2058 Shadow Forge

In the forge, sweat rolled down Sunny's body as he hammered the incandescent bar of blessed alloy. Furious white sparks danced in the air — these ones not the immaterial sparks of soul essence, but the very real, white-hot particles of burning metal. The heat was sweltering, and the shadows flowed as the brilliant flames danced in the immolating furnace.

Sunny would have already singed his hair and received countless terrible burns if not for the Onyx Shell, which protected him against heat and fire. His expression was focused, and his hand was steady, delivering devastating blows of the black hammer at a steady rhythm.

The cadence of his blows and the ringing of metal filled the dark expanse of the forge chamber, which was hidden from the world in its own dimension, with a furious, but beautiful melody.

The force he unleashed with each blow was enough to shatter the gates of a castle and topple its walls, sunder mountains and split the earth. However, the blessed alloy resisted it stubbornly, putting up an exhausting fight.

Still… Sunny was not one to lose a battle.

He hammered the bar of alloy to flatten it, then folded it and repeated the process — again, and again, and again, layering the blessed steel over itself countless times. This was not done to remove impurities — there were none — but rather to make the composition of the future blade uniform, spreading the ashes, the obsidian dust, and the remnants of his blood across its length evenly.

From time to time, he would thrust the bar of alloy back into the furnace and allow the incinerating white flames burning within to lick it freely. He also steadily fed more fuel to the fire — wood of the ancient, abominable trees that grew in the Hollows of Godgrave, and from the Burned Forest as well.

And then, at some point…

Something strange happened.

The fire suddenly grew weaker, forcing him to add more fuel to feed it, and do it more frequently. Sunny studied the furnace for a few moments before realizing what was happening.

The blessed alloy was absorbing the soul flame. Every time he thrust it into the furnace, the incandescent metal drank the fire like a man dying of thirst in the desert. As such, the holy white flame permeated the alloy, changing it on a fundamental level and becoming one with it.

And at the same time, the weave of the Memory he was still keeping from collapsing blazed with a new radiance, infused with the flame, as well.

The ethereal string of essence suddenly burned his fingers, and his inky-black hands caught fire. For a few moments, the hands made of shadows were wreathed in blinding white flame. Then, they started to crumble. Only Weaver's Needle, which he held in his real hand, remained unaffected, still emanating a soft golden glow.

But one needle was not enough.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny endured the blinding pain and called upon the shadows, rebuilding his hands at the same speed as the flames were devouring them. Just like that, he continued to weave while burning — suffering, being turned to ash, and then being reborn from the shadows.

His already pale face turned deathly white, but Sunny did not halt his work even for a moment.

Just as his other incarnation was weaving a vast tapestry of essence strings in the dream world, he was doing the same here, repeating its every motion with absolute precision.

At first, the two spellweaves were identical. But soon, the patterns of essence strings diverged, each creating a unique tapestry. These tapestries, however, were intimately tied — each was one part of a single whole, meant to be seamlessly connected like two pieces of a vast puzzle.

The forging hall of the Marvelous Mimic was filled with deafening ringing, flashes of light, and unbearable heat for a while.

After some time — and eternity, perhaps — Sunny wiped the sweat off his brow and inhaled deeply, feeling the sizzling air scorch his burning lungs. His muscles were burning, too, having endured more strain than they would have in the most dire of battles.

But he was finally satisfied with the alloy, having judged that it was ready to be shaped.

Thrusting the incandescent bar of blessed metal into the furnace one more time, he allowed himself a moment of respite. The cool water from the Endless Spring touched his lips and flowed into his parched throat, replenishing his strength and making him feel a sense of tranquil bliss.

Pouring some of it on his head, Sunny shook his wet hair and let out a satisfied sigh. Then, grasping the handle he had fashioned out of scrap metal, he pulled the blessed alloy out of the furnace and placed it on the anvil once again.

'Grow heavy…'

Raising the Soul Serpent, he made his hand as heavy as a mountain with the help of the Onyx Shell and delivered another crushing hammer blow to the radiant metal.

Now, it was time to shape the sword.

