1946 Divine Shadow

Although the battle in the Hollows had dealt a heavy blow to the Sword Army, Sunny himself received quite a boon as a result of facing Revel and her true darkness. Robbed of most of his powers, he had been forced to rely on his

Shadows to prevail, and discovered a new facet of his Aspect in the process.

That timely discovery had helped Sunny defeat the daughter of Ki Song... but its repercussions were much wider than a momentary triumph. He felt that the ability to augment his Shadows and his Memories personally could potentially propel his mastery of Shadow Dance and weaving to new heights.

In fact, Sunny suspected that he had stumbled onto one of the cornerstones of what a divine shadow like him was meant to be. Not that he was obliged to follow someone else's designs — he had done quite well by being his own independent person so far, after all, instead of acting as a loyal minion of the being casting him.

Even if his Aspect originated directly from Shadow God, it was folly to assume that a long-dead deity had known better what its uses would be in the distant and dire future of the Nightmare Spell.

Still, the discovery held so much promise that it left Sunny impatient, giddy with anticipation, and almost breathless. He felt something that he had not felt in a while — the pure excitement of an explorer. Even if what he was going to explore were the depths of his own power, it was still uncharted territory.

The Lord of Shadows had returned to the Nameless Temple, and Nephis was still on her way back to the main camp of the Sword Army. So, Master Sunless had little to do for now — locking himself in the basement of the Marvelous Mimic, Sunny dedicated himself to research and experimentation.

There were two avenues he wanted to explore.

The first one was his newly discovered ability to augment his Shadows, which allowed him to gain a profoundly deep understanding of their physical nature. It also allowed him a glimpse into the nature of their powers and mindset, albeit to a more shallow degree — for now, at least.

Needless to say, such a source of profound knowledge about how the bodies of his Shadows were built and functioned could potentially do wonders for his ability to construct faithful Shadow Shells, as well as push the intricacy of his control over Shadow Manifestation to a new level.

Sunny suspected that the path to the next step of Shadow Dance lay in that direction.

Right now, his Shells were a crude fusion of emulation and improvisation. His most natural Shell, for example, was the giant version of himself — Sunny knew his own body the best, after all, so reconstructing it was relatively easy.

Which was not to say that it was simple. Many things went into building this powerful Shell, from deep knowledge of human anatomy, material science, and basic physics to more esoteric subjects like souls, essence, and will. Much of that complexity was miraculously solved by Shadow Dance, but the process still required a lot of conscious effort from Sunny.

A Shadow Shell was not a perfect replica of the original, but it was close enough. For example, Sunny did not need to recreate things like the heart, the blood, and the digestive system when turning into the Shadow Colossus — however, he did need to create a semblance of things like bone structure, musculature, tendons, and so on.

That was how the Shadow Colossus was able to move and fight effectively. The foundation was rebuilt, while all the parts that Sunny neglected to shape were substituted by the intricate use of Shadow Control, and the whole Shell was empowered by his essence.

Of course, building such a complicated Shell required him to get inventive with using Shadow Manifestation, as well. Sunny had gotten quite adept at manifesting shadows in various ways, manipulating not only their shape, but also their physical attributes.

He could easily control such traits of the manifested shadows as rigidity, elasticity, viscosity, density, and so on. He could make them rough or slippery, solid or fluid, dense or porous... of course, there were limits to how sophisticated these manipulations were.

Sunny could manifest a shadow as a liquid, but he could not make it resemble water in all regards. He could make the surface of a manifested shadow slippery, but he could not turn it into actual ice. While sufficient for his purposes, his ability to finely control the physical attributes of shadows was relatively crude.

...This was going to change now.

While augmenting Saint, Sunny had sensed the structure and composition of her stonelike body with stunning clarity, as if it was his own. Even greater than that, really, considering the mystical nature and legendary origin of his taciturn Shadow.

Those turbulent moments alone had given him some insight into how to improve his Shadow Manifestation and potentially build a Shell of a Stone Saint, one superior in quality and faithfulness than any other Shell he had created before. The benefit did not end there, though — on the contrary, that spark of inspiration was merely the appetizer.

Sunny could also augment Fiend, Nightmare, and Marvelous Mimic, learning more about how their bodies were constructed. The more comprehensive examples he had to compare, the more he would be able to understand and infer, and the better his skill would eventually become.

And there lay the source of his excitement...

Because he had Serpent.

And Serpent could assume the forms of thousands of creatures whose silent shadows dwelled in Sunny's soul, waiting to become fuel for his development.

'...I've struck a jackpot.'

What Sunny now possessed was basically a vast library of all kinds of beings, all ready to be studied and fathomed by him. From the Mountain King to the abominations of Godgrave, he could potentially learn from them all.

And by attaining all that knowledge... who knew what Sunny would be able to achieve?

He couldn't even imagine.

Or rather... maybe he could.

Standing in the basement of the Brilliant Emporium, Sunny suddenly shivered. His eyes widened a little, full of shock and fear, glistening with ambition and greed.

'Shadow Dance.'

He had often wondered, of course, what the final form of Shadow Dance was supposed to be. He had already mastered four of its steps, but three still remained, both alluring and elusive.

The first four steps of Shadow Slave were about sensing the essence of a being to shadow their mind, skill, and overall form. The fourth step in particular had allowed Sunny to delve into the physical structure of creatures both deeper and faster, which allowed him to shadow them more perfectly by assuming the same shape as them through the use of Shadow Shell.

But there was a glaring difference between the forms Sunny assumed and the beings he endeavored to shadow.

It was that he could not replicate their Attributes, Aspects, and mystical powers.

He could become a five-meter tall adamantine troll to resemble Fiend, but he could not breathe out jets of infernal flame.

...But what if he could?

If he was supposed to be a divine shadow, then what was the shadow of a god supposed to look like? Was it supposed to only replicate the general shape of the being casting it, or was it supposed to replicate more?

All of it, perhaps?

Overwhelmed by these thoughts, Sunny made a tentative guess about what the final form of Shadow Dance was meant to be. It was the ability to become a true shadow of a being — all of them, including their mystical powers and authorities —not just their shape.

The fifth step of Shadow Step, then...

Would have to encompass the ability to shadow a being's Attributes.

Some of them, at least.