputation and looked frightful, enough to inspire confidence in his martial prowess. He had survived alone in Godgrave for many years, after all — surely, a man like him was perfectly suited to be placed in charge of a war party.

But those were just rumors and second-hand knowledge. In truth, none of the soldiers truly knew him or had seen him fight — except for the Fire Keepers serving Lady Changing Star, no one had. He was a stranger, and therefore, it was hard to trust in his ability to lead them into battle.

When the battle did start, however…

The doubts of the soldiers were alleviated in the most striking way.

A sense of silent astonishment came to replace them.

The third war party had a perfect view of the moment when the Lord of Shadows leaped over the battle formation and dove into the depths of the jungle without showing any kind of fear or hesitation. An infuriated roar resounded from the spot where he had landed, and dozens of trees toppled, hinting that a scene of terrible carnage was happening out there, not too far ahead.

After that, they only caught glimpses of him.

The figure encased in an intricate suit of onyx armor seemed to be… everywhere. It was as if he was in several places at the same time. The soldiers did not know how their commander managed to move across the vast length of the battlefield with such speed, but he always appeared where he was needed the most.

His white hair danced in the air, and his black odachi struck true without fail, bringing down the most dreadful Nightmare Creatures down to the ground. It was as if he was a messenger of death, reaping the lives of their enemies with cold and emotionless ruthlessness.

The soldiers were busy fighting their own foes to pay what was happening ahead much attention, at first. An endless tide of abominations rushed at them from the scarlet jungle — there were not enough words in the human language to describe the appalling hideousness of them all, and no time to discern the horrid details to their appearance.Instead of gawking at the Nightmare Creatures, the warriors of the Sword Army strained their bodies and minds to the absolute limit in order to survive.

Clouds of arrows fell into the moving carpet of abominations. Aspect powers rained from above, tearing hideous bodies apart. Thousands of Awakened warriors clashed with the enemy in melee, desperately trying to block the avalanche of claws and fangs with their shields while slaying the creatures with their enchanted blades.

Masters served as the cornerstones of the battle line, rallying the Awakened around them. The officers bellowed orders, adjusting the formation and rotating fresh centuriae to the front. A terrible cacophony of screams, screeching wails, and roars enveloped the battlefield...

The war machine was churning, grinding humans and Nightmare Creatures alike to dust.

Once a wave of enemies was eradicated, the jungle was set aflame. Ash danced in the air, and unbearable heat washed over the sweating soldiers like a suffocating cloud. Pushing away the corpses of the dead abominations, they marched forward in pursuit of the flame.

All the while, the grey sky above shone with diffused, but blinding radiance. The soldiers knew that Saint Tyris of the White Feather clan was present to protect them from the incandescent white abyss… and yet, it was still a terrifying feeling, to know that only a brittle veil of clouds stood between them and certain death.

The soldiers were only able to maintain composure because what they were witnessing overwhelmed their sense of fear. Fear was a finite emotion, after all once a certain threshold of terror was reached, it lost all meaning.

Nevertheless…

After a while, the fighters of the war party noticed that something strange was going on.

Their dire and horrific assault on the scarlet jungle... was going too smoothly.

They had already experienced fighting against the jungle while traversing the Collarbone Plain, so they knew what to expect. The battle was terribly strenuous and ghastly, yes. People were dying, either killed by the frenzied Nightmare Creatures or by the scarlet infestation itself. And yet, too few of them were losing their lives.

The reason was simple — it was because nothing they couldn't deal with reached the battle formation.

There were extremely powerful Nightmare Creatures hiding in the jungle, even if its current incarnation was only a day or two old. There were indescribable hazards, as well.

However,the only abominations that attacked the war party were those that could be dealt with by Awakened and Ascended.

It wasn't long until the soldiers realized why...

It was because of the Lord of Shadows.

Their unfamiliar, cold, and sinister commander was much more competent than what they had ever expected him to be.

Slowly, the war party came to realize why Lady Nephis had put the Hermit Saint of Godgrave in charge.

He was like a force of nature... a walking calamity for those who found themselves on the wrong side of his merciless blade.

As the battle raged on, the soldiers witnessed more of what he did, as well.

Their eyes widened, and their spirits slowly surged.

The Lord of Shadows was swift, decisive, and incredibly lethal. In fact, he was deadlier than any Saint was supposed to be. His sword knew no mercy, and did not care about whom it cut down — be it Tyrants, Terrors, or even the mythical Great Nightmare Creatures, just one of whom could potentially devastate an entire continent in the waking world.

He did not seem to be using any special powers, either — except for his uncanny ability to dissolve into the shadows and move across the battlefield in an instant. All he had was his personal strength, his skill with the sword, and his devious will.

That alone was enough to bring even the most powerful abominations to their knees.

If there was one thing that made the Lord of Shadows appear as a demigod, it was that he seemed nearly omniscient. No enemy could get past him, and no peril could escape his attention. It was that miraculous ability to perceive everything, everywhere, all at once that allowed him to defend the battle formation flawlessly.

Not only was the Lord of Shadows fearsome, but he was also inescapable. More than that, he possessed keen intelligence and profound foresight that allowed him to rule the battlefield like a ruthless tyrant, coldly and methodically eradicating the threats facing the war party.

And then, there were the three dreadful Echoes following his will.

The graceful knight. The steel devil. The serpentine shadow.

Each of them was powerful enough to contend with a Saint... and the most valiant of Saints, at that.

With them serving as the pillars of the offensive and their master conducting the battle with his dark blade, the third war party was in high spirits. The soldiers steeled their hearts and hardened their resolve,slaughtering the Nightmare Creatures and cleansing the surface of the ancient bone from the scarlet infestation.

Their exhaustion mounted...

But their commander was still out there, in front of them, fighting in the burning jungle without showing any sign of fatigue or hesitation.

His fearsome mask remained emotionless. His black blade never lost its edge. His onyx armor was unbroken, and not a drop of his blood fell into the scarlet moss.

By the end of the eight hours the war party had been supposed to battle the jungle, a choir of exhilarated cries rose above the rows of soldiers.