2274 Dark Lord  
...The dark fissure in the fabric of reality was a Dream Gate.  
But a Dream Gate could not be hidden in an underground reservoir beneath the Central Government HQ. Because there was only one Supreme in the world, and only one Dream Gate... the radiant Dream Gate of Chanigng Star, the living goddess of humanity.  
  
This Gate, however, was out of place. It brimmed with an impenetrable darkness, making June shiver as if chilled to the bone.  
He was not someone to deny what he saw, however.  
'A... second Dream Gate?'  
If there was a second Dream Gate in the world... that meant that there was a second Supreme in the world, as well.   
He almost staggered.  
Awakened Kim patted June on the shoulder.  
"Relax, Corsair. This secret is fully sanctioned by the Ivory Tower."  
June gulped.  
"B-but... the Lord of Shadows... he's dead. I saw him die with my own two eyes."  
She smiled.  
"Did you?"  
With that, Awakened Kim left the elevator and entered the reservoir.  
It was only then that June noticed that there were various cargo containers placed chaotically here and there on the floor of the underground chamber, as well as several people busy unloading building materials and supplies from them.  
"Kind of creepy, isn't it?"  
He flinched, headring a friendly voice speaking into his ear.  
Turning around, June noticed a young man looking at him with an amiable smile. Quite disturbingly, he had not sensed the young man's approach at all.  
It had been years since anyone had managed to sneak up on June. He still had scars from the near-fatal encounter.  
The young man pointed to the Dream Gate.  
"A creepy black portal hidden in a secret underground chamber... I nearly fainted the first time I saw it!"  
June looked at the towering fissure once again, trying to regain his composure.   
"The Lord of Shadows... is alive?"  
Not only was the sinister fiend alive, he was also in charge of an elite clandestine force that supported the Ivory Tower from the shadows.  
So...Lady Nephis and him had staged the fateful duel, for whatever reason.  
June tried to come to terms with that fact.  
Somehow, it made a comforting sort of sense.  
One Supreme was like a radiant sun, shining upon manking from the heavens. The other was like a vast shadow hiding in the eternal darkness deep underground. Both were working hand in hand to protect humanity.  
The goddess and her shadow.  
June exhaled slowly, then froze.  
'Wait... that's "our boss" Awakened Kim kept talking about?!'  
He suddenly felt dizzy.  
Who went around calling a Supreme "boss"?! Wasn't... wasn't that sacrilege?  
The young man turned to Awakened Kim and saluted her respectfully.  
She smiled.  
"Oh. Ray... are you and Fleur back from the Eastern Quadrant?"  
He nodded.  
"I am, but she stayed behind to treat the civilians. Oh, by the way, will Master Quentin be returning any time soon? She wanted to thank him for his guidance."  
Awakened Kim shook her head.  
"You know that he mainly stays in Bastion. Now that our princess is there as well, he won't be back for some time."  
The young man - Ray - sighed.   
"I don't get it... I really odn't. When i first learned that Rani - I mean, Rain - was royalty, I was honestly a bit envious. But she went straight back to a road crew after the war! And now she's delivering coffee in Bastion. Isn't our boss a little too ruthless to his sister?"  
It was only then that June noticed Ray wearing a suit of black armour similar to that of Awakened Kim.  
Everyone in the underground chamber was, in fact, all emblazoned with the coiling serpent insignia.  
That suddenly made his heart flutter.  
'Does this mean that I'll get one too?'  
Would he be getting a bespoke suit of Transcendent armor?  
'She did say that our benefits were stellar...'  
Awakened Kim, meanwhile, pointed to June and said neutrally:  
"This is our new recruit, Corsair. Corsair, this is our best stealth specialist, Ray. Be nice to him... his girlfriend is a healer."  
June looked at the young man and smiled.  
"Let's be friends."  
Anyone who knew anything understood that befriending healers was a matter of first priority.  
After saying their goodbye to Ray, June and Kim walked past the cargo containers and passed through the Dream Gate without much fanfare. June had been wondering what he would encounter on the other side with a bit of trepidation, but to his suprise, he saw...  
Nothing.  
Absolutely nothing. He was surrounded by impenetrable darkness, the kind one rarely encountered in a world that was full of stars, moons and city lights.  
All June could feel was the wind on his face, hinting that he was not underground anymore. He could also hear various sounds reaching his ears from a distance.   
Awakened Kim was somewhere near. Her voice reached him from a few meters away a second later:  
"You will receive the Mark soon. For now, I will use my Aspect Ability on you. It will help you see."  
Then, suddenly...  
June could see again.   
