1761 Old Haunts

In the past, it had taken the Dreamer Army many days of an arduous march to reach the Crimson Spire from the Dark City. Now, however, Sunny could traverse that distance in less than a minute.

He was not in a hurry to leave, though.

Leaving the towering mountain of rubble behind, he crossed the broken bridge and returned to the ashen wasteland. He remained motionless for a while, then sighed and leaned down to brush the dust off the old bones.

...In the end, it took him almost a week to find the remains of every Sleeper that had perished in the battle for the Crimson Spire. There were four hundred of them, after all, and he had to be careful not to damage the brittle bonds. So, it took some time.

He placed them together on the ground, and then used the jagged slabs of black stone from the ruins of the gargantuan tower to construct a stone barrow above the mass grave.

It was a little fitting, to lay these young men and women to rest under the broken remains of the Crimson Spire, which they had laid down their lives to conquer.

Sunny also collected the remains of every Nightmare Creature that had fallen in the battle, and piled them onto each other to the side of the barrow. The mountain of hideous bones towered above the stone grave, dwarfing it entirely in size... a poignant testament to how fearsome the Dreamers of the Dark City had been, and how valiantly they had fought.

He stood in front of the barrow for some time, and then sighed.

"We were tough bastards, weren't we? You guys... rest easy now. The others are doing well. Most of them still follow Nephis, but they are Masters now. The remaining Handmaidens will Ascend before too long, as well - Seishan is taking care of them. Oh, Effie and Kai are already Saints. There are a few independents like myself out there, too. We... we all escaped."

Sunny didn't know why he was saying that. His words rang hollow... he wasn't a big fan of speaking to the dead, to begin with. What was the point?

Shaking his head, he approached the barrow and carved a few runes into the surface of the black stone.

The runes read:

[Here lie those

Who extinguished the sun Dreamers of the Dark City

Sleep well

Your nightmare is over.]

Stepping back from the slab of black stone with a heavy heart, Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed and turned away.

Walking across the sea of ashen dust, he summoned Nightmare and jumped into the saddle.

His voice sounded rough when he urged the stallion forward and said:

"...Let's get out of here."

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A young man with alabaster skin and raven-black hair rode through the darkness on a tenebrous steed, his fearsome armor crafted from polished onyx. In front of him, a great wall of dark stone rose into the lightless sky, obscuring the world.

Sunny had reached the Dark City.

He hunched in the saddle, looking up at the towering wall. The city, which had been populated by dreadful abominations, was now peaceful and silent. He could not sense any movement on its ancient streets.

After lingering for a while, Sunny stepped through the shadows and appeared on top of the wall. Gazing down, he saw a familiar landscape.

In the distance, the twisted and misshapen ruins of the Bright Castle were covered in soot. The Sleepers had set flame to the ancient fortress before leaving, destroying that which had withstood the cruelty of time.

He could recognize many other landmarks, as well. The toppled lighthouse, the half-collapsed library where he had once learned the truth of the Forgotten Shore, the plaza where Saint and her siblings had once fallen, the ruined cathedral…

Even all these years later, Sunny remembered every ruined street of the Dark City where he had hunted. The places where he had ambushed abominations, the places where he had been ambushed by them. There were countless pieces of rubble here that had been wetted by his blood, and even more that he had painted with the blood of his enemies.

A Fallen Nightmare Creature had seemed like the end of the world back then.

Smiling wryly, Sunny took a step into nothingness and jumped down from the great wall of the Dark City. The wind whistled in his ears for a few seconds, and then, he landed on the stone rubble. The silence enveloping the ruins was momentarily broken by the thunderous boom of his landing.

The Terror of the Crimson Spire had annihilated most of the living beings on the Forgotten Shore to fuel her transformation into a Corrupted Titan. Everywhere the rays of the ruthless sun had reached, nothing but death remained.

But there were many dark places in the ancient city. The interiors of the ruined buildings, the catacombs, the lairs dug in the rubble... the sun could not reach there. More than that, the abominations populating the Dark City were much stronger than those in the Crimson Labyrinth. So, a few of them had to have survived the annihilation.

Sunny was calling them over, wishing to eradicate them all in one fell swoop.

...However, even after he had made so much noise, nothing moved in the ruins.

His shadow sense was enveloping the whole city, but Sunny could not feel any motion at all.

Puzzled, he brushed the dust off the Onyx Mantle and ventured into the maze of ruined streets.

Sunny spent the whole day exploring the Dark City. He wandered the ruins and reminisced about the past wistfully. Here, he had rescued Kai from the well... here, he had learned from Effie how to kill a Blood Fiend.

Here was the ditch where he had hidden himself after the Black Knight gutted him.

'How nostalgic.’

By the end of the day, Sunny knew why there were no Nightmare Creatures left in the Dark City.

There were a lot of hideous remains on the ruined streets... most of them showed no sign of having received a wound, since their souls had been annihilated by the Crimson Terror. But some bones had nicks and deep cracks on them, others were scorched by flame.

'...Nephis.’

She must have come here after escaping the Crimson Spire and hunted the remaining abominations down, one after another. To build another core and harvest their meat for the long journey ahead.

A faint smile twisted his lips.

'She's so thorough...'

With the mystery solved, he wandered the ruins some more and eventually made his way to the remains of the Bright Castle.

The ancient stronghold had collapsed, the white marble melted by the terrible heat of the white flames. He did not know why he wanted to see the scorched ruin... so many things had happened here, between the Castle's walls.

But now, it was all erased by the fire.

Just like him.

Chuckling, Sunny shook his head and wandered the remains of the outer settlement for a bit. He kicked stones and remembered the past, then stopped by the lodge where Nephis and Cassie had once lived. Now, it was empty and quiet. After visiting his old room, he left the outer settlement and descended back into the city.

Finally, Sunny reached the ruined cathedral.

He entered the majestic great hall, climbed over the toppled column that Saint had once dropped on the Black Knight, and gazed at the statue of the nameless goddess.

He studied her face for a while, then stepped through the shadows and appeared on the hidden balcony behind it. Soon, he entered a familiar chamber.

The living quarters of the young priestess were neat and tidy, just as he had left them.

The room was beautiful and spacious. The stone walls were engraved with intricate patterns, creating an atmosphere of sanctity and elegance.

The furniture was made out of pale polished wood, with several mismatched pieces that Sunny had scavenged from the Dark City once.

He was surrounded by a soothing darkness. The chamber had no windows, but there were light wells cunningly hidden here and there... the ingenious system of mirrors that was supposed to bathe the room in sunlight was long destroyed, though...

And so was the sun itself.

Sunny closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

Then, he recalled the Onyx Mantle, walked over to the spacious bed, sprawled on it, and fell asleep with a satisfied smile.