1731 Slaying Blade

NQSC was still shivering in the embrace of winter, but the smell of spring was in the air. The deserted alleys of the outskirts were drowning in dirty snow and deep shadows, with no one to clean the former and no lights to dispel the latter. Many of the decrepit human hives stood empty, their tall walls forming lightless wells.

The people who used to populate the hives had long abandoned the cradle of humanity for the vast and dreadful expanse of the Dream Realm.

Sunny was leaning against a wall in one of the alleys. He was clad in the fearsome carapace of the Onyx Mantle, hiding his face behind a mask - not exactly a suitable attire for the waking world. His appearance would have probably frightened the mundane passersby, if there were any. Granted, he was standing in the shadows, so no mundane human could see him anyway.

'Feels so strange. I can barely recognize the place.

The outskirts of today were too different from the overpopulated, suffocating slums where he had grown up. Times were changing, and NQSC was changing with them.

Sunny had believed that the world was unchanging, once upon a time. The great upheavals of history - the decimating wars, the descent of the Nightmare Spell, the legendary achievements of the First Generation - had happened long before, reshaping the ways of humanity. But by the time he was born, everything seemed lasting and stable, and so, he simply took that stability for granted.

It was a strange feeling, to realize that he was living in the very thick of history instead. Who knew that there had never been any stability, and that the reality he knew was fleeting like a mirage?

He sighed and touched his mask briefly.

The mask he wore was the Memory he had created, [Definitely Not Me]. Unlike Weaver's Mask, which resembled the ferocious face of a demon, this one was quite human, and entirely expressionless. With impenetrable darkness nestling in its eyes, the emotionless mask was quite eerie.

It was also not as comfortable as Weaver's Mask, which hurt his craftsman's pride a little.

He sighed.

‘That lazy guy in Bastion is really worthless.’

Calling himself names was perhaps not very healthy, but certainly amusing.

Sunny looked down.

Many things were happening at the same time. Nephis had received the orders of the Clan Valor elders and was supposed to meet him today to relay their will. In the distant Song Domain, Rain had made her way to the roving camp of the road construction crew and was hired as a laborer. The guy in Bastion... truth be told, there was no time to be lazy.

From playing the role of the Memory Purveyor for the Fire Keepers to preparing to forge a sword for Nephis, that incarnation of his was the busiest right now. Not to mention that he had to craft a few Memories for Rain in advance of her Awakening.

The war was drawing closer, and time was running out.

...Nephis, meanwhile, was running late.

Sunny was growing bored. To dispel the boredom, he sent some essence into the Handy Bracelet and summoned the runes.

He studied them for a while, went over his Memories, and finally settled his gaze on the list of his Shadows.

Soon, the runes describing the Soul Serpent ignited in the darkness.

Shadow: Soul Serpent.

Shadow Rank: Transcendent.

Shadow Class: Terror.

Shadow Description: [When the end came, Shadow was the last of the gods to be destroyed. Many have resented him for creating death, but in the end, death embraced all.]

His gaze lingered on the description.

Sunny had read these runes for the first time a long, long time ago. Back then, it all seemed so strange and mysterious. Now, however... although he knew more about how Shadow God had created death and what it meant, the description of Soul Serpent still touched upon a great mystery.

One of the last great mysteries that Sunny still could not solve.

He knew how the war between the gods and the daemons had started, and why. But how did it end? How were the gods destroyed? What could have killed the creator of death?

For now, there was no answer.

Shaking his head a little, Sunny continued to read the runes.

Shadow Attributes: [Shadow Guide], [Spirit Guide], [Soul Weapon], [Soul Beast], [Soul Companion].

Three of the Attributes had been there before the first enhanced Sunny's essence control when Serpent was in its tattoo form, the second allowed Serpent to become a weapon, the third allowed it to assume the form of a beast.

The [Spirit Guide] and the [Soul Companion] Attributes were new.

He concentrated on them.

Attribute: Spirit Guide.

[Spirit Guide] Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent enhances the rate at which its master can absorb elemental essence.”

Of course, both the name and the description of the Attribute had been written by Sunny himself, and were the result of his own observations and consideration. Actually, he did not know if this new power of Serpent's was a separate Attribute or an evolution of the [Shadow Guide]. However, there was an important distinction between the two that had made him divide the them.

It was that the [Shadow Guide] only functioned when Serpent was in the form of a tattoo, while the [Spirit Guide] did not. Whether it was the tattoo, the Soul Weapon, or the Soul Beast forms, spirit essence at least that of shadows seemed more active around Serpent, and nourished Sunny's soul better.

