1888 A Neat Trick

Sunny was troubled.

Not only because he was facing Revel the Lightslayer and two Reflections, separated from the rest of the group and having no clue how Nephis was doing, but also because the familiar voice in his head was silent.

[Cassie?]

There was no answer.

Either the Song sisters had a way to isolate those who entered the Citadel from the outside world — be it because of the Citadel itself, a mysterious facet of the Queen's Domain, or some other means — or something else was happening on the surface, not allowing Cassie to split her attention.

In any case, at that moment, Sunny realized that he had grown both accustomed and reliant on having the blind seer be his invisible companion.

Her silence made him feel uneasy.

But there was no time to dwell on that...

Because Revel was already attacking.

The true darkness summoned by her and the two Reflections had overpowered the light emanating from Serpent, drowning the overgrown hall once again. The giant firefly's body grew dim and bleak, its radiance snuffed out. Even the infernal glow of Fiend's fire was extinguished.

Sunny was blind once again... he just barely managed to manifest a sword from the shadows before they were consumed by the darkness.

He took a step back and moved his odachi. In the next moment, a violent impact reverberated through his bones, and he felt a sharp blade being blocked by his own. Twisting it into a bind, Sunny calmly shifted his weight and delivered a crushing forward kick — there was the sound of soft soles scraping against wood, as if someone had leaped back, and his kick struck nothing but air. Almost at the same time, he heard an irritated growl, and a long jet of red flame momentarily pushed the darkness away, revealing the silhouettes of the fighters.

Saint had moved to protect Serpent from the deadly attack launched by one of the Reflections — just as the hall became briefly enveloped in dim red glow, a sharp do sword landed on her shield, sending a powerful shockwave rolling outward and tearing the ancient roots apart.

Fiend had been weakened by true darkness, as well — the jet of flame he spat failed to catch the second Reflection, and it leaped into the air, delivering a flying kick to his wide chest. Another shockwave cracked the floor, and the steel giant staggered back.

Both Reflections looked like the darkly beautiful Princess Revel.

But Revel herself was standing in front of Sunny, just a few meters away.

As both of them ignored the shockwaves and the light of Fiend's flame died out, her cold voice resounded in the darkness:

"...Neat trick"

She sounded both impressed by and indifferent to the fact that he had managed to deflect her first attack despite being blinded by the darkness.

A moment later, her voice drowned in the deafening cacophony of his Shadows battling Mordret‘s Reflections.

'Crap...‘

Sunny shifted his stance and defended his side. There was another impact, and although he prevented Revel's blade from biting into his armor, its tip still scraped against the Onyx Mantle, pushing him back and almost throwing him off balance.

The reason Sunny was able to defend himself against the Lightslayer was simple — it was a combination of his experience and Shadow Dance, as well as the threefold augmentation of his shadows. He might not have had the time to glean the true essence of her battle style, but he knew enough to predict where she would attack from, and how.

...More or less. She was too swift and powerful to be a mere Saint, which meant that her Aspect was granting her some kind of augmentation of her own.

Still, Revel's sword was very similar to a tachi, and Sunny knew how to wield one very well. Her Aspect, meanwhile, seemed to allow her impossible freedom of movement within the darkness — a trait reminiscent of the Black Knight of the ruined cathedral, whom Sunny had killed many years ago... as well as his own Shadow Step, in a way.

In fact, Sunny and Revel even looked somewhat alike. It was not that their features were that similar — there were plenty of pale people with raven hair and dark eyes in the world. It was just that they shared a certain bleak style. After all, shadows could easily be mistaken for true darkness, and vice versa. That was why Sunny could tell how she would try to kill him, to a degree. He simply defended against what he himself would do.

It had worked until now...

But how much longer would it preserve his life?

Without shadow sense, he could not peer into Revel's intentions with Shadow Dense. Without sight, he couldn't see what she was doing. She could betray his expectations and deliver a subpar attack just to throw off his predictions. She could gain an edge over him by simply being patient.

She could even neglect him entirely and move to dispatch one of his Shadows from behind first.

'Damn it!‘

Sunny had not felt so powerless in a long, long time.

The Citadel groaned and quaked around them. He clashed with Lightslayer a few more times, barely managing to avoid death in the barrage of insidious, lethal attacks. Her swordsmanship was stellar, and her mastery of combat was fearsome. He blocked or deflected some blows and weakened the impact of the rest — Revel's sword rattled his body and left scars on the surface of the Onyx Mantle, but his armor held.

The sharp blade did slide into its cracks a couple of times, causing him torturous pain, but dealing little damage.

"That‘s... one vile enchantment...‘

Revel's sword seemed to infect everything it touched with a plague of potent poisons, causing unbearable pain, paralysis, wasting, and necrosis all at the same time.

Blood Weave devoured them hungrily, preventing any of the poisons from spreading to his heart.

A cold scoff came from the darkness.

"...Are you even human? I can't smell your blood at all."

Sunny smiled crookedly behind his mask.

"Human? No... I am just a shadow. Shadows don't really bleed."

Despite his smile, he was grim. Surviving Revel's onslaught was useless — the initiative was fully on her side, and his Shadows were being tied down by Mordret's Reflections. At least one of them had to be Supreme, it seemed... otherwise, Saint would have destroyed her enemy already.

If this went on, he was going to lose.

And then, he would die.

Well, not really. At least one of his shadows would be destroyed, leaving Sunny weakened and an incarnation short.

But he would most likely survive.

Even if all four of the shadows were killed, Sunny's soul would not collapse -— after all, it was fortified by Soul Weave. A normal human's soul would crumble and dissipate if its integrity was violated too severely, but he was different. As long as at least a shred of Sunny's soul remained, it would be able to one day restore itself.

However...

What about the rest of the Saints of the conquest force? What about Roan? ...What about Nephis?

He needed to think of something. A tactical shift... a new strategy.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

Then... he gave his Shadows a mental command.

A moment later, Fiend turned around, rushed blindly at the wall of the overgrown hall, and collided with it at terrible speed.

The great weight of the towering devil and his Supreme power caused the entire Citadel to quake. An entire section of the castle's wall collapsed, and Fiend — as well as the Reflection pursuing him — tumbled outside, falling into the distant lake.

In the chaos, Serpent scurried toward Saint and leaped into the air, turning into a serpentine odachi. Saint dismissed her dark blade and grasped the hilt of the odachi with an unshaken fist.

And Sunny...

Sunny released the hold on his avatar, allowing the Lord of Shadows to turn into a one.

The true darkness consumed the wild shadows, but it could not consume Sunny's own — just like he could not command or manifest the shadows of living beings.

If his true body was here, he would not have been able to assume an intangible form, since there were no shadows for him to dive into. But the Lord of Shadows was a manifested avatar — therefore, his natural form was that of a shadow, to begin with.

So, Sunny was able to abandon the physical form without losing control of the incarnation. He had become a shadow in the depths of a sea of darkness.

For a moment, there were four shadows — haughty and his three companions — drowning in the that sea. It felt eerie and unpleasant, as though something was gnawing at Sunny's very soul.

However, he could still control the avatar.

So, he did something that he had never tried before.

Followed by the other three shadows, he crawled across the floor in the direction where Saint was fighting against the Reflection...

And wrapped himself around her body, fusing with it like any other of his shadows would.