The darkness did not disappear, but he was somehow able to see through it clearly. The world was devoid of color, but other than that, it was as if he suddenly received perfect night vision.  
A vast starless sky was above him.  
All around him...  
Were the crumbled, dilapidated buildings of a dark, ancient city.  
He was standing in the middle of a spacious square that rested under the black branches of a colossal tree. The Dream Gate towered behind him, while a wide road led into the depths of the city in front of him.  
Awakened Kim spoke calmly:  
"This is the Saint Square. Apparently, this is where our boss met Saint for the first time..."  
June hesitated to ask.  
"Which Saint?"  
She shook her head.  
"Not a Saint. The Saint - The Onyx Saint. She is the general of Shadow Legion... as well as the combat instructor of the Shadow Clan. She'll be training you, too."  
He trembled.  
'Wait... she doesn't mean... that terrifying living statue?'  
June was actually quite familiar with the Lord of Shadows and his infernal servants, having followed the sellsword Saint into battle during the conquest expedition of the Vanishing Lake.  
The graceful onyx knight, the towering steel fiend, and the shapeshifting serpent...  
Weren't they simple Echoes?  
Apparently, they weren't. And one of them would be training him soon.  
He sighed.  
"I'm... looking forward to it."  
Awakened Kim nodded.  
"First, you will need to meet the boss and receive the Mark. We'll settle you in the Dark Castle after that."  
June raised an eyebrow.  
"The Dark Castle?"  
Instead of answering, Kim simply pointed.  
Turning around, June looked up and froze for a few moments.  
Out there, standing on a tall hill above the city, was a sinister castle built of black stone.  
It was grand and magnificent, with dozens of towers rising into the air, each supported by a number of elaborate arches and columns. Grotesque gargoyles were staring down on the ruins from under the eaves.  
A grandiose staircase led to the castle gates. In front of it, there was a vast stone platform, meant to serve as the gathering ground for the soldieгs in case the enemy was to somehow scale the hill.  
Now, however, a stunning temple of black marble was perched on it instead.  
The Nameless Temple...  
It was at this point that June finally asked:   
"I am sorry, Awakened Kim, but where, exactly, are we?"  
She looked at him in confusion, then smiled faintly.  
"Where else? This is the Forgotten Shore."  
June inhaled sharply.   
The Forgotten Shore! The nightmarish crucible where Song of the Fallen, Raised by Wolves, Nightingale, the Fire Keepers... and Changing Star herself had been forged.  
The cradle of humanity's goddess.  
A subtle frown creased his brow.  
"Wait... but wasn't there a Bright Castle here, rules by a Bright Lord?"  
Awakened Kim laughed quietly.  
"There was. Now however, we have a Dark Castle... ruled by а Dark Lord."  
June blinked a couple of times.  
"That's a little on the nose, isn't it?"  
She coughed.  
"Oh... it is. Don't say it to the boss's face though. Granted, he probably heard you already - he hears everything, after all.  
June paled.  
"What I meant to say was that it is beautifully poetic and highly symbolic. Yeah?"  
Kim looked at him with a hint of disdain and shook her head.  
"In any case, let's go. I need to get back to NQSC soon."  
They walked across the Dark City together as she explained a few more things. June was a little bit distracted however, by the sight of countless harrowing Nightmare creatures - or rather, their silent shadows - moving along the desolate streets, clearing them of stone debris or transporting building materials.   
It seemed like the entire city was beinng slowly restored to its former glory.  
At some point, they passed a magnificent ruined cathedral. Rhythmic sounds of a hammer striking an anvil could be heard from the inside, ringing far and wide in the silence of the desolate city.   
June looked at it with curiosity.  
"What is happening there?"  
Awakened Kim glanced at the cathedral and frowned slightly.  
"There... our blacksmith is there, working endlessly to arm the members of the Shadow Legion. He is a shadow, just like the rest of them."  
June thought he heard a reverent note in her voice, but wasn't sure what it meant.  
Finally, they ascended the tall hill and stopped. The Nameless Temple was to their right, while the towering gates of the Dark Castle were in front of them.   
Looking at the dark chasm, June couldn't help but shiver.  
"You know, Awakened Kim... looking at this gate, I can't help but feel like it is the maw of a giant, insatiable beast."  
She gave him an odd look, then headed towards the gate with a nonchalant shrug.  
"Well, that is because it is. This entire castle is one giant Transcendent Devil."  
June chuckled.  
'This Awakened Kim... she really has a strange sense off humor.'  
"You're joking, right?"  
The unassuming woman entered the castle without responding.  
June hesitated in front of the gates for a few moments.  
"...Right?"