Perhaps there was something else to that Attribute, but he did not know. In any case, it was quite useful.

The [Soul Companion] Attribute's name and description, likewise, included some guessing on Sunny's part. He had assumed that it was an evolution of the [Serpentine Steel] Ability at first, but eventually decided otherwise.

Attribute: Soul Companion.

[Soul Companion] Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent can fuse with its master's Shadow Shell, granting it some of its Abilities.

Sunny felt that he had not explored the depths of this Attribute yet, but what he did know was that just like Serpent could augment his body as a tattoo, it could also enhance his Shadow Shell. The Abilities that the Shell could channel were [Soul Reaver] and [Slaying Blade].

And speaking of Abilities...

He lingered for a while, then continued to read the runes.

Shadow Abilities: [Serpentine Steel], [Soul Reaver], [Grace of Shadows], [Formless], [Mark of Shadows], [Slaying Blade].

The first four Abilities were quite familiar to Sunny. The first allowed the Soul Weapon form of Serpent to assume the shape of any weapon, the second granted Sunny a portion of essence of those slain by its Soul Weapon or Soul Beast forms, the third allowed Sunny to bestow Serpent on someone else, and the fourth allowed Serpent to assume the forms of shadows dwelling in Sunny's soul.

The fifth and the sixth Abilities were new.

[Mark of Shadows]... was a peculiar Ability, and one Sunny knew the least about, since there was no good opportunity to experiment with it.

Ability: Mark of Shadows.

[Mark of Shadows] Ability Description: "Soul Serpent allows the Lord of Shadows to mark his vassals."

Sunny honestly did not know how it worked, exactly, so he had allowed himself a few liberties when composing that description. He had been able to find out that Serpent could... create lesser versions of itself, for lack of better word. Theoretically, Sunny could place a serpent tattoo on someone, after which a little soul snake would be born in their soul.

What was that snake capable of? Was it a new being or a manifestation of Serpent? He wasn't sure. Sunny had tried to mark his Shadows, but since they did not really have normal souls, the Ability did not work. He had also tried to mark Rain, but nothing happened. He guessed that the soul needed to be at least Awakened to nourish and accommodate the little soul snake, and for the Mark of Shadows to take root.

And since there were no other volunteers, his experiments had ended there... for now.

All he could tell was that the [Mark of Shadows] was connected to the [Grace of Shadows], or maybe even an evolution of it. It was a way to share some benefits of being the master of Soul Serpent without parting with it entirely.

And finally... there was the [Slaying Blade].

The most mysterious of Serpent's Abilities.

What was written in the runes had mostly come from Sunny's intuition, corroborated only slightly by careful observation. Something like that... was hard to observe.

Ability: Slaying Blade,

[Slaying Blade] Ability Description: "When in its Soul Weapon form, Soul Serpent embodies the Death aspect of Shadow God. As such, it ignores the will of greater beings."

Perhaps Sunny should have capitalized the word "will". Creatures of higher Ranks, such as the Corrupted Tyrant, Condemnation, had a way of bending the world to their will...

And what was the foremost will of all living beings?

The will to survive. The will to continue existing.

Therefore, killing truly powerful beings was not simply a question of cutting them down. The killing intent of the murderer had to overpower their will to exist, as well. Without the tyrannical will to kill, the sharpest of blades would fail to cut their skin, and the most gruesome of wounds would fail to extinguish their lives.

...Unless Soul Serpent was involved.

From what Sunny could tell, when Serpent assumed its Soul Weapon form, it was as deadly to the greater beings as it was to mundane creatures. He did not have a very rich experience of slaying truly powerful abominations, so this statement was inconclusive... but, from what Sunny had seen, it was also undeniable.

He wasn't sure how it worked, exactly - maybe his killing will was enhanced, maybe the will to exist of the enemy was weakened... or even completely ignored. In any case, he was certain that the Serpent's Soul Weapon form was unexplainably deadly.

Which wasn't particularly useful to him, for now, since most of the enemies he fought did not possess that much of the Will.

And yet, Sunny felt that as his power continued to grow, the caliber of the enemies he faced would also become increasingly inconceivable... and, therefore, the [Slaying Blade] would gain more and more importance in the future. Tremendously so.

'If I live long enough to see that future.’

As he thought that, there was a sound, and he sensed movement at the periphery of his shadow sense.

Soon, a luxurious PTV awkwardly made its way through the snow and stopped some distance away from him. The passenger door opened, and a familiar figure climbed out of the vehicle, looking around with a deadpan expression.

Sunny dismissed the runes and smiled behind the mask.

Nephis had arrived.