1947 Formlessness

Sunny's theory that mastering the remaining steps of Shadow Dance would allow him to shadow the Attributes and Aspects of other people, as well as profane powers of Nightmare Creatures, was not built entirely on pure conjecture.

Sure, his intuition was telling him he was right, but sadly, his intuition was not what it used to be now that Sunny was cut off from fate.

However, there was also something that corroborated his theory. A piece of information that Sunny had noted a long time ago, but never managed to explain before now.

It was the scope of powers that the Mad Prince had seemed to possess.

The Mad Prince, Sunny's own past self, had been a Corrupted Titan. He had attained Transcendence — or rather, descended into the abyss of Corruption — all on his own. He had also formed the Titan Core in the depths of the Tomb of Ariel, somehow, despite the dire number of shadow fragments that would have required.

Sunny himself was currently facing the problem of how slow the process of building a new Shadow Core was, so he knew very well what the easiest way to absorb a vast amount of shadow fragments would be.

It was to slay other shadow creatures.

So, he had a strong suspicion that the Mad Prince had slain his own Shadows to become a Titan. Considering that none of the Shadows had been heard of by the people of the Great River, that suspicion was all but confirmed.

So, then...

How had the Mad Prince been able to visit Ananke in her dreams and instruct her where to meet Sunny and Nephis? If Nightmare had been killed, then he wouldn't have been able to use the black steed's [Dreamwalker] Attribute.

Unless the Mad Prince had learned how to shadow that Attribute.

It made sense, in hindsight. The vile madman had spent hundreds of years in the Tomb of Ariel, and while many paths to advancing his power were not available there, one path remained wide open —because it depended on nothing and no one except Sunny himself.

It was to deepen his mastery of his own powers.

Sunny did not know how many years exactly the Mad Prince — the last version of the Mad Prince, to be precise — had spent on the Great River. But if his mastery of weaving had grown sufficient to create the mind-boggling Estuary Key, then it must have been a long, long time.

So, he could have mastered more steps of Shadow Dance, as well.

Ananke must have called him a Sword Saint for a reason.

'Crazy bastard.'

While Sunny did not really want to follow in the footsteps of his past demented self, the Mad Prince was proof of what the future held.

Thinking about him made Sunny feel hopeful about the potential of Shadow Dance, but also reminded him to be careful.

'Slow and steady.'

Taking a deep breath, he remained motionless for a few moments, and then summoned Saint, Fiend, and Serpent.

In the next several hours, Sunny conducted a lot of different experiments. He told himself not to hurry, but his excitement and drive were too powerful. In the end, he spent more essence than he had planned to, and brought himself to greater mental exhaustion than what was wise.

His eyes were still full of excitement, though, despite the fact that these early results were incremental at best.

The first thing Sunny confirmed was that augmenting his Shadows was indeed an excellent method to improve the intricacy of his Shadow Manifestation. The stonelike flesh of Saint, the steel body of Fiend, and the countless shapes Serpent could assume were like a practical guide for making the shadows he manifested more sophisticated.

Of course, it was not an instantaneous success, but rather gradual progress. Sunny would have to practice much more to elevate Shadow Manifestation to an entirely new level — in fact, the sheer amount of practice he would have to undertake was a little daunting. But that was irrelevant. The only important fact was that he had discovered a reliable and effective method of improvement.

With that, the hardest part was already behind him... the hardest part of this one relatively minor challenge, that was.

What came next was actually implementing this new skill to create a more faithful versions of Shadow Shells. For now, Sunny concentrated on two new prototypes — one Shell emulating the Onyx Saint, and another one emulating Fiend. The goal was not simply to copy their outward appearance and body structure, but to bring everything about these Shells closer to the originals.

So, for the Stone Saint Shell, Sunny tried to replicate the stonelike properties of Saint's body. For the Scavenger Shell, Sunny tried to make the manifested shadows comprising it as similar to blessed steel as possible.

It was an entirely new experience for him. He had freely manipulated the properties of his manifested shadows before, making them as hard as tempered steel or as soft as feather down, but he had never tried to emulate a material flawlessly. Augmenting the Shadows with an actively controlled incarnation was certainly of great help, but still, the process was immensely difficult and elusive.

Nevertheless, Sunny was making good progress. He was especially attuned to the traits of Saint's stonelike body — most likely because he was somewhat familiar with them due to his own Onyx Shell. After a while, Sunny was able to make something that might not have been exactly like what he wanted to achieve, but at least resembled it closely.

It was a good result for the first day of experimentation.

Trying to replicate Fiend's steel carapace was somewhat harder, but Sunny had a lot of experience in emulating metals, as well. After all, one of the most persistent uses of Shadow Manifestation in his arsenal was the creation of weapons for him to wield — so, he possessed relevant experience in that field too, just on a more shallow level.

Considering that Fiend had inherited some of his most fundamental traits by munching on Sunny's own flesh all the way back in Antarctica, there were similarities between his towering four-armed body and the Shadowspawn Shell. So, Sunny experimented both with replicating the gluttonous Shadow's form and with modifying his very first Shell to resemble it in a few ways.

In the process, he also spent several minutes standing motionlessly, basking in the feeling of sharing a Supreme creature's ferocious power.

Sunny had a little hope that augmenting a Supreme Devil would instantly reveal the secrets of Supremacy to him, but sadly, that was not the case. Although it was indeed a new and startling experience, Fiend was not a Sovereign.

Creatures like him were different from humans, and followed a different path... and even though Fiend did possess a nascent will capable of influencing the world, he was too young and inexperienced to truly be in command of it. In fact, Sunny felt that his own will was infinitely more robust and domineering than that of his Shadow, even if it lost in terms of potency.

There was also something about the very fact of being a Shadow that made Fiend different from the Great Nightmare Creatures Sunny had faced before — something that he could not quite explain, but nevertheless felt like a limitation.

Sunny did not dwell on that vague feeling for long, adding it to the pile of unanswered and barely formed questions he would hopefully get to explore later. Instead, he returned to his current experiments.

Next in line... was Serpent.

Sunny turned to the serpentine Shadow and smiled widely, his eyes gleaming so dangerously that it hissed in alarm.

A few hours later, however, Sunny furiously rubbed his temples and let out a frustrated sigh.

"Damn it. Damn!"