1954 Realm of Shadows

Sunny found himself standing at the top of a tall mound, with a desolate expanse of dark hills stretching in front of him in all directions. There was no grass, no trees, no moss or flowers. No sign of life at all, just stillness and silence.

It was a stark contrast to the dreadful reaches of Godgrave, where everything was consumed by the sprawling vermilion jungle that teemed with hungry, restless, abominable life.

The ground was covered in a soft layer of fine black dust, but felt more solid than a sand dune would.

What made him gasp was not the desolate landscape, however, but everything else he perceived.

...There was light.

He had expected the Shadow Realm to be a land of eternal darkness, entirely lightless and covered by a veil of shadows. However, instead, its dark expanse was illuminated by a beautiful silver radiance, as if resting under a starlit sky... it was just that there were no stars.

Looking up, Sunny saw a black sky. At least he assumed that it was a sky — there was no way to tell. There were no stars and no moon, just a seemingly endless expanse of darkness.

However, there were clouds.

Far in the distance, a vast storm front was moving across the dark plain. That was what Sunny wanted to call it, in any case — in truth, the clouds weren't really clouds, and the storm wasn't really a storm.

The clouds weren't formed from water vapor, but from ethereal light particles, instead. Shining with silver radiance, they moved and swirled, as if carried by ghostly winds. The empyrean currents were like beautiful rivers of starlight that illuminated the desolate land, making the immense, ancient shadows populating it flow and dance.

It was a breathtaking sight.

But, more than that... even from a distance, Sunny could feel the terrifying violence of the radiant storm. It was both daunting and chilling, making him want to dive deeper into the embrace of shadows to hide himself.

It was a storm of light.

'No...'

Not light.

Looking closer, Sunny shivered slightly.

Those sparks of silver light... he recognized them for what they were.

It was soul essence.

The storm raging above the dark plain was a storm of essence.

He didn't quite know what to make of it.

At the same time as his eyes were enthralled by the sight of the beautiful, terrible soul storm, Sunny's other senses were flooding his mind with intense sensations, as well.

There was his shadow sense, of course.

As it flowed in all directions, Sunny felt... at home.

He was surrounded by nothing but shadows, all of them indescribably ancient and unfathomably deep. Their dark depths were so vast that he almost felt lost, and so immense that he almost felt cowed by their scale. Their tranquil, slumbering indifference made him feel calm and at peace.

The shadows were his source element, after all.

Here in the Shadow Realm, Sunny felt more spirit essence than ever pour into his soul, soothing and satiating it. It was to a degree that the rate at which he replenished shadow essence had become swift enough for at least one more avatar to be maintained indefinitely, without causing any loss.

'...That's good.'

Sunny strived to maintain a careful balance between expending and replenishing his essence. Maintaining two avatars at all times — the Lord of Shadows and Rain's companion — was what he could do without constantly draining his reserves. So, knowing that he would be able to send one additional incarnation out to explore the Shadow Realm without crossing the line was welcome news.

'Now, then... should I take a look around?'

There did not seem to be immediate danger around him, but Sunny still remained in the form of an incorporeal shadow for now. He could not see any structures or sense any movement nearby, either.

But he felt uneasy, for some reason.

Actually, it was completely reasonable for him to feel ill at ease. The Shadow Realm was supposed to be the land of death, after all. If everything that died ended up here, then...

The shadows of Unholy Titans and horrors beyond description would be here as well, wouldn't they? Sure, those harrowing creatures were supposed to be already dead... but beings of higher Ranks were often above such limitations.

Had Shadow God not blessed him from beyond the grave?

Come to think of it...

Would the shadows of the gods, and the seven daemons, be here as well?

Sunny shivered and carefully glided a few steps forward, nearing the crest of the hill.

'Something... is wrong, I think.'

He was feeling rather strange.

There was no pain and no discomfort, but he definitely felt that something about him was not right.

His unease grew stronger.

'What is it?'

Then, he froze.

If Sunny had eyes at the moment, they would have undoubtedly narrowed.

It was because he saw a tiny mote of silver light slowly rise above his incorporeal form, dancing in the ghostly wind. Then, there was another, and another...

Why was he emanating sparks of soul essence?

That did not make any sense. Not only because he was not supposed to randomly leak essence, but also because Sunny had never possessed soul essence, to begin with — he was rather unique, possessing shadow essence instead.

Following an ominous premonition, Sunny summoned the runes and looked tensely at the counter of his shadow fragments.

A moment later, he felt a hint of terror. His shadow fragments... were dwindling.

The rate was not high, just one or two every moment, but it was unmistakable.

His soul was being drained.

Not, not quite. It was not being drained — instead, it was slowly disintegrating. It was bizarre and beyond reason, but he could not deny the fact. He was not under a soul attack and was not receiving soul damage, he did not even feel any pain, but his soul was slowly falling apart.

It was being broken down and turned into pure soul essence.

If not for the radiant motes of light, Sunny would not have even suspected anything.

Feeling a sense of terror, he looked into the distance, where the immense soul storm was raging above the dark plain.

A storm comprised of an incalculable number of essence sparks.

If Sunny had hair right now, it would have stood on end.

'D—damnation...'

What the hell was this place?

Following an instinct, Sunny assumed his human form and immediately manifested the Onyx Mantle. A shadow was quite vulnerable, after all, leaving the soul without the protection of a physical body.

Finally, the stream of essence sparks rising above him was cut off.

Sunny trembled and let out a relieved sigh.

'That was close...'

Before he could celebrate his salvation, however, his shadow sense caught a subtle movement a short distance away.

...And then, a black arrow suddenly flashed from the darkness, easily piercing his chest.