1661 Missing Light

In the courtyard of the Nameless Temple, a lonely figure was sitting on the black marble plates, shrouded in shadows. It was a young man with alabaster skin and onyx eyes, clad in an intricate suit of fearsome armor. His hair was long, and darker than a raven's wing.

In front of him, a frail tree was growing in the darkness, its branches brimming with wilting leaves.

Sunny studied the tree and sighed.

'It's not doing well, despite my efforts.’

The tree was missing sunlight-what little of it there was in the outskirts of NQSC, from where Sunny had stolen it. But it was resilient, just like the people there were. It had clung to life for a long time in that godforsaken place, and now it continued to do so here, in Godgrave.

Sunny felt guilty towards the tree.

It was the one he had cut two lines into to mark the passing of his parents. After claiming the Nameless Temple and coming back to the waking world, Sunny visited NQSC and took the tree away from the pitiful park where it grew. Of course, he replaced it with a different one people of the outskirts did not have a lot of vibrant things to look at, and he didn't want to rob them of another one.

Not that it mattered too much. Most of the settlers who chose to pass through the Dream Gates were not citizens, but those who had been discarded by humanity and hoped to find a better place for themselves in a different world. As a result, the outskirts of NQSC were much less crowded than they had been in his time, and would only grow more desolate as time went on.

In any case, the familiar tree stood in the courtyard of his Citadel now, and Sunny often came to tend to it, or gaze at it as he contemplated various matters.

‘It seems that Valor and Song have started preparations. It won't be long now.’

He sighed, then closed his eyes and dove into his Soul Sea.

Such a simple thing, but it had taken Sunny more than a year to find a way back into the Soul Sea after being banished from the Nightmare Spell.

Even then, he could only enter it after concentrating and meditating for a long time. At least for a while he could do it on a moment's notice once again after another year of practice.

The Soul Sea looked the same as it had before.

But also entirely different.

The vast expanse of silent water was the same. The six lightless suns hanging above it were also no different.

However, now, a magnificent black temple stood in the middle of the lake, its pillars shrouded in darkness, It was a perfect replica of the Nameless Temple, which had appeared here on its own the moment Sunny claimed ownership of the ancient Citadel.

The legion of shadows, which had dwelled at the edges of the Soul Sea, were now gathered around the temple, Just as lifeless and motionless as they had always been... of course, there were much more of them now, with several giant figures towering above the rest.

It almost looked as if they would come to life at any moment, ready to enter the temple to worship its master.

Sunny did not know what, exactly, had caused this change, but suspected that the Soul Seas of all Saints were somewhat different from those of lesser Awakened. A Soul Sea was the representation of one's soul, after all, and Transcendence was all about the soul surpassing the limits of its mortal vessel.

As such, he couldn't help but wonder what the Soul Sea of a Sovereign would look like. What about a Sacred being? Or a Divine one?

Would the soul of a deity contain an actual realm?

He didn't know, yet... but maybe one day he would find out.

In any case, for now, he had come here for a purpose.

Sitting on the steps of the dark temple, Sunny sighed and summoned the images of his Shadows. Soon, five figures appeared in front of him.

Saint, Serpent, Nightmare, Flend, and Mimic.

He studied them silently.

There was more than one thing he had to discover anew after losing the helpful guidance of the Spell. Entering the Soul Sea was one, but nurturing his Shadows was another.

Only after being left alone had Sunny learned clearly where his Aspect ended and the Nightmare Spell began. Creating Shadows was a facet of his Aspect... making them stronger by feeding them Memories, however, was a helpful tool the Spell had graciously provided, building it around his innate powers.

It was reasonable, in hindsight. Memories were born from the Spell, after all, so it wouldn't make sense for Shadow Creatures to be dependent on them for growth. The same could be said about Echoes, which were similarly of the Spell - it wouldn't make much sense if the only way to create a Shadow was through an Echo.

So, Sunny had to discover a new way - the true way - to accomplish both of these things.

He had succeeded only partially.

Sunny still had no idea how to create a Shadow without an Echo, but he had discovered ways to empower most of his Shadows.

Fiend was the easiest to deal with, in that regard. All he needed was to devour powerful creatures or potent mystical materials to grow, Granted, his stomach was truly bottomless, The rascal had been feasting on all kinds of dreadful Nightmare Creatures for many vears, but only advanced to the Supreme Rank recently, after consuming that Great Demon some days back.

All of his Attributes and Abilities had grown stronger, but Fiend had not gained any new ones yet.

The secret to Serpent's growth was also rather simple, since that Shadow had always been unique. Its Rank depended on how well Sunny had mastered Shadow Dance, while its Class was equal to that of its master. Sunny could not receive Aspect Legacy Relics anymore... however, he could still advance in his mastery of it. When that happened, Serpent would become Supreme as well.

Granted, he was wary of diving deeper into Shadow Dance due to losing his True Name.

Meanwhile, Nightmare... had already become a Transcendent Terror, reaching the same Class and Rank as Serpent. It had taken Sunny a long time to figure out how to make this Shadow of his stronger in the absence of the Nightmare Spell, but the solution was simple.

Nightmare fed on the dreams of powerful creatures. He subjugated them, but could also consume them. That was how it could reach a higher Rank, even though the process was slow and fraught with danger.

The way for the Marvelous Mimic to grow was also not that hard. It could produce soul coins by devouring living beings. Those soul coins could be used by anyone to strengthen their soul - but if fed back to the Mimle, they would strengthen it Instead

However, Sunny did not really need Mimie to rise In Rank, for now. The most important traits of the Marvelous Mimle - the volume of its dimensional storage and the intricacy of the shape it could assume - depended on the potency of its master's soul, not the Shadow's own.

And finally... there was Saint.

Looking at her, Sunny sighed.

She was the only one he didn't know how to nurture, yet. In the past, Saint grew in Rank by consuming Memories with the help of the Spell, but now, there was no way he knew of to strengthen her. As a result, his very first Shadow had remained a Transcendent Devil to this day.

Of course, as far as Transcendent Devils went, she was by far the most deadly one he had ever seen.

'But is it enough for what is to come?'

Sunny didn't know.

Hearing someone walk across the marble floor of the dark courtyard, he dismissed the images of his Shadows and left the Soul Sea.

It seemed that he had a visitor.