1847 Deadly Equilibrium

On the other side of the titanic skeleton, the Ivory Island was surrounded by a sea of Nightmare Creatures. The horde of them flowed forward, tearing the scarlet jungle apart.

The jungle itself was moving too. Vermilion vines were crawling, and rust-red flowers were blooming, releasing clouds of flesh-eating pollen. It was as if the whole world had come alive to devour the invading humans.

The humans, meanwhile, met the tide of abominations with sharp steel and the destructive power of their Aspects.

The Fire Keepers were skilled and formidable. Their discipline and morale were beyond reproach. Their cohesion and experience were unequalled. Countless Nightmare Creatures fell to their blades, torrents of blood being absorbed by the ancient bone.

And yet, they were being pushed back.

A force of fifty battle-hardened Masters was truly fearsome, but most of the abominations they faced were of a higher Rank than them. These creatures were also the cursed spawn of Godgrave, where nightmares had to fight and devour each other without reprieve for the infinitely small chance to survive.

The surface dwellers were not the true horrors who hunted in the dim twilight of the great Hollows, but they were also exorbitantly fierce and ferocious, even when compared to the usual demented frenzy plaguing all Nightmare Creatures.

The horde was vast, as well.

Granted, the Fire Keepers had been forged and shaped by the Forgotten Shore, and so, facing abominations that were more powerful than them was more or less their speciality. But, still…

There was one reason why they were able to hold out.

Two reasons, actually.

One was Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan. The other was the Lord of Shadows.

It had been a long time since Sunny was truly able to unleash himself. Right now, he was like a dark hurricane that moved across the battlefield, surrounded by a vast mantle of flowing shadows. He neglected to manifest any of his Shells, using only his two hands and the black odachi to cut the abominations down.

Everywhere he went, severed bodies fell to the ground.

Sunny was using Shadow Manifestation to control the surrounding area and Shadow Step to move around it, dancing between the Nightmare Creatures as his blade reaped their lives. While wielding Serpent as a weapon, his essence was replenished with every life he took.

The faster he killed the abominations, the more essence he received — and could therefore burn. And the more essence he burned, the more enemies he could slay. Reaching a dangerous equilibrium in that manner, Sunny rampaged on the battlefield like the epicenter of a vast whirlpool of blood, darkness, and death.

Of course, it was not easy.

The Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were falling easily to his blade, but he could be just as easily overwhelmed by them. All it took was a single mistake…

But Sunny did not make any mistakes.

Despite the startling speed at which he moved around the battlefield, despite the daunting complexity of navigating it with no regard to the familiar constraints of linear space, despite the burdensome task of maintaining both the lethal dance of slaying steel and the flowing storm of manifested shadows…

Sunny's mind remained cold and clear, aware of every little detail of his surroundings, and full of merciless killing intent.

He did not allow the dire mayhem of the battle and the intoxicating stench of death to pull him into a state of battle frenzy. No matter how brutal and unbridled his slaughter seemed, it was instead a result of precise and callous calculation. There were no emotions in his heart, no distraction in his mind — there was only clarity and will.

The will to see his enemies dead.

...Nephis was fighting on the other side of the Ivory Island. Sunny could not see her, but he could sense her presence through the movement of shadows.

In the world of shadows, her presence was as vast as that of the sun.

She had unleashed a sea of incandescent flames, turning a swathe of the battlefield into a searing inferno. The flames moved as if possessing a mind — and hunger — of their own, spreading through the horde of Nightmare Creatures like a plague. Where the power of the scorching flames was not enough, her sword fell like a herald of inescapable finality.

At the same time, she was supporting the Fire Keepers. When one of them received a wound, it was healed by the soft radiance of her soulflame. When one of them was on the verge of being swallowed by the tide of abominations, she was there to lend them the power of her incandescent blade.

Cassie was participating in the battle, as well.

Her unseen presence was subtle, but played a pivotal role. She was not present on the battlefield, and no Nightmare Creature fell to her sword. However, she served as the connection between Sunny, Nephis, and the Fire Keepers. She was aware of all and guided them all, helping them fight as a single being.

She could also share the traits of the abominations with them, making the task of surviving the dreadful onslaught much easier.

It was because of her that Nephis knew when one of her people needed support. The Fire Keepers knew when to press forward and when to retreat. Sunny knew where the most dangerous enemies were, and in which direction he had to move.

Nephis was in command, but Cassie was the person who made sure that the commander had all the necessary information to make good decisions.

Sunny had not seen the Fire Keepers fighting a battle of that scale before, and now that he did… he was quietly impressed.

He knew many who were more powerful than them, and a few who were more skilled than them. But he struggled to think of another group of warriors who were capable of showcasing this level of cohesion, combat awareness, and effectiveness in a battle.

That said…

It was still not enough.

It did not matter how skilled and brave the Fire Keepers were, or how unreasonably powerful he and Nephis had become. At the end of the day, they were still fighting against impossible odds.

There were simply too many Nightmare Creatures, and each of these Nightmare Creatures was too powerful.

Sending fifty Masters and three Saints to face an entire Death Zone was a suicidal task. They could not even retreat, because they were surrounded from all sides.

However…

This time, Clan Valor had not sent Nephis into battle hoping that she would die.

This time, they desperately needed her to survive... for a while, at least.