1750 Nothing But Time

The Ebony Tower was just like the last time Sunny had seen it - floating ominously in a boundless black vold, with a sea of fire burning above it relentlessly.

The Fire Keepers had established an outpost here, but after the Chain Breaker gained the ability to brave the Crushing, they only maintained a token presence in the Sky Below. Now that Neph's followers had left to challenge the Nightmares, there was not a soul around.

He stepped out of the black arch on the highest level of the obsidian pagoda and remained there for a while, staring into the distance. Somewhere far away, in a different world, one of his shadows was following Rain... Sunny had to think of a way to approach her openly, but his current mental state was too volatile to try.

‘...I'll think of something later.'

Nothing moved in the Sky Below. Nothing disturbed the cold silence. Rid of the suffocating pressure of human company, he felt... comfortable, for the first time in a while. Or at least numb.

There was consolation in solitude.

Sunny exhaled slowly, then allowed the Onyx Mantle to retreat back under his skin. With his military bodysuit in tatters, he was left practically naked - after hesitating for a bit, Sunny allowed the wild shadows to envelop his lithe body, and manifested them into a semblance of soft fabric.

Summoning the Endless Spring, he satiated his thirst and left the sixth level of the Ebony Tower.

The fifth level consisted of one large chamber. It was shrouded in darkness, with countless runes covering the obsidian walls. These runes were the reason why Sunny had chosen to come to this place.

He stared at them emotionlessly.

'I knew it.'

Before, Sunny had been unable to read the forbidden runes. In fact, simply beholding them had almost killed him... but things were different now. Not only had he grown vastly more powerful since his day as an Awakened, but he had also received the revelations of madness from the Sin of Solace.

Thanks to that, he glimpsed the secrets that Ariel had left behind, and was seemingly inoculated against the power of the forbidden runes by the knowledge of the Forgotten God.

And so... Sunny did not feel repelled by the runes carved into the walls of the Ebony Tower anymore. All he felt was a slight sense of discomfort.

Of course, he still had to be careful when studying them - the knowledge of the Void that a daemon was capable of enduring could very well plant seeds of Corruption into his Transcendent Soul, and there was not telling if any of it was mixed between the passages concerning the Forgotten God.

There was also a bit of a problem...

Nether had not used the runic alphabet Sunny was most familiar with while leaving the notes on the wall, and since the Spell never translated the forbidden runes, he could not do it himself from memory. After years of wandering the Dream Realm and exploring ancient ruins, he could somewhat decipher the meaning, but a proper translation would take a lot of time.

Which was fine.

Sunny had nothing but time, these days.

He did not get to work immediately, though. What was the rush?

Instead, Sunny left the fifth level behind and descended lower. He passed the solemn shrine on the fourth floor, the workshops on the third floor, the divine flame reservoir on the second floor where Weaver's arm had once been left to burn, devoured by the harrowing rot - and finally reached the first level of the Ebony Tower.

That was where the Fire Keepers had established their living quarters.

The central chamber had been shrouded in darkness once, but now, it was brightly lit by a multitude of enchanted lanterns. Sunny counted them calmly and smiled.

Each of the lanterns was a Memory belonging to one of the Fire Keepers. They had been left behind here for a reason. For as long as the master of the lantern was alive, their lantern would continue to glow. If they perished, the lantern would dissipate into a rain of sparks, destroyed with the rest of their Memories.

There was a similar chamber in the Ivory Tower, which could tell if any of them had died.

From the look of it, the Fire Keepers were doing well in the Second Nightmares. The number of lanterns had not dwindled at all... at least not yet.

Looking away, Sunny walked over to one of the cots and fell on it heavily. As soon as his head hit the pillow, his eyes closed on their own.

He was tired...

It was time to sleep.

Tomorrow, his new life as an aimless wanderer would begin.

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Sunny woke up feeling refreshed.

It was still strange to him, to sleep while one of his incarnations stayed awake. In such moments, his consciousness seemed to split, one part of it functioning normally, the other drifting in the comforting embrace of slumber. He even dreamed sometimes, while simultaneously observing his dreams from the side.

In any case, his mental fatigue lessened no matter which incarnation slept, as long as one of them did.

Rising from the cot, Sunny looked around groggily.

There was nothing pressing he had to do, so he was not in a hurry. He summoned the Covetous Coffer, took out some supplies, and seasoned some monster meat. While it was roasting, Sunny brewed himself a pot of coffee.

Then, he took the pot and the plate of meat outside and ate breakfast while dangling his feet above the bottomless abyss of the Sky Below.

The sea of divine flames above made for a spectacular sky. He enjoyed the views for a while, sipping coffee and not thinking about anything in particular. Eventually, though, Sunny grew bored, and finally returned to the fifth level of the Ebony Tower.

He looked at the runes for a while, eventually stopping near a familiar section of Nether's writings.

Out there on the obsidian wall, a strange map had been carved into the stone.

The Ivory Tower, the Tomb of Ariel, Ravenheart, Bastion, the great vessel that served as the Citadel for the House of Night, the Underworld... and Weaver's Mask placed above the other six landmarks, with a question mark next to it.

The other six strongholds were only marked by a single rune each,

Desire, Oblivion, Dread, Imagination, Repose, Destiny... and "Fate?".

Sunny studied the map with amusement.

It had seemed a bit strange before - after all, there were no borders, no terrain, no measure of distance between the strongholds. They all seemed strangely disconnected, as if there was no map at all.

Now, of course, Sunny knew the daemons had built their citadels in different realms, and so, it could as well have been a realm map. It was only after the Dream Realm had assimilated all mortal realms and five of the six divine realms that the daemonic strongholds ended up connected by land.

Finally, his gaze settled on the carving of Weaver's Mask.

Nether had not known where his eldest siblings dwelled, or if there was such a place at all.

Perhaps Weaver had been a homeless wanderer, just like Sunny.

Smiling darkly, Sunny looked away from the map and turned his attention to the runes.