1301 Fourth Mastery

The Outsiders and the Riverborn... the revelation of the difference between them was enough to boggle Sunny's mind. He had already been prepared to encounter all kinds of bizarre situations inside the Tomb of Ariel, but what Ananke told them sent him for a loop.

It was because Sunny had only considered the odd perils of the Great River in relation to himself, not in relation to a whole civilization. The way the River People lived was fundamentally different from anything he had ever known... because the most fundamental truth of the world — time — worked differently for them.

The first settlers of the Tomb of Ariel had all been Outsiders, so how great must their shock have been when their children were born so different from them? How much pain did that division bring, how much sorrow? How much effort did it take for them to create an entirely new kind of society?

With time, the number of Riverborn grew, while the number of Outsiders dwindled. However, the civilization that Ananke had described could not function without the Outsiders, who could travel the Great River and served as the connective tissue between various cities established on it.

What was it like for them, to see their children remain forever young? What was it like for the Riverborn, to watch their parents age when they never did? To see them leave when they couldn't?

...How did Riverborn children even become adults?

Suddenly, the story of the followers of Weaver being chased far upstream gained a much darker undertone.

Sunny shivered.

The civilization of the Great River turned out to be much stranger than he had thought. It was so strange, in fact, that he struggled to imagine it.

And that was not even mentioning the fact that Old Ananke had turned out to not be old at all... while also being ten times his age.

'Ah, I can't think anymore...'

It was too much to digest... especially this early in the morning.

Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and washed his face, then opened Ananke's wooden box. There was not much food left inside, which made him sigh.

Taking out a teapot and a plate brimming with juicy braised meat, rolled in seaweed leaves, he sat down and stared at the seven suns for a few moments.

'...Dusk of Fallen Grace is one of the original sybils. If Ananke, who was born long after they had entered the Tomb of Ariel, is two hundred years old, then what about Dusk?'

What about the Defilement? For how many centuries had the sybils fought against the spreading Corruption before losing all their cities except Fallen Grace?

In other words... for how long had the enemy been growing stronger, while their potential allies had been growing weaker?

Shaking his hand, he poured the tea into two cups and grabbed a seaweed roll. 'No matter how long it has been, I need to grow stronger, too, and do it quickly.'

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A few more days passed. Nephis had spent them diligently learning how to control the ketch with the Names, while Sunny mostly sat at the bow, looking at the water silently.

Sometimes, he would allow himself to get distracted and either think about the Tomb of Ariel or study the Estuary Key. Almost all his time, however, was dedicated to mastering the fourth step of Shadow Dance.

Feeling that he was on the brink of an epiphany, Sunny even abandoned sleep. The seven suns rose and fell, but he remained motionless, his eyes veiled by deep shadows.

And then, finally, in the twilight of dusk...

Sunny suddenly straightened and opened his eyes wide. 'This is it...'

In his mind, countless memories, insights, and experiences clicked together with a deafening thunderclap. The feeling of being embraced by the dark carapace of the Shadow Shell, the strange state of dissolving into shadows only to manifest himself into a tangible form... the memories of the Red Colosseum, where he slowly learned to fight in the unfamiliar body of the shadowspawn... the harrowing labyrinth of nightmares, the furious battle with the Azure Serpent...

All of it came together.

Being able to peer into the essence of the enemy, to mimic them both in thought and action. Training his body to be supremely adaptable and flexible. Breaking the rigid constraints of his mind to make it formless and shapeless, akin to a shadow. Those were all necessary steps, without which this evolution would not have been possible.

It was all for this moment.

It was all... to truly become a shadow. 'I see now.'

As Sunny gazed into the twilight, the encroaching darkness around him moved and stirred.

At the same time, a familiar voice whispered into his ear: [You Aspect Legacy mastery has increased.]

[You have received the right to claim a Legacy Relic.]

[...Your Shadow has evolved.] Sunny let out a soft sigh.

Finally... after so long, he finally took another step.

Instead of summoning the runes immediately, he closed his eyes and assessed the breakthrough he had made.

The fourth step... it was a departure from his previous understanding of Shadow Dance, indeed. It was not about understanding the enemy to absorb their battle style and anticipate their moves. It was not even about peering into their essence to know their feelings and intentions.

It was about becoming the enemy, both in thought and in flesh. Just like he had done with Daeron of the Twilight Sea.

As a result... the previous skills Sunny had cultivated through practicing Shadow Dance had all grown stronger. His ability to shadow his enemies had been elevated to a new level, and would allow him to do it much faster, as well as to a wider extent.

More importantly, his ability to learn the structure and function of the bodies of various creatures had been elevated tremendously. Up until now, Sunny had only ever achieved two forms except for his own — that of the shadowspawn, and that of the river serpent. The former was the result of his many experiences in the Second Nightmare, while the latter was the result of an entire month of constant and meticulous observation.

He wouldn't need a month to learn a new form anymore. Of course, he wouldn't be able to do it instantaneously, either — but the amount of time was drastically reduced. Sunny felt that he would have been able to become a river serpent in a week if he had mastered the fourth step before the dark island.

But that was because the Azure Serpent had been so much greater than him, and so very different from him. At the same time, the mad beast had been a human once, and thus not entirely alien. Some forms would take less time, while others would take longer.

And the more forms he learned, the easier creating the next one would become. 'But it is also dangerous.'

The third step of Shadow Dance was dangerous, but the fourth step was much more so. If Sunny wasn't careful about changing his form too drastically and too often, he could very well lose the connection to his own.

'I'll be careful.'

He sighed, then opened his eyes and finally summoned the runes.

Sunny really wanted to check how Soul Serpent had evolved, but the runes of his absent Shadow were lifeless and dull. He couldn't summon more information about Serpent while it was away.

So, he turned to his Aspect Legacy instead and read, holding his breath:

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance]. Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [4/7].

First Relic: Claimed.

Second Relic: Claimed.

Third Relic: Claimed.

Fourth Relic: [Claim].

Fifth Relic: Unearned...

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then whispered quietly:

"Claim."

Nothing happened for a few seconds.

Then, it seemed as though the world turned a little darker, and the Spell spoke: [You have claimed an Aspect Legacy Relic.]

Its words echoed above the flowing water. There was silence for a moment, and then, the Spell whispered:

[...You have received a fragment of Shadow's Domain.]