1616 Blade of Shadows

Sunny had never stopped fighting, sharpening his mastery of combat to a sublime level. He had already been one of the most seasoned warriors of humanity four years ago... mostly because very few had it as rough as he had it on the Forgotten Shore and in the Antarctic Center.

But the last four years had not been easy on him, either. Crossing the Hollow Mountains alone had given him more battle experience than most Awakened would receive in their lifetime. So, now, he had a solid reason to be supremely confident in his ability.

That said, there was a difference between fighting Nightmare Creatures and fighting humans. Sunny had mostly been doing the former recently, so the latter... he was a bit rusty.

As the Fire Keepers surrounded him, Sunny observed them silently.

Now that they were Masters, each possessed one additional Aspect Ability. Gorn not only had four arms, but also expanded in size, towering above the floor at almost three meters in height. Gantry seemed to have augmented his body, somehow... making it more durable? More nimble? Or simply more powerful?

He was going to find out shortly.

Erlas, meanwhile, was enhancing the physical state of each member of the cohort. His powers had been mainly focused on endurance and stamina before... what about now?

Sid was bound to do something unpredictable, as well.

Shim, Shakti, and Kaor all possessed non-combat Aspect, so guessing their powers was of less importance. Still... they could be full of surprises.

There were the Memories the Fire Keepers wielded to consider, as well.

'Ah...'

Sunny felt a pang of regret for setting such strict restrictions for himself. But, still... he was looking forward to it.

A real clash of skill, cunning, and competence.

He had missed it a lot.

"What are you waiting for?"

Before the echo of his cold voice had time to disappear, the Fire Keepers attacked. The two archers opened the battle, instantly letting two arrows loose. They were showing decorum, too — since it was a friendly duel, his opponents refrained from using truly destructive Memories inside the Citadel.

Sunny did not augment himself with any of his three shadows. Being a Transcendent already gave him a great advantage as far as physical prowess and the intricacy of essence control went, so it was unnecessary.

Shifting slightly, he dodged both arrows with the minimum effort. One seemed to possess a homing enchantment, turning sharply to strike him in the back, but was tossed aside by the flat of the black odachi's blade.

At that moment, the melee fighters of the Ascended cohort were already upon him. They coordinate their attacks seamlessly, using the arrow salvo to cover their advance.

'Perfect teamwork.'

Shim and Sid were the spearheads aimed at his chest and back. Gorn and Gantry, who wielded longer weapons and had a wider reach, attacked from behind them at the same time.

There was a ceiling to a numerical advantage, since space was limited and only a few people could target a single opponent simultaneously... but by using this simple formation, the Fire Keepers effortlessly increased that limit.

There was no way for Sunny to block and deflect four attacks that came from different directions with a single sword.

So, he didn't. Instead, he removed himself from the path of the enemy weapons, deflecting Shim's spear and Gantry's heavy axe in the process. Using explosive footwork, Sunny escaped the encirclement and used the bodies of the Fire Keepers to block their comrades from chasing after him.

Then, he lashed out with a probing attack.

Sharp steel sang in the dark expanse of the Nameless Temple.

'Interesting...'

Sunny's smile widened under Weaver's Mask. The Fire Keepers... had not wasted these four years, either. He had known that Valor had used Nephis and her personal battle force like a sledgehammer, endlessly sending

them to put out one fire after another. It was almost as if they were being repeatedly sent to death, but stubbornly refused to die. As a result, their lethality reached chilling levels.

Of course, he could have crushed them easily if he wished to. The gap between Saints and Masters was already vast, and Sunny was a singular existence even among Saints, to boot.

But with the limitations he had put on himself, the Fire Keepers were a challenging adversary. Especially because he could not allow himself to be hit even once.

Plus, he had chosen to only use a single battle style against them... Morgan's own battle style, to be precise. The sharp, deadly, and ruthless technique she used was representative of how warriors of Valor fought —not even becoming one with their weapons, but instead treating themselves as weapons.

So, it wasn't easy.

It was exhilarating, though.

'Damnation. More!'

There were a few tense moments when the unexpected facets of the Ascended Abilities of his enemies revealed themselves. There were several interesting enchantments their Memories possessed, as well.

But Sunny still managed to evade, block, or deflect all their attacks in the most efficient and economical manner. He didn't make any big moves, using the least amount of motion possible in every situation.

And all the while, he was studying how the Fire Keepers fought.

Solving their battle styles and their teamwork like a puzzle.

And when that puzzle was solved...

The dynamic of the battle changed abruptly.

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The Lord of Shadows was indeed like a shadow. Swift, elusive, and insidious, he moved across the black marble of the great hall with stunning speed and flawless precision, effortlessly deflecting the rain of blows that the Fire Keepers unleashed upon him.

His black odachi seemed to have a life of its own, flowing like a stream of darkness. A weapon of that length was supposed to be if not unwieldy, then at least less maneuverable than a shorter blade... and yet, the odachi was always exactly where it needed to be, effectively creating an impenetrable barrier of steel around its cold-hearted master.

It was not because of his speed, strength, or mystical power. Instead... it was pure foresight and pure skill, both sharpened and tempered until they became a lethal weapon.

Nephis observed the movements of the Lord of Shadows silently.

The Fire Keepers, who had gone through countless battles by her side, fought well. They fought bravely. They fought with great skill and cunning, proving that their glorious fame was well-earned.

And yet, she had guessed the result of the duel almost as soon as it started.

Soon, the cadence of the battle shifted. The Lord of Shadows, who had been defending against the barrage of attacks, suddenly abandoned all pretenses of defense. Instead, he easily shrugged off a squall of steel and moved through it, attacking the Fire Keepers before they could even react.

It was almost as if he was dancing...

The black odachi hissed like a snake as it cut the air.

It struck Shim in the chest, sending him flying back. A split second later, Sid's shield was pushed aside, and her breastplate caved as the young woman toppled with a short yelp. Gantry was struck by the pommel of the odachi almost at the same moment, swaying once before falling down. By the time his back hit the floor, Gorn was already on his knees, both of his greatswords sliding away.

The Lord of Shadows was among them. A moment later, he had already reached the two archers.

"Crap..."

Kaor, who was supposed to protect them, was tossed back with one unhurried blow of the demonic swordsman's fist. Shakti and Erlas attempted to retreat, but both were sent to the ground before taking a single step.

From start to finish, the duel between the Lord of Shadows and the Fire Keepers had taken a couple of minutes.

However, they had all been defeated in just two seconds.

It was as though the master of the ancient temple was telling them — look! I could have ended you all any time I wanted.

White sparks ignited in Neph's eyes.

'Beautiful.'

The Lord of Shadows stopped and calmly put the spine of the black odachi on his shoulder. His fearsome mask remained the same, eerie and devoid of any emotion. The Fire Keepers groaned as they slowly picked themselves up from the floor.

"Is that all?"

His voice was still the same, cold and impassive.

Nephis smiled slightly and finally unsheathed her swords.

"You haven't defeated all of us yet, have you?"

He tilted his head a little, staring at her with arrogant indifference.

Well... Nephis thought that those were his emotions. In truth, there was no way to know what was hiding behind that fearsome mask... if there was anything behind it at all.

The Lord of Shadows slowly lowered his odachi and gripped its hilt with both hands.

"Stop wasting my time, then."

Nephis took a step forward.

That mask..

Why did it look so familiar?