1955 Rude Welcome

Sunny was in the heart of the Shadow Realm — a place where he was supposed to have an absolute advantage over his enemies. And yet, he had not sensed the smallest of movements up until the very last moment.

It made sense, in hindsight.

Who else could exist in this dark and deadly wasteland other than creatures similar to him?

He only sensed the black arrow when it was already too late to dodge it. Sunny only managed to turn his torso a little, bracing for the impact. He had a faint hope that the Onyx Mantle would protect his body — it was a Transcendent armor, after all, its breastplate designed specifically in a way to deflect blows instead of enduring them directly.

However, his hopes were futile.

The arrowhead pierced his armor easily. It pierced his skin and muscles, as well, sliding between his ribs and biting his heart.

If not for that slight last-moment turn, his heart would have been entirely destroyed. Now, it was merely damaged.

A split second later, the arrowhead exited from his back and scraped against the inner surface of the Onyx Mantle. Having wasted its momentum, it failed to break through the stonelike armor again.

Consumed by pain, Sunny was tossed back by the devastating force of the impact. He flew a dozen meters back, fell into the black dust, and rolled down the slope of the hill at terrible speed. The world spun, and he tasted iron on his tongue.

'Ah...'

The shock of the impact was fierce and violent. Being skewered by the arrow hurt like hell.

Worse yet, Sunny had no idea where the enemy was... and who the enemy was. The initiative was entirely on the side of the unseen archer, and they were at least powerful enough to effortlessly break an exceedingly durable Transcendent armor.

Things did not look good for him.

Of course, there was plenty Sunny could do.

Here in the Realm of Shadows, he was unreasonably powerful... in fact, he felt more powerful than ever before, as if the world itself was infusing him with dire strength.

There was an ocean of shadows around him to manifest. There were his Shadows, as well — Saint, Fiend, Serpent. He could call upon them to protect him. There was Shadow Step, and his ability to move great distances in the blink of an eye.

Even without the support of other incarnations and unable to augment himself, Sunny could try to give the deadly enemy hiding in the darkness a good battle.

However, he did not.

There was a much safer solution, after all.

...Standing in the basement of the Brilliant Emporium, Sunny looked at the open gate of the Shadow Lantern and summoned his incarnation back.

A moment later, his avatar disappeared from the slope of the dark hill and crashed on the floor of the Marvelous Mimic, letting out a muffled groan, sliding a few meters, and colliding with an empty Memory display stand.

Sunny watched the stand with a pained expression.

Both because he was feeling the avatar's agony and because that damned display had cost him quite a lot back in Bastion.

His first tentative foray into the Shadow Realm... seemed to be over, just like that.

'Well. That's not the best homecoming I could have hoped for, I guess. Not the worst though, either...'

Walking over to the avatar, who was sprawled on the floor, Sunny looked down at himself with a dark expression.

He considered the few short moments he had spent in the Shadow Realm carefully.

It was... not what he had expected it to be.

That dark land was nebulous and beautiful, but also somehow able to destroy souls. If not for how durable his own soul was, it might have been damaged far more severely... in fact, Sunny had a sinking feeling that without Soul Weave, the damage might have been irreparable.

On top of that, he had gotten an arrow driven through his chest. His heart had almost been pierced clean through.

In fact, the wound would have been fatal for most humans... even Saints. His avatar was only alive because of Blood Weave, which helped him ignore the damage dealt to his heart and keep the blood running through his veins.

For now.

The avatar stared back at him from below, his face pale and his lips red with blood.

Sunny sighed.

"What are you waiting for, fool? Hurry up and turn back into a shadow."

That would not heal his wound, but it would at least prevent the wound from killing his body.

The avatar gritted his teeth, lingered for a moment, and then said in a resentful tone:

"Go to hell, you smug bastard!"

Sunny smiled pleasantly.

Berating himself was still fun.

"We're already in hell, though."

With that, he released control of his incarnation and allowed the avatar to become a shadow once again.

Gloomy was a little damaged and seemed rattled by the whole experience, but at least it wasn't vomiting blood.

Sunny sighed and looked at the ceiling.

'I'll need to think a bit before venturing into the Shadow Realm again.'

He lowered his gaze and looked at darkness hiding behind the open gate of the Shadow Lantern.

His thoughts returned to what he had seen, sensed, and experienced on the other side. It was a little bit overwhelming. However...

Sunny had a feeling that there was something in particular that he was missing at the moment.

Something important.

As a scowl appeared on his face, his shadow stirred on the floor.

In the next moment, Sunny's eyes widened, and he reeled back.

Almost at the same time, there was a quiet rustle, and another black arrow suddenly shot out of the gate of the Shadow Lantern, missing his head by a hair's breadth.

It struck the ceiling above, tearing a hole in it and making the Marvelous Mimic shudder.

'It... it can follow!'

Stunned and terrified, Sunny fell on his back. He froze for a moment, dazed, and then hurriedly slammed the gate of the Shadow Lantern shut.

A few moments passed in tense silence, but nothing else happened.

The basement of the Brilliant Emporium was silent and peaceful.

...Sunny's mind, however, was anything but.

Staring at the Shadow Lantern with a pale face, he inhaled sharply, and then slowly breathed out.

'What... what the hell have I almost brought back from that cursed place?'