2283 Deal with the Shadow  
  
The exploration of the caverns below the Forgotten Shore was proceeding smoothly, but slowly.  
  
The Dark Sea - and the Corrupted abominations populating it - had spent thousands of years hiding from the obliterating sun there. So, the ground was covered in innumerable layers of mud, shards of pulverized coral, shattered bones of dead Nightmare Creatures, and everything else that the receding tide had pulled with it underground.  
  
All of it was resting in eternal, undisturbed darkness… and there were distressing things hiding in the darkness. Powerful abominations that had not been swallowed by the Crimson Spire when the Great Titan was sealed, swarms of microscopic parasites that could consume a human in seconds, pockets of true darkness that rendеred Sunny blind, and so much more…  
  
None of it posed a serious threat to him, but he had to proceed with caution. After all, despite his great pоwer, Sunny was not immortal. He could deal with any Abomination dwelling on the Forgotten Shore as long as he put his mind to it, but a few seconds of carelessness could still cost him an incarnation. He was also quite resistant, but not immune to soul and mind attacks. On top of that, no matteг how powerful one was, there were still all kinds of eerie and bizarre beings in the Dream Realm that simply escapеd logic. So, it paid to be careful.  
  
For now, Sunny had not discovered anything too valuable in the vast darkness of the hidden caverns. He did find more than a few interesting historical artifacts belonging to the extinct civilization of the Forgotten Shore, but that only satiated his curiosity as a Dream Realm explorer, not furthered his goals as a Supreme. Still, he continued patiently. Every Abomination he killed made his Shadow Legion stronger, after all - plus, every pool of true darkness was a valuable discovery, since Sunny was contemplating ways of helping Saint attain a higher Rank and Class.  
  
While he explored the caverns, another incarnation of his was laying on the cold marble floor of the Nameless Temple, breathing hoarsely. His body was a map of vicious wounds, and while his jade skin had long repaired itself, the muscles and tendons below were in a sorry state.  
  
'Argh, damnation,'  
  
Groaning quietly, Sunny winced and sat up. He summoned the Endless Spring, drank deeply from it, and then rose to his feet unsteadily. This particular incarnation of his was recovering from a task that each of them undertook every few weeks or so.  
  
That task was battling Slayer.  
  
Sunny kept the murderous Shadow in the dungeon below the ruined cathedral of the Dark City now - in the stone cell where he had found Weaver's Mask once. Every seven days, he summoned her to the lower hall of the Nameless Temple and had a duel with her. That had gone on for an entire year. The duels were unfailingly vicious, brutal… and educating. Every week, Sunny barely managed to defeat Slayer, and every week, he ended up in this pitiful state. As a result, one incarnation was always recovering, while a healed one challenged the Shadow the next week. The recovering avatar performed the role of the Nameless Temple's custodian.  
  
Wincing again, Sunny headed toward the back garden.  
  
'I should take her on a picnic north of the city one day. She'll probably appreciate the Slayer statue… even if that Slayer is missing her head. Two Slayers in one place, will that be funny? Or will that be too much? I wonder…'  
  
A pained smile illuminated his face.  
  
The pain was real, but the duels were showing results.  
  
Initially, Sunny had not known what to do with the murderous Shadow. He had not wanted to destroy her, but he had also been reluctant to compel her into servitude against her will. That went against his principles.  
  
Unlike the silent shadows - the shades, as he called them now to avoid confusion - who lacked the sense of self, his Shadows had their own identity. They were as much individuals as they were parts of him. Saint, Serpent, Nightmare, Fiend, and Mimic seemed more than willing to follow his command, but Slayer did not. So, he would not force her.  
  
But he could not set her free, either. She was a being of dreadful lethality and malice, after all, so Sunny was not going to unleash that calamity upon the world out of moral discomfort. Hence, he fought her every week instead. Their duels had begun as an attempt to communicate - Sunny had hoped to come to some sort of understanding with Slayer, but instead of listening to him, she immediately attacked. So, instead of words, they ended up communicating with sharp steel.  
  
Sunny had been frustrated with her single-minded aggression at first, then indignant, and eventually angry.  
  
Slayer remained doggedly defiant, always aiming to kill and hurt him in any way she could. And as much as Sunny was learning from fighting her, she was learning and adapting from fighting him, as well. So, none of his victories had come easy thus far.  
  
At some point, he had grown unsure why he was even continuing with these painful weekly thrashings. But they had become a habit by then, almost a ritual, so he decided to simply enjoy them as valuable lessons.  
  
He was regularly sparring with Nephis on the Ivory Island, and with Saint or Slayer here on the Forgotten Shore. Truly, life was spoiling him with wonderful training partners.  
  
But then, something unexpected happened.  
  
After a long string of losses, Slayer seemed to have began to treat him with a kind of, begrudging respect. A sense of kinship, even. She was still unwilling to submit to him, but she was at least willing to strike a deal with him. As long as Sunny defeated her that week, she would follow his command for a week. Additionally, she demanded payment for each time he summoned her.  
  
Being a Shadow, Slayer naturally had no need for money or worldly treasures. What she wanted as payment instead… was Sunny's blood.  
  
Slaуer did not speak, but she easily managed to express her desire with poignant silence. It was a bit peculiar… and more than a bit creepy… but she seemed to have developed a taste for Sunny's blood - or at least an interest in it - ever since a few drops of it fell on her, and were absorbed by her, from Sunny's torn knuckles during their battle in the Shadow Realm. Absorbing his blood almost made her seem… more alive, somehow.  
  
In any case, that was their deal now, and that was the price Sunny was paying to benefit from the power of his sixth Shadow. That, and the pain.  
  
Groaning, Sunny limped across the halls of the Nameless Temple, entered the garden hidden behind the magnificent black Citadel, and used the Endless Spring to water his tree.  
  
Then, he looked up at the starless sky and sighed.  
  
'I wonder when the next storm is coming? We haven't had rain in months now…'  
  
His expression dimmed, and he grumbled:  
  
'Am I going to have to worry about water supply, too? More work for me, damn it.''