Alternating between heavy blows that were meant to draw out the metal and light blows to shape it, Sunny set about the difficult task of turning the bar of the blessed alloy into a blade.

He was forging a longsword — Neph's preferred type of sword, as well as the original form of the Dream Blade. The blade had to be more than a meter long, with a very slight taper, and the tang adding another thirty centimeters or so. In the end, the entire sword would be close to one and a half meters in length, which was a lot of steel to forge, quench, temper, polish, and sharpen.

There was also the crossguard, the pommel, and the hilt to be fashioned and fitted onto the tang.

There could be no mistake, no time to rest.

The work was only just starting…

Absolutely focused, Sunny continued to hammer the blessed alloy. The incandescent metal stretched out under his blows, turning into a semblance of a long, narrow blade…

Sweat poured down his face, boiling and evaporating moments later.

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In Neph's dream, Sunny continued to create the weave.

It was vast and infinitely complex — much more complicated than what he was simultaneously creating in the forge of the Marvelous Mimic.

But that was only to be expected. After all, the real Dream Blade was merely a Dormant Memory of the First Tier. It had only one dim node to serve as the anchor for the ethereal strings, while here… here, Sunny had seven Transcendent soul cores to use as the foundation.

And not just any soul cores, at that — the soul cores of a person who possessed [The Fire], the lineage Attribute of Sun God, which made the soul especially potent.

So, Sunny could allow himself some freedom.

And he was usingthat freedom both fully and unapologetically, weaving an inspired tapestry that combined all his attainment in sorcery, serving as his crowning achievement.

Even though his fingers bled, and his mind reeled on the verge of collapse, Sunny continued to weave with a subtle smile on his face.

His fingers healed moments later, anyway, awash in Neph's warmth.

After a while, one of his incarnations staggered and fell to its knees, looking down with a pained expression. Then, it continued to weave strings of essence strings while kneeling on the ground.

Nephis looked at him with concern.

"What is happening?"

The incarnation of Sunny who was receiving her flame opened its eyes and smiled faintly.

"...I just burned my soul a little. Nothing serious."

She studied him silently.

"You look… a little off."

He simply shook his head.

"It's fine. I am just a bit… overwhelmed. The mental pressure is staggering, but my concentration can't be broken. So, I am shutting down things that serve no purpose."

Sunny had forced some of his incarnations to close their eyes, so that absorbing visual data did not strain his mind. He had abandoned listening to his shadow sense altogether. If an incarnation did not need to stand, he stopped trying to keep it standing. Anything that was not connected to forging the sword or weaving its enchantments was being sacrificed…

And even then, he was barely managing. Even the vision of those incarnations that had to see was slowly turning blurry, and his coordination was suffering.

Nephis frowned.

"Why are you wasting energy on an unimportant thing like talking to me, then?"

Sunny smiled wider.

"Talking to you can never be unimportant."

Then, his gaze lost focus, and his expression grew absent.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes again.

"It has… been so long, already… but that's alright… it will be finished soon…"

Indeed, the forging had continued for countless hours — he had lost count of them, at least. But the final part was swiftly approaching.

Out there in the forge, his original body had already shaped the blade. Currently, billowing clouds of scorching steam were rising from the vessel where the sword was being quenched. They had already filled the forge entirely, but the incandescent blade was still refusing to cool down.

Sunny was pouring more water from the Endless Spring into the vessel, threatening to empty the beautiful glass bottle for the first time in a decade.

Then, he would have to polish and grind the blade to sharpen it, affix the crossguard, fit the hilt on the tang, and put the pommel in place.

The spellweave here in the dream was not far from reaching the point of near-completion, as well — granted, even that small distance seemed dreadful and daunting to Sunny, who was mentally exhausted and physically drained, almost more so than he was able to endure.

After that, the most important part of the forging would be upon him.

He would have to connect the real version of the sword to its dream counterpart, thus completing the last enchantment.

And binding the blade to Neph's soul.

…The second of his incarnations staggered and fell down.

Sunny inhaled deeply.

'One last push.'

His hands moved with stunning speed and beautiful grace, expanding the vast tapestry of radiant strings even further.