1956 Consider Death

In the end, Sunny lost more than he gained from his first venture into the Shadow Realm.

He had gained precious knowledge of what awaited him on the other side of the Gates of Shadow... as well as two black arrows, one smeared in his own blood.

After retrieving the second arrow from the ceiling of the dining hall of the Brilliant Emporium, Sunny studied them both with a dark expression.

The arrows were not enchanted in any way. In fact, they looked quite simple, almost makeshift —the shafts were made of dark wood, the arrowheads were cut from obsidian, and the fletching was made from crow feathers. Nevertheless, there was nothing mundane about them.

Just by holding the two black arrows, Sunny could tell that he was holding something mystical. There was a quiet, deadly aura surrounding them, as if the arrows themselves had presence, akin to one a Saint would possess. Each was also much heavier than he would have expected, hinting that the materials used to craft them were not at all ordinary.

Sunny did not know who had crafted these arrows and from what, but taking a closer look at them, he was not at all surprised that the Onyx Mantle had been pierced.

He had created more than enough Memories to know mystical materials when he saw them. The materials used to fashion the two black arrows... were at least akin to something he would have harvested from a Great Nightmare Creature, but somehow even more daunting.

Even the shadows cast by the arrows were a little threatening.

There was something else about them, as well.

Sunny's expression turned even darker when he sensed something familiar about the black arrows.

If he wasn't wrong... they seemed to be imbued with the killing intent of the unknown shadow stalker, etched with their desire to see the prey die.

The arrows carried their own will.

'Well. I'm still alive, aren't I?'

Better yet, he was now in possession of two supremely lethal arrows. Sunny had many uses for something so precious... who knew, perhaps he would be able to return the favor and sink

them into the heart of that damned archer one day.

Sadly, he had lost something far more precious in return.

It was not the health of one of his avatars, either...

Grimacing, Sunny glanced at the Shadow Lantern.

It was his ability to use its [Gates of Shadow] enchantment.

Of course, he was still able to send shadows inside or call them back. However, now that the unseen assailant had shown their startling ability to follow shadows back through the gate of the Shadow Lantern, Sunny was wary of opening it again.

Who knew what would crawl out of the Shadow Realm the next time he did? By personally passing through the Gates of Shadow, Sunny seemed to have attracted the attention of at least one creature dwelling there. Now that the shadow archer knew his scent, it would not be impossible for them to wait patiently in the area where the Lantern's led to.

Sunny uttered a quiet curse and dismissed the Shadow Lantern.

Now was not a good time to lose one of his most useful tools. The war was raging on, and the battle with the Sovereigns was drawing closer with each passing day.

He would have to step into the Shadow Realm and slay the mysterious archer sooner rather than later.

...But not now.

Now, Sunny had to collect his thoughts and pay attention to his over endeavors.

First, his sorcery.

He looked at the destroyed display stand, sighed, and called upon the shadows to clean up the debris.

There was a lot to do, and no time to waste.

As he headed for the warehouse hidden behind the Memory Boutique portion of the Brilliant Emporium's basement, though, Sunny lingered, staring into the distance with a complicated expression.

He was still being tormented by curiosity, wishing to learn the secrets of the Shadow Realm. If anything, his thirst had only grown stronger after witnessing the unforgettable vista of the dark, silent land. But he could wait for a bit before trying to quench it...

Nevertheless, he had to consider something. He had to consider death.

The soul storm raging in the distance and the strange fact that his own soul had started disintegrating almost immediately after entering the Shadow Realm were obviously connected. In fact, Sunny had an idea of what the storm of soul essence was...

If his shadow had been almost reduced to a whirlwind of essence, then other shadows would be, too. And since the shadows of all living beings that died were supposed to enter the Shadow Realm...

He could safely assume that the soul storm was formed by countless shadows being transformed into essence by the dark expanse of the Shadow Realm.

Countless living beings perished every day across the Dream Realm and the waking world. Just here in Godgrave, the constant cycle of the scarlet jungle extending its tendrils to the surface, giving birth to legions of creatures, and being reduced to ash by the incandescent abyss above would probably send an endless stream of shadows to the empty Realm of Shadow God.

Where they would be slowly ground to dust, turning into swirling rivers of essence.

Maybe that essence was then released back into the universe, giving birth to new life...

If so, then Sunny might have just witnessed the inner mechanism of existence.

He might have seen the true workings of death.

What was death, really?

Death... was a weapon created to fight against the Void and its Corruption.

Death was a tool to bring end to that which had been endless before.

There was this peculiar detail that he had not really considered before. The souls of Nightmare Creature were tainted by the vile corruption of the Void. And yet, once a Nightmare Creature was slain, the soul shards retrieved from its body bore no signs of Corruption. No Awakened had ever become corrupted as a result of absorbing soul shards.

Which meant that death somehow cleansed the souls of the Nightmare Creatures from the dark taint of the Void, putting an end to it.

But how could one end something that was supposed to be endless?

Sunny lowered his head and rubbed his face tiredly.

Was he thinking about useless things? Maybe he was...

But then again, maybe he wasn't.

Destroying something might end it, but if a thing was indestructible... then transforming it into something new was a kind of end, as well.

Shadow God had created death, but he had also become death. He swallowed everything that died, and gifted the dead the peace of an end.

Was that peace... the process of being stripped of everything that made a being themselves, grinding their very soul into a river of essence, and releasing that essence back into the world to live anew?

If so, it was a terrifying thought. But also... a little comforting.

Most of all, it made Sunny think about his own soul, and the shadows that he himself carried within its dark depths.

Was his soul... a weak, tiny seed of a new Shadow Realm?

'Now that is really terrifying.'

Shivering, Sunny threw these thoughts out of his head and walked into the material storage of the Brilliant Emporium with determined steps.