1883 In His Element

It took them four days to reach the designated area, which was a bit longer than Sunny had expected. His estimations had not accounted for the torrential flood that drowned the Hollows, turning the vast subterranean jungle into a darkly beautiful land of abundant rivers, deep lakes, and overgrown vermilion islands. Great pillars of pale light poured from above here and there, illuminating the wet foliage and the glistening surface of flowing water.

The flooding had caused the entire ecosystem of the Hollows to come alive. Many weaker Nightmare Creatures were forced to flee their dens and lairs because of the flooding, migrating to elevated ground in search of safety — there were fearsome predators lurking in the water, having waited a long time for the chance to hunt and gorge themselves once again.

However, the migrating abominations were easy prey for the stronger horrors who ruled the highlands, and many ended up devoured anyway. The Hollows were always a cruel place, but for these last few days, they had become a scene of unimaginable carnage. Rivers of blood were being spilled under the shroud of scarlet leaves, and terrible wails resounded from the. darkness without end.

The fourteen Saints made their way south. Sunny guided them through the jungle with utmost caution, but it was impossible to stay safe in this Vibrant hell. Every now and then, they had to wet their blades with blood — the abominations that attacked them were powerful, fierce, numerous... and, worst of all, devilishly cunning.

They were all old predators who had survived the unforgiving cruelty of the world above, and then spent countless years fighting for the right to exist in the twilight below.

Still... the carriers of the Nightmare Spell were much more terrifying beasts. None of the fourteen Saints was weak, and together, they were a force that even the dreadful dwellers of the Hollows had to be wary of. The conquest force killed countless Corrupted Nightmare Creatures and more than a few Great Ones, as well, moving south with constant speed.

As long as they did not encounter a Cursed abomination, the Saints were more than capable of contending with the perils of the ancient jungle.

It was not all bad, either.

Although the journey was full of peril and danger, the Transcendent champions were slowly restoring their reserves of essence. That was especially true for Sunny — the surface of Godgrave was eternally bathed in bright sunlight, but here in the Hollows, deep darkness reigned. Surrounded by shadows, he was in his source element, and could therefore absorb spirit essence from the air. They did not sleep for the first three days, but then cleared a small ruin and camped there to rest and prepare themselves for the assault on the Citadel.

By then, the storm had passed, and the great waterfalls flowing into the Hollows from the surface had run dry. The air was humid and hazy, permeated by sweltering heat. The resting Saints had dismissed the outer layers of their armor, making Sunny feel quite a bit of envy.

He was regretful at the fact that Serpent wasn't a titan yet — otherwise, he could have given it a command to assume the form of the Winter Beast, and solved the heat problem once and for all.

At least Sunny was mature enough now not to get flustered at the sight of so many gorgeous people wearing the minimum amount of clothing needed to preserve the dignity of their flawless bodies.

...Or rather, there was only one body he was interested in here.

To his mild surprise, the mood among the Saints was not tense at all. Instead, most were at ease, joking and laughing quietly as they shared food and water. A dire battle awaited them tomorrow, but these were the best warriors of the Sword Domain — they had braved harrowing Nightmares and the perils of the Dream Realm to attain Transcendence, so facing death was nothing new to them.

Sir Jest was in the middle of telling a story, gesturing with his cane to illustrate the most important points:

"When I contracted the Nightmare Spell, my mother thought that I was simply being lazy and didn't want to go to school — going to school was a big privilege back then, so needless to say, she was angry! That was how l ended up with a sore butt just before the First Nightmare. My mom might not have been an Awakened, but she really knew how to give a good beating..."

He chuckled with a wistful expression.

"Well, anyway, when I returned from the Nightmare and told people about battling demons in a magical world and possessing supernatural powers, they were very impressed. So impressed, in fact, that they sent me to a mental asylum... that's where I was when the Nightmare Creatures went on a rampage across the world. Mind you, kids, nobody even knew what Nightmare Creatures were back, let alone how to kill one. In fact, we weren't calling them Nightmare Creatures yet — instead, people still called them "the infected" out of habit..." The beautiful Saint who had been the least tolerant of the old man's jokes — Saint IIelie — was looking at him with a hint of admiration.

"Uncle Jest... wait. But shouldn't the Nightmare Creatures have appeared before the first Sleepers? How come nobody believed you?"

Her question was innocent enough, but it prompted Sir Rivalen to ask another. "And there should have been millions of people inexplicably falling asleep back then. Why would your mother think that you were simply being lazy?"

Roan added with a smile:

"Didn't they send you to a mental asylum long before you became a Sleeper, though? That is what you told the last time..."

Saint Jest looked at them in outrage.

"What do you even know, brats?! Stop ruining my story!"

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

He would have loved to stay and listen to the stories about the First Generation — no matter how unreliable the narrator was — but he had to concentrate on scouting the path to the Citadel.

So, he left the Saints to rest and wandered outside, sending two of his shadows south.

Unlike the other members of the conquest force, he was tense.

Both because the creature guarding the Citadel was truly terrifying, and because of another reason.

'I've made a mistake.‘ Back when Mordret invaded the Sword Domain, Sunny had been too hasty. He answered Cassie's call and arrived at the main camp of the Sword Army not knowing that his orders would change — instead of raiding Song's supply lines, he was here in the Hollows, preparing to help Anvil expand his Domain.

The problem was that the Lord of Shadows was here in all his glory — all four shadows that comprised this persona of his were here present.

Which meant that there was none left in the Nameless 'I‘emple.

Seishan and Death Singer were currently in the process of conquering a Citadel of their own, far west. Beastmaster was protecting the stronghold of the Song Army and slowly cleansing the western reach of the Collarbone Plain. Lightslayer had never shown herself after the war council, so he had no idea where she was.

The Queen of Worms was aware that the Lord of Shadows had allied himself to Valor. It wasn't hard to deduce that he would be used to disrupt their supply lines... was Revel leading a small force of elite warriors to repel the supposed raid party?

Or had she planned to assault the Nameless Temple itself?

If so...

It could be troublesome.

Sunny‘s Citadel was not defenseless, even if he wasn't there personally. Nightmare was protecting it. More importantly, it had the Guardian — the invisible being that no mere Saint could sense, let alone destroy.

And Sunny himself was much closer to the southern edge of the Breastbone Reach now than he had been before. He could return to the Nameless Temple relatively quickly, if need be. Better yet, he could travel to the waking world and step back into the great hall of the Nameless Temple in mere minutes.

But still, still...

Sunny was uneasy.

'I'll send a shadow back right after we conquer the Citadel. Just in case.‘ Losing the Nameless Temple was not an option, so he had to be careful. Frowning behind the mask, he turned his gaze south.

Tomorrow, they would face the guardian of the old ruin and challenge it in a battle...

And after that, the nature of the war in Godgrave would irrevocably change.