1948 Familiar Barrier

Serpent was indeed of immeasurable value to Sunny in his endeavor to master the next step of Shadow Dance. Given its ability to assume the form of any shadow resting in Sunny's soul —those equal or inferior to Serpent in Class and Rank, at least — the Legacy Shadow could be used to gain access to a vast repository of shapes for its master to study in profound detail.

As long as Sunny was using an incarnation to augment Serpent, he could experience complete unity with countless beings, from Dormant Beasts to Corrupted Terrors.

In fact... now that Sunny considered it, wasn't Serpent's [Formless] Ability more or less identical to what he was trying to accomplish? What he wanted to achieve was to learn how to mimic not only the outward shape of a being, but also their Attributes and mystical powers. And that was what Serpent had been able to do all along.

The final goal had been in front of Sunny all that time.

The problem, however...

Was that the same obstacle that had prevented him from slowly learning the essence of Serpent's forms with the help of Shadow Dance in the past was preventing him from truly delving into the state of unity with these beings now — the threat of losing himself in the formlessness, forgetting who he was and what separated him from the beings he shadowed.

If anything, the risk was even more dire now, because he was not simply peering into the essence of the alien beings. Instead, he was fusing with them entirely, becoming one with their bestial forms.

Sunny had managed to maintain a strong hold of his sense of self while experiencing the state of unity with Saint and Fiend — perhaps because they had been born of his Aspect and dwelled within his soul, to begin with. Augmenting Serpent was not a problem, either — it was just when Serpent used [Formless] that he was suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling of otherness.

Sunny persisted for quite some time, then uttered a few curses and called his incarnation back. He stared at Serpent for a while with a grim expression, then clicked his tongue and looked away.

'I am still cripplied...'

Being banished from the Nightmare Spell and losing his True Name was still making life hard for him, even after all these years. Sunny thought that he had finally managed to adapt to his fateless existence well enough, but now that an alluring opportunity was right in front of him, his deficiency was showing its ugly head once again.

He remained motionless for a while, then let out another resentful sigh.

'Whatever. I'll find a way to break through this barrier eventually... there are plenty of other things for me to explore right now, anyway.'

In fact, with everything else he had to do, diving into the endless well of knowledge contained within the [Formless] Ability of his serpentine Shadow might have been too much for him at the moment ... even with seven bodies, Sunny was in no position to explore it thoroughly just yet.

He continued to experiment with building the Stone Saint Shell and the Scavenger Shell for a while, eventually losing track of time. Sunny even chose to augment the Marvelous Mimic, becoming a transdimensional house for a short while...

That was quite a bizarre experience, to say the least.

If Nightmare had not been busy lulling a Cursed One to sleep, Sunny would have summoned him here, as well.

...Eventually, something thundered in the basement, and the entire Brilliant Emporium shook a little.

Aiko, who had been sleeping on an opulent wooden chair, flinched and floated into the air. Wiping drool off her face, she looked around in a daze.

"What, no way! I wasn't sitting in your precious chair!"

Noticing that there was no one around, she calmed down a little... only to notice that the door to the basement was open, revealing a dark entrance.

An insidious voice resounded from the darkness, making her skin crawl.

"Hey, Aiko... can you come down for a moment?"

The petite woman hesitated a bit, suddenly uneasy.

"Uh, boss.... actually, I have to leave... urgently. My great dog is terribly sick and my family aunt has been run over by a PTV... wait, no, the other way around..."

The darkness spoke again:

"It won't take long. Come down..."

Aiko let out a heavy sigh and glided into the basement with a resigned expression.

Her boss was sitting on the floor with a mad look on his face and a frightening glint on his eyes.

She landed softly on the floor and scratched the back of her head.

"Hey there, boss. I must warn you — If you finally lost it and decided that you want to eat me or some such... I'll be expecting a huge bonus come payday!"

Sunny stared at Aiko with a dumbfounded expression.

"...Who wants to eat you? Tsk, don't flatter yourself!"

He shook his head.

"Honestly, sometimes, I have no idea what is happening in that head of yours... you are such a weirdo. Anyway, don't move. I'll be quick."

Aiko just stared at him in disbelief, as if she had never expected to hear such an accusation coming from him.

Sunny, meanwhile, allowed his incarnation to separate itself from Fiend.

Then, he controlled it to glide across the floor... and wrap itself around Aiko.

The petite girl let out a yelp.

"Ah! What the hell?!"

She subconsciously floated up, this time shooting almost all the way to the ceiling.

Sunny let out a whistle.

"So... this works, too."

Aiko regained her composure, landed, and looked at her small hands.

After making them into small fists a few times, she blinked.

"What the hell, why am I suddenly so strong?"

Sunny took a deep breath.

His Aspect could be used to augment himself, his Memories, his Echoes, and his Shadows. He could also augment inanimate objects, to a degree. But he had never been able to augment other living beings — with the sole exception of Nephis, whom he had been connected to by Shadow Bond before.

Shadow Bond was no more, and although Sunny did not have a master now, he did have a connection to two other people. They were Rain and Aiko, both bearing the Mark of Shadows.

So, Sunny had decided to see if he could augment his followers, as well.

Amazingly, it worked.

Which was a great thing, because keeping Rain alive in the middle of Godgrave was getting harder and harder, and would get harder still once the two armies clashed in earnest. She did not even have an Aspect, so Sunny was quite happy to find a way to boost her strength.

Looking at Aiko — and staring at himself through her eyes — Sunny grinned.

"Don't worry. That's just a little benefit of being a member of the Shadow Clan. Basically, I used one of my incarnations to fuse with you, thus doubling your strength. No need to stare at me with admiration..."

The petite girl was indeed staring at him. However, the emotion in her eyes was very far from admiration.

"F—fuse with me? Who... bastard, you have some nerve, going around fusing with unsuspecting women without permission! Thanks, but no thanks, I did not assent to fusing of any kind! Defuse me right this second!"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then recalled his incarnation and coughed awkwardly.

'Right...'

In hindsight, he could have just sent his shadow to augment Aiko without controlling it directly. He just forgot about it in all the excitement.

'Well. That's embarrassing.'

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Whatever. Anyway, you can go... I'll think about giving you a bonus. A small bonus, mind you!"

Aiko opened her mouth, wanting to retort, but he added sternly:

"And, by the way... were you sitting in my chair?"

The petite girl turned around and hurried upstairs.

"I'll be going, boss! My great uncle and my family cat... I mean, my auntie and my dog... anyway, see you later!"

Sunny scoffed and looked at his Shadows.

After a while, he dismissed them, deciding that it was time to switch gears.

'Next, the Memories.'

It was time to delve into the second avenue he wanted to explore.

The first one had to do with augmenting Shadows to advance his mastery of Shadow Dance, while the second one... the second one was inspired by the experience of fusing with Serpent in the Soul Weapon form, and had to do with Memories.

Sunny hoped to advance his mastery of weaving by augmenting them.