1876 Third Pillar

The eight Saints that had followed the enigmatic Lord of Shadows into battle were both rattled and elated. The battle was a gruesome ordeal, but they had expected that much.

What they did not expect was to learn just how powerful their sinister commander had turned out to be.

The Lord of Shadows was a singular existence because, unlike the rest of them, he was not a vassal of the King of Swords. He was a mercenary Saint that Lady Nephis had somehow convinced to pledge his blade to the Sword Domain's cause — therefore, she knew him best. So, nobody had doubted her promise that they would not be able to defeat him in a fight.

Nevertheless, it was a startling shock to witness the Transcendent sellsword in action.

Not only was he immensely powerful and chillingly lethal, he was actually an existence of the same caliber as the other two field commanders of the expedition force — Changing Star herself and Summer Knight, the most renowned paladin of the Great Clan Valor.

The Saints had thought that the expedition force had two pillars, but now, they knew that there were three.

By the time the shrill wail of the war horn signaled them to retreat, the way they looked at the Lord of Shadows had changed completely.

…Sunny was a little bit amused by their change of attitude.

'I used to live in this damned place alone, of my own free will. What else did they expect? That I'm a weakling?'

Hearing the war horn, he let out a tired sigh and prepared to pull back.

He could sense Nephis enter the range of his perception, followed by the Fire Keepers. Once she and the other Saints of the first war party advanced, Sunny commanded his Shadows to retreat and followed suit.

Soon, he found himself behind the battle line, surrounded by his eight Transcendent subordinates.

Now that their shift was over, Sunny suddenly felt the weight of fatigue crash into him like a mountain. He was tired, dehydrated, and covered in sweat… it was to the point that he did not know what he wanted to do more, summon the Endless Spring to quench his thirst, or summon it to wash himself.

'In hindsight, Antarctica wasn't that bad. At least it wasn't so damn hot there...'

Dismissing his Shadows to let them mend the scrapes they had received in the nurturing darkness of his soul, Sunny gazed at the exhausted Saints and raised an eyebrow behind the mask.

"What are you waiting for? Retreat to camp. We only have sixteen hours to recover before the second round starts."

Rivalen of Aegis Rose sighed."...You really know how to raise morale, don't you, Lord Shadow?"

His usually gallant voice sounded a little bitter.

Sunny stared at him coldly.

"Why yes, I do. I doubt you'll like my methods, though."

Shield Wall almost seemed to shiver, then looked away with a cough.

Not paying him any more attention, Sunny headed in the direction of the distant camp. His armored boots scraped against white bone.

The stretch of the First Rib they were crossing had been enveloped by the scarlet jungle before his war party cleansed it. There was ash in the air, and piles of burned abomination corpses were smoldering here and there.

Once the battlefront moved further away, someone would arrive to harvest soul shards from them — but for now, the carcasses simply carpeted the ground, helping one realize just how terrible the battle had been.

Sunny sighed.

'It is only the first day.'

Soon, they reached the line of tired soldiers. The warriors were covered in soot and dead-tired, but their sunken eyes were shining brightly.

For some reason.

The war party was in the process of assembling into a march formation, but when Sunny and the Saints approached, everyone paused for a few moments.

He felt thousands of gazes wash over him like a tide, and then, a deafening cheer rose above the sea of soldiers.

Surrounded by a crowd of cheering soldiers, Sunny felt a cold chill run down his spine, and a sudden sense of dread grasp his heart with icy claws.

He almost stumbled.

It was because he recognized their chant.

"...Glory! Glory! Glory!"

Sunny's face was hidden behind a mask, so no one could see his expression. The shadows populating the battlefield moved as he halted and gazed at the soldiers silently.

He remained motionless for a few long moments, and then continued walking.

"Move out!"

His voice was colder than the frozen depths of hell.

The cheer exploded in volume briefly and then died out. The tired warriors followed their general across the corpse-littered battlefield back to camp.

'Ah, how bothersome…'

Sunny did not have much to do once the war party returned to the base of the dead god's collarbone — mercifully, he did not have to handle the minutiae of managing an army out of battle. He simply wanted to dismiss his mask and armor to clean himself and drink some water, but considering the nature of the Lord of Shadows, that was harder to accomplish than it should have been.

In the end, he wasted some essence to step away from the camp through the shadows,refresh himself, and then come back.

His soldiers had eaten and were now asleep — some in the tents, some simply on the ground. Most had dismissed the outer layers of their armors because of the heat, so there was a lot of skin in sight. It was a stark contrast to what he was used to from Antarctica, where everyone had always tried to put on as many layers of clothing on themselves as possible.

Sunny studied the scene of the camp silently, then shook his head.

'...I hate jungles.'

Since the Lord of Shadows did not have to sleep, he walked to the lifts and climbed some way up the slope of the collarbone to observe the distant battle.

To his surprise, there was another figure sitting on the edge of the wooden platform, doing the same.

It was a strikingly handsome man with a valiant profile and a thoughtful gaze. His lake-blue eyes were calm, and his glistening hair was moving slightly in the wind.

Sunny almost failed to recognize Summer Knight out of his lustrous armor, but that angelic beauty was hard to forget.

"Sir Gilead."

He sat down nearby, looking in the direction where Nephis was currently reducing the scarlet jungle to ash.

Summer Knight glanced at him, then turned back.

"Lord Shadow."

The valiant Saint remained silent for a moment before saying in a neutral tone:

"I observed your battle. Your reputation is well-earned."

Sunny smiled crookedly behind the mask.

"You're not so bad yourself."

He paused for a moment, and then added evenly:

"Not as good as me, though."

Sir Gilead chuckled.

He raised a beaten alloy canteen, drank some water, and then looked at Sunny with a subtle smile.

"We'll know who's better once we cross swords. However… I hope we'll never find out."

It could have been a sincere wish, a mild joke, or a veiled threat. Summer Knight took his oaths very seriously, and since he had sworn allegiance to the King of Swords, his loyalty was beyond reproach. He might have had some reservations about the selfish mercenary Saint.

These were the kinds of people Sunny would have to fight one day, if things went wrong.

Glancing at the camp where his subordinate Saints were resting, he wondered how many of them he might have to kill in the future.

In the end, Sunny let out a sigh.

"I hope so, too."