1764 Never Be Afraid Again

A long time ago... Sