1760 Ruins of the Crimson Spire

The Crimson Spire, which had been a symbol of both oppression and salvation for the Sleepers of the Forgotten Shore, was no more. Sunny had witnessed the beginning of its destruction, all those years ago, but was sent away by Nephis before the cyclopean structure collapsed.

Looking at the mountain of shattered black stone that towered above the sea of dust like a titanic gravestone, he wondered how she had escaped the cataclysmic collapse. It must have been hard, to escape that disaster...

It must have been even harder still to survive the long journey across the desolate Forgotten Shore, traverse the Nightmare Desert, enter the Underworld, and conquer the Second Nightmare. He had always known how hard it would have been for a mere Sleeper... but only after spending close to two years in solitude did Sunny realize how taxing it must have been on Neph's mind.

Escaping the collapsing Spire had probably been the easiest of her ordeals.

...Sunny gazed upon the vast ruin from the sky, then plummeted down and turned into a human. Walking across the dust, he fell into a solemn mood.

Soon, something crunched under the boot of the Onyx Mantle. He hesitated for a moment, then kneeled and brushed the dust away.

Below it, a monstrous skull was revealed.

Sunny stared at it for a while, then rose and looked around. He could discern more bones on the ground around him, all covered by a thick layer of dust.

A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.

'It's here...'

He was on the edges of the battlefield where the Dreamer Army had fought against the horde of Nightmare Creatures.

There, in the distance, stood the broken remains of the siege engines that Kai had commanded. Not too far away, Effie had held the line against the flood of abominations, her soldiers dying one by one, until nobody was left. Behind that place was the spot where the Dreamer Army had made its last stand, the rising water already reaching their knees.

Sunny knew exactly how many Sleepers had come to siege the Crimson Spire. He also knew how many of them had survived.

So, it wasn't difficult to calculate how many human skulls lay here, buried in the ashen dust.

He remained silent for a while, and then said quietly:

"...Your nightmare is over."

Sighing deeply, he continued on his way to the bridge that led to the island where the Spire had once stood.

The bridge itself had long collapsed, destroyed by the falling debris. Once upon a time, Sunny had used the Dark Wing and Saint's strength to breach the wide divide... today, however, he simply disappeared from the spot and appeared on the other side a moment later. All it took was a single step.

Clad in an onyx armor, with his raven-black hair dancing in the wind, Sunny walked across the rubble and then froze in place, a subtle expression of astonishment appearing on his alabaster face.

His eyes widened slightly.

'Well... this is a surprise.’

Out of there, in front of him... a stone colossus was kneeling on the ground, unmoving.

Sunny recognized him instantly. The weathered surface of the ancient stone, the small cracks and fissures where countless abominations had assaulted the giant since ancient time

After wandering the Forgotten Shore for thousands of years, the statue of the Builder had finally come to a rest.

Of course, his head was still missing. The giant hammer that had once struck down the harrowing depth dweller lay in the rubble to the side, forgotten and abandoned. The colossus was still and motionless, its back turned to Sunny,

Inhaling deeply, he walked around the gargantuan statue and faced it.

For a while, there was only silence.

In front of the kneeling colossus, six stone heads lay in the rubble, staring blindly at the empty space where the gates of the Crimson Spire had once been. The Lord, the Priestess, the Hunter, the Slayer, the Knight, the Stranger...

The seventh head - the Builder's head gently in the statue's hands - was held gently in statue's hands.

The colossus did not show any sign of life, having found what he had been looking for all that time.

Sunny lingered for a bit, then shifted his gaze, looking within the stone giant. His mind was full of bright curiosity.

'What are you, really?’

After a while, a strange sound escaped from his lips.

"So that's how it is..."

The walking statue... was neither a living being nor a Nightmare Creature.

It had no soul.

Instead, seven Transcendent soul shards were hidden in its stone depths, connected by dimly glimmering essence channels.

...Soul shards, not cores.

The ancient colossus was an automaton... a great golem created by the Builder and brought to a semblance of life by sorcery. Sunny had no doubt that if he broke the statue apart, he would find a complicated weave of countless runes engraved into its hollow core and the expansive web of essence channels.

It was a crude creation, far less intricate than even the Echoes that the Spell weaved.

No wonder Saint had treated it with disdain.

She was a true living being, after all - first created from stone by the Demon of Choice, then brought back to life by a treacherous shadow. The wandering colossus, the Forsaken Knight of the ruined cathedral... they were no more than pale imitations. Their power might have been much greater than hers, but their nature was deeply and fundamentally inferior.

If Sunny was to guess, one of the seven heroes of the Forgotten Shore - the Stranger - must have been one of the Stone Saints, and had brought a small number of his soldiers with him to this dark land. The Builder must have been in awe of Nether's craftsmanship, and tried to recreate it clumsily.

The walking giant was the result.

By now, the seven soul shards placed in his stone body were almost entirely devoid of essence, shimmering dimly, one step away from being extinguished. Perhaps the colossus had been absorbing power from the artificial sun, and was left without a source of essence after the Crimson Terror was destroyed. Perhaps he had simply exhausted all his power and came to a natural end.

In any case, the headless statue would not be wandering the vast expanse of the Forgotten Shore ever again.

Sunny threw one last glance at it and turned away with a sigh.

‘I'm glad you found what you were looking for.’

He walked away, then started climbing the rubble.

"Even the big guy is gone... ah, why does it make me feel sad? It's like... I barely recognize the place..."

The reason he had come to the ruins of the Crimson Spire was still there, though.

It was at the very heart of the mountains of crushed stone, at the bottom of a vast well. Sunny climbed down, being extremely careful not to fall - he did not trust the stability of the rubble and tested each foothold before lowering himself deeper into the darkness, and for a good reason.

At the bottom of the deep well... was a vast pool of black water. Its surface was perfectly still and flat, like that of a harrowing mirror made from pure darkness. Although the water was opaque and Sunny could see how far down it went, he felt as though it was unimaginably deep, reaching such depths that mere thought of light would be impossible there.

The Dark Sea.

As Sunny watched it in solemn silence, a subtle ripple spread across the surface of the imprisoned ocean of darkness. It was as though it was straining to spill over the edges of the pool and break free. However, the invisible powers that held it down were too mighty to overcome, even for this vast, boundless, inconceivable creature.

The seal he had activated still held, showing no sign of growing weaker.

Shifting his gaze, Sunny peered into the depths of the Dark Sea and let out a stifled chuckle.

It did not change.

All he could see was boundless, appalling darkness.

However, somewhere deep, deep below...

He seemed to have sensed the presence of seven abyssal nodes where the Corruption was even denser.

His suspicion had been right.

The Dark Sea of the Forgotten Shore was indeed a living being... a Great Titan.

Before, the mere thought of a Great Titan would have caused him to fall to his knees in terror, but after witnessing one dying miserably in the white mist, Sunny remained unmoved.

He even...

Felt a strange, daring compulsion to dive into the black waters.

Why not? He had bathed in them before. Back then, the Dark Sea paid him no attention... would it be different now that he was a Saint, possessing a Transcendent Soul that would be much more nourishing for a being such as this?

What would he find in the depths of the ancient sea of Corruption? What mysteries were hidden in the unfathomable black waters?

'Should I find out?'

The temptation was strong.

He reached toward the dark pool, tantalized by its lightless expanse.

But then, he stopped.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, struggling against the sense of dark wonder. Then, he slowly, laboriously, pulled his hand back.

'What the... hell am I doing?'

He wanted to dive into the Dark Sea. Back then, he was merely a Sleeper... a powerless, pathetic Dormant Beast. But now, he was a Transcendent Terror, and carried a cohort of fearsome Shadows in his soul. Although his mind was telling him to be cautious, his heart recklessly believed that he could survive the depths of the Great Titan... maybe he would even be able to destroy it.

Why not? What would he lose if he actually died in that vast darkness? There was nothing to lose...

Only there was, now.

If he had reached the ruin of the Crimson Spire before promising to be Rain's teacher, Sunny might have risked it. But now, things were different. She might not have remembered him... but he remembered her.

He also remembered himself.

Shaking his head, Sunny took a step back.

"I am... such an idiot."

It didn't even matter if he could survive in the embrace of the Dark Sea. What mattered more was that the Great Titan had been sealed by his own hand - and none of the Nightmare Creatures that dwelled in the black water were able to escape that seal.

So, if Sunny did dive into the black pool, he wouldn't be able to escape it, either.

Wouldn't it be funny, to be imprisoned by the seal he himself had put in place?

Smiling darkly, Sunny looked at the still water and sighed.

"If I ever become powerful enough to break the seal... maybe then, we'll meet again."

The black pool rippled, as if acknowledging his promise.

...Suddenly unnerved, Sunny took another step back and silently dissolved into the shadows.