2382 Wrath of Mortals  
  
Just before the sun touched the horizon, Kai joined Sunny on the roof of the Shrine of Truth. He glanced ready for battle, the arrows bristling with the black feathers of their fletching in his quiver. Summoning the outer layers of his armor, the archer inhaled deeply and looked east.  
  
"Lady Slayer has received the third boon of the Ash Domain. We seem to be ready."  
  
Sunny nodded slowly, a distant expression on his face. "Has she now?"  
  
Kai nodded.  
  
"Yes. Why? Your voice, it sounded a little odd."  
  
Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed. "She is set to play a decisive role in this battle. I've just been wondering… about how capable she truly is."  
  
Ka studied him a bit. "What is on your mind?"  
  
Sunny smiled faintly and lookеd at the towering mountain to the east, its peak covered in snow. Eventually, he said: "Well, the Cursed Beast we'll be fighting tonight is a swarm of rats. They are infected by Corruption now, but that means that they weren't at some point. Which means that there was a swarm of Sacred rats oncе upon a time. Isn't it odd?"  
  
Kai blinked a few times, prompting Sunny to chuckle quietly.  
  
"I mean, it's one weird deity, don't you think? Who would want to worship a swarm of rats?"  
  
His friend tilted his head a little.  
  
"Actually, you are right. I have not considered it from that point of view." Sunny shook his head.  
  
"But then again, who said that Sacred beings have to be worthy of worship? Conflating divine power and benevolence is a very modern way of thinking about things. Actually, for most of history, people had not worshiped gods out of love or gratitude. Rather, they did so to placate and mollify the deities, hoping to avoid drawing their ire." He smiled. "After all, mortals can't survive the wrath of gods. Not the other way around."  
  
At that moment, Slayer emerged from the Shrine, still shrouded in ghostly smoke and cradling her mangled arm. Sunny studied her with a dark expression. "Or at least it's not supposed to be."  
  
This Shadow of his… ah, she was definitely an overachiever.  
  
Sunny had a lot to think about and a lot to say, but he did not have any time for that at the moment. Instead, he looked at Kai and said: "Prepare yourself to feel weaker than you are now. We'll be invading the Snow Domain once again, after all. You remember the plan, right?"  
  
Kai nodded somberly. "I do. Leave it to me."  
  
Sunny glanced west, where the sun had just touched the horizon, painting the sea of clouds in a million shades of crimson. "Let's go, then."  
  
The volcano - what was left of it - shuddered. The fantastical scene of ethereal obsidian bridges forming from the plumes of ash played out once more, just as breathtaking and spectacular as it had been in the past. But after seeing it so many times already, Sunny paid little attention to the great bridges that spanned the sea of clouds.  
  
Instead, he turned himself into a shadow… and wrapped himself around Slayer. Immediatelу, he felt himself fusing into her ragged, battered form. A sense of fierce power and cold confidence filled him, as well as of a sharp and merciless killing intent - much similar to his own, but also different. Subtle, determined… inescapable. He could vaguely sense Slayer's thoughts and emotions, all of them painted in hues of grey by her sinister, dark resolve. There was a certain… purity to her feelings that he did not share. Her black heart might have been filled with nothing but malice and desire to kill, but that malice and that yearning were pure, unblemished, and pristine.  
  
Sunny could not really read the thoughts of his Shadows when fusing with them, but he could usually sense fragmented echoes of what they were thinking about, sometimes even see glimpses of their subdued, distant, dreamlike memories. In the case of Slayer, though, he could sense none of the latter… Just a vague impression of a vast emptiness, impenetrable darkness, and of an imperative need to hunt… to kill. The sound of the wind howling across the obsidian dunes, the lethal radiance of destructive essence storms… As if Slayer had only ever existed in the Shadow Realm, and that was the only thing she had ever known.  
  
On a purely physical level, fusing with Slayer was an exquisite experience. She was different from both the indomitable Saint and the mighty Fiend - hers was a graceful, subtle kind of strength. She was nimble and agile like a dancer, but at the same time ruthless and furious like a prowling predator.  
  
Sunny himself followed a somewhat similar path. The origin of his battle art had been a radiant dance, after all - so, he could appreciate Slayer's fatal grace and ferocious litheness.  
  
As soon as Sunny took Slayer into his dark embrace, he could feel a raging torrent of power flow into her body. This Shadow of his had already been enhanced by three consecutive infusions of mystical ash, and now, she was amplified by the power of shadows, as well. The result was quite frightening.  
  
That said, Slayer was still not in her best form. She was severely wounded, and Sunny was as well. Neither of them made for a good fighter at the moment, but together… together, they could easily pass as one.  
  
That was why Sunny had decided to guide her in this battle instead of participating in it himself.  
  
'Well… good luck to us, I guess.'  
  
Behind them, Kai's voice boomed, as if commanding the world: "Be strong!"  
  
And with it, Slayer and Sunny suddenly felt amplified even more.  
  
There was no time to waste, so Sunny did not waste any by sending her running across the obsidian bridge. Instead, he commanded the shadows to open before Slayer, and as she stepped forward, the two of them emerged from the darkness directly on the slope of the distant mountain.  
  
One of Slayer's swords left its sheath with a quiet hiss. In the next moment, the pristine white snow around them boiled, and many feral rats rushed at them like a writhing avalanche of rotten fur and sharp, needle-like fangs.