1882 Entering the Hollows

The Hollows had undergone a striking transformation, looking very different from how they usually did.

There was still a vast and hollow expanse hidden inside the breastbone of the dead deity, drowning in darkness and overgrown with vermilion jungle. Monstrous trees and ferns towered like towers, the thick canopy of scarlet leaves fusing into a tumultuous red sea. Great pillars of light were falling from the immense dome of white bone here and there, plunging some areas of the jungle into a dim twilight.

However, there was a rainstorm raging on the surface today. So, the light was not the only thing pouring through the cracks in the bone — grandiose waterfalls flowed down into the jungle, as well, plunging into the vermilion canopy as they connected the floor of the Hollow to its dome akin to foaming pillars.

The jungle seemed to have come alive, quenching its boundless thirst. However, there was more water than it could swallow — vast lakes and deep, raging rivers had formed throughout Hollows, turning them into a world of powerful currents.

Some of the furious rivers were wider and more abundant than most rivers in the Sword Domain.

In fact, when the Hollows were flooded, a network of them connected the interior of the titanic skeleton like a great waterway — if one dared to sail the currents, they could slip through the cracks in the walls of the breastbone, be carried by water down one of the ribs, and dive into the colossal sea that collected in the endless spine of the dead god.

Luckily, that was not Sunny's goal today. He preferred to stay away from water on usual days, and he definitely did not want to have anything to do with the dark subterranean ocean resting in the gargantuan skeleton's spine.

Roan and Nephis were the first to reach ground. They landed on the shore of the deep lake that had formed below the fissure and dismissed their wings, preparing for battle. Sunny joined them a few moments later — assuming his human form, he commanded Serpent into the shape of an odachi and unleashed his shadow sense, scanning the chaotic world around him.

There were Nightmare Creatures nearby, hiding in the jungle. Some were drinking water, some were ravaging each other, some were brutally devouring struggling prey.

There were Nightmare Creatures in the water, as well. A few of them were already moving toward the surface, attracted by the smell of human souls.

He pointed to the lake.

"Get ready."

The three of them had already dealt with a score of reptilian horrors by the time the rest of the Saints arrived from above, using Memories to slow down their descent.

The strike force regrouped on the shore of the lake and prepared to move forward. Looking around, Saint Jest let out a heavy sigh.

"...And I thought that the humidity above was terrible. No, wait!"

His expression suddenly turned tense.

The rest of them looked at him with alarm.

"What is it, Sir Jest?"

The old man remained silent for a few moments, then said hesitantly:

"Entering, crack, humidity… bone… there had to be a joke here somewhere, right? Right?"

The same woman who had rebuked him earlier glowered.

"Sir Jest!"

The old man grinned.

"I bet Lord Shadow knows what I mean."

Sunny felt happy that his face was hidden behind a mask.

He was starting to understand how the old man had received his peculiar True Name.

'...I think I miss Effie.'

Suppressing the desire to shake his head, he turned south and took in the movements of the shadows in the surrounding jungle.

Initially, the expedition force had been meant to push all the way to the Third Rib, and enter the Hollows very close to the supposed location of the Citadel. However, Nephis had changed the plan to save time — now, they were much further north, near the Second Rib, which meant that the Saints had to cover a lot of distance to reach their goal.

It was not going to be easy.

Sunny was quite confident in the power of the Transcendent Team. He and Nephis alone were enough to deal with the Great abominations that dwelled in the Hollows, as long as they proceeded carefully. With a dozen Saints accompanying them, reaching the Citadel should not pose a problem.

The Cursed Nightmare Creatures, however, were entirely different.

Luckily, most of them were easy to avoid. With how far his shadow sense reached, Sunny could usually discover where the true horrors of Godgrave dwelled — mostly because Cursed abominations were so powerful that their mere existence exerted pressure on the world.

However, there was always an exception to the rule. More than that, he was worried that these dreadful beings would abandon their usual hunting grounds, lured by the presence of so many powerful human souls.

So, there was a choice to be made.

The strike team could move toward their goal with utmost speed by assuming their Transcendent forms, or they could take it slow and proceed forward as humans, spending several days to brave the jungle.Both options presented their own risks, and the final decision was entrusted to him, since he was supposed to be the guide.

Sunny hesitated.

He was tempted to go with the fastest approach because staying in the Hollows a minute longer than necessary was a gamble.

However… after three weeks of the never-ending battle, even the Saints were exhausted. Worse than that, they were all running low on essence, and not everyone was like him, who could sustain his Transcendent form indefinitely — or at least most of it, since keeping all of his incarnations manifested still consumed his essence.

Most Saints burned a considerable amount of it to maintain a Transformation, though. They weren't so drained that reaching the Citadel was impossible, but if they did go as fast as possible, everyone would be nearly spent by the time they reached it.

And Sunny had a feeling that slaying the guardian of the Gateway would demand more than a little effort, even from a team as powerful as this one.

So, going slowly and spending a few days restoring their reserves seemed like a more prudent decision.

'...Let's go with this plan, then.'

In any case, their advance could only be called slow when compared to the speed of their Transcendent forms. It was not like Saints actually lacked speed as humans.

Beckoning for the team to follow, Sunny chose a path and broke into a moderate sprint.

Soon, the lake on the shore disappeared behind the scarlet foliage, and the jungle enveloped them like a hungry veil.