2082 Fragments of War (19)

The Hollows felt different in the company of a Sovereign.

Before, Sunny had always felt like prey here. Despite the fact that his powers were enough to survive the perils of the ancient jungle, it had always been a losing fight — he could slay some predators and escape others, but only for so long. The Hollows themselves were like a hungry beast, and were bound to devour him sooner or later.

But now that he was following the King of Swords, things were different.

It was not even a matter of raw power, but more so a feeling. The chilling sensation of being alone and alien to the foreign, hostile, and malevolent land that intended to consume him was replaced by the sensation of belonging. Of being the predator instead of prey… of being the master of this dark place.

Or rather, of being a follower of its master.

Examining the subtle feeling with curiosity, Sunny smiled behind the mask.

He wondered if that was what being a minion of a Tyrant felt like.

The small group was traversing the Hollows swiftly. They had left Vanishing Lake the previous day and delved into the jungle without wasting any time.

The King of Swords was riding a fearsome stallion forged from black steel — an artificial Echo of unknown Rank and Class that he had probably forged himself. Considering how the Echo looked, Sunny could not help but imagine Nightmare tearing it apart with his adamantine fangs… after all, the world was too small for two tenebrous steeds.

Saint Rivalen had assumed his Transcendent form and was barreling through the jungle behind the Sovereign. The enormous rhino was surrounded by an invisible field of interlocked shields and carried two figures on his back — they were Jest and Cassie, one holding onto his cane, the other onto the hilt of the Quiet Dancer.

Roan had transformed into the giant white lion, running to the side of Rivalen. His wings were folded, but he was still maintaining astonishing speed. Saint Helie was galloping on the other side of the rhino, her hair dancing in the air.

Sunny, meanwhile, had turned into four shadows and hid himself inside Cassie's, allowing himself to be carried with her. Needless to say, out of everyone in the group, he was traveling with the most comfort.

It was both strange and amusing, to be so relaxed and comfortable in the Hollows.

The Hollows had not become any less deadly, after all. Now that the Sword Domain had spread across the Breastbone Reach, all of its surface belonged to Anvil — there, his authority was undisputed, and his power was at its peak.

That authority reached into the Hollows, as well. Apart from the hunting grounds of the Cursed Ones and of the Great Nightmare Creatures of higher Ranks, the vast expanse of the ancient jungle was now permeated by his will. However, that did not magically eliminate countless abominations dwelling under its canopy, and neither did it pacify the jungle itself.

Sunny did not have to concern himself with protecting the party, though.

As they moved swiftly through the jungle, the small group was surrounded by a quiet rustle. That was the sound of countless swords flowing like a river around them, all controlled by the will of their King. The sword scared many inhabitants of the jungle away and easily obliterated those Nightmare Creatures that were too fearless for their own good.

Sunny was using shadow sense to perceive the surroundings, so he could observe the quiet river of flying swords closely.

What he saw left him disturbed and uneasy.

He had known that Anvil was a being of daunting power, of course. The sight of countless swords blotting out the sky like a swirling cloud of sharp steel was still fresh in his mind. The sight of them raining down to annihilate a horde of Nightmare Creatures was, as well.

However, it was only now that he saw the true horror of the Sovereign's swords.

They could cut down powerful abominations in mere moments, true.

But they could also cut down things that no one was supposed to be able to cut.

For example…

As Sunny observed, a field of vermilion flowers swayed in an intangible wind, expelling a cloud of red pollen. That same eerie wind carried the pollen toward the approaching humans, but before it could reach it, a single sword flashed through the red haze, drawing a thin line in it.

In the next moment, the pollen fell to the ground like dust, the vibrant scarlet color fading into dull brown. It looked inert and withered… dead.

Obviously, it was impossible to cut down a cloud of pollen, so how had the King of Swords destroyed it with a single slash?

As Sunny observed many similar events happening around them, he came to a disturbing conclusion.

It was not that Anvil's sword had cut down a cloud. Instead, it seemed to have cut… the very concept of the red pollen, thus destroying its material manifestation.

Such power was a step above what Sunny was capable of, knew how to defend himself from, or could understand. It was a frightening display of potency that seemed more divine than mundane.

'...Troubling.'

Sunny wondered if Anvil was able to perform such feats because they were currently within his Domain, or if he could accomplish the same anywhere, anytime, simply by virtue of possessing Supreme power.

Someone else would have rejoiced to serve such a fearsome monarch, but since Sunny was actively planning to kill the king, he was not too happy to see how deadly his target was.

[Cassie… do you see what I see?]

She lingered with the response, then spoke in his mind neutrally:

[That's quite an unfortunate bit of wording, isn't it?]

Sunny shifted awkwardly within her shadow.

[Ah… r—right. Sorry.]

She chuckled quietly, then added in a somber tone:

[But yes. I do. It is a bit terrifying.]

Sunny listened to the quiet rustle of countless swords for a few moments more.

[Be sure to share the memory of this journey with Nephis when we return. She will find it useful.]

Sunny and Nephis had hoped that observing Great Nightmare Creatures in the Sovereigns do battle would give them clues about what it meant to be Supreme — and therefore how to attain Supremacy.

Without achieving that…

Right now, the gap between them and the Sovereigns seemed terribly vast.