2009 : A Wolf, a Dog, and a Jackal

Sunny was still unable to use the Shadow Lantern — or rather, too wary to open its gates. As a result, he was cut off from the nearly inexhaustible supply of shadows for the first time in a long, long while.

So, the Shadow Shell he had woven out of the wild shadows that dwelled naturally on the battlefield was not nearly as titanic as it could have been.

Nevertheless, it was more than tall enough to match the height of the obsidian giant, and even higher than that, towering above him by a few meters.

The Onyx Mantle covered the colossal Shell created in the image of Sunny's own body like a fearsome black carapace. It was nothing new… however, today, this transformation of his felt different.

That was because he was doing something he had never done before — controlling one of the shadows as an incarnation and augmenting himself with it. Therefore, Sunny felt a strange and incongruous, but not entirely unnatural sensation — that of being himself, but also something other than himself, which had in turn become one with his body.

Basically, he was doing the same thing he had been practicing with his Shadows and Memories, but aimed at his own mind, body, and soul.

That allowed him to push the state of fusion with the Shell even further, making it feel almost like his actual self.

Sunny felt powerful. Sunny felt vast. He felt… as if his every motion held within itself untold devastation.

There was another curious thing that had happened as a result, as well.

It seemed as if that flawless union between the Shadow Shell and him was not merely a sensation. Rather, it was as if the world itself did not see the difference between Sunny and the Shadow Colossus anymore, or at least not so strongly, regarding both as manifestations of his soul.

And Weaver's Mask did, as well.

So, it had expanded in size, shifting to cover the dark titan's face. This mask had been meant to fit the face of a nebulous deity, after all… it was more than capable of hiding the features of giants. So, Sunny did not have to create a facsimile out of shadows, like he had usually done in the past.

He had to admit, though…

Weaver's Mask had always been fearsome and deeply disturbing. Now that it was the size of a tall edifice, however, it suddenly seemed ten times more terrifying.

He wasn't surprised that his enemies seemed slightly hesitant, all of a sudden.

But their wills were not going to be shaken by a frightening visage, and so, their earth-shattering assault continued without slowing down even for a moment.

The obsidian jackal brought his crescent polearm down. His devastating slash seemed powerful enough to slice the very fabric of the world apart, but its momentum broke a moment later.

Sunny had long known how the enemy Saint was going to attack. Having read his intentions in the movements of his body, of his shadow, and of his essence, Sunny had grasped the very core of the enemy's sophisticated Transcendent Battle Art and learned the enemy's intentions far in advance.

So, he fearlessly stepped into the range of the Jackal's weapon, avoiding the crescent blade, and grasped the shaft of the polearm with one armored hand.

There was a loud thunderclap and a devastating shockwave the moment the wooden shaft came into contact with the onyx gauntlet. As its momentum was instantly drained, Sunny's feet were suddenly enveloped by a crimson haze — the blood smearing the surface of the ancient bone had absorbed the dire force of the impact and evaporated, turning into a scorching cloud.

Sunny himself — the conduit of all that destructive energy — had not even flinched, though. He just held the crescent blade in place, unmoving, like a black mountain.

He was not satisfied by simply blocking that first strike, either… of course.

As soon as his left hand grasped the shaft of the crescent polearm, his right arm was already turning into a fist, ready to crash into the skill of the Jackal like a fortress-toppling ram.

'Let's see how tough you are…'

However, before Sunny had a chance to strike the jackal, a swift and massive shadow lunged at him from the side, and his right hand was suddenly caught in the crushing vice of a monstrous wolf's jaws.

Lonesome Howl had timed her attack to coincide with the fall of the crescent blade.

Her fur was bristling like a black palisade, and furious red flames were burning in her enormous, bestial eyes.

Saint Ceres was not far behind, either.

A split second later, she lunged at Sunny from the left, one of her heads biting him into the shin, a second sinking its fangs into his knee, and the last one tearing into his thigh.

There was an ear-piercing sound of sharp fangs scratching against the stonelike metal.

Sunny was momentarily immobilized.

His left hand was holding the Jackal's weapon, preventing it from cleaving his shell apart. His right hand was caught in Lonesome Howl's eviscerating jaws. The enormous three-headed canine was trying to pull his leg apart, using all its infernal strength to topple him.

Curiously enough…

The Onyx Mantle withstood the fangs of Saint Ceres. It shattered under the fangs of the stygian she-wolf, though — Lonesome Howl had bitten his gauntlet, shredding the hand and wrist of the Shadow Shell with vicious fury.

And, of course, the other four Saints were not staying idle.

Silent Stalker had already released an arrow, and Bestmaster had already sent a piece of bone flying from her slingshot.

Sunny barely had time to register the two projectiles, which were flying in his direction with terrible speed.

He did not like the look of either of them.

Both the arrow and the piece of bone were destructive Memories, no doubt. Clan Song was sparing no effort in trying to bring him down today… so, they would use heavy artillery from the start.

If either of the projectiles found its mark, his Shadow Shell would probably be mangled quite badly.

The usefulness of Shadow Step was limited by the shattered space around them, and there were not enough wild shadows on the battlefield to reform the giant Shell if it was badly damaged.

...But it did not matter.

Sunny possessed an Aspect that possessed many strengths, but its greatest one by far was its versatility. Even bound by so many restrictions, he still had a sea of tactics to choose from, and a rich treasure of devious tricks to employ.

That was what made him so dangerous.

Sunny pushed away the golden crescent, making the bestial giant stagger back. With his left hand now free, he struck down, delivering a terrifying blow to one of the canine heads that were trying to mangle his leg.

The blow did not quite crack the creature's skull, but Ceres was definitely dazed and in pain… well, at least a third of her was dazed and in pain.

A torrent of blood flowed from one of her crushing maws, and her hold on his thigh grew weak.

Using the chance, Sunny grabbed the hill-sized canine by the scruff of her neck. At the same time, he dismissed several elements of the Onyx Mantle, thus escaping from her remaining two sets of terrifying fangs.

Suddenly, Ceres was being pulled into the air, her pillar-like paws losing contact with the ground.

Deep within the Shadow Colossus Shell, Sunny smiled coldly.

And then, he hoisted the three-headed canine up with one hand, placing her enormous body between himself and the two incoming projectiles at the last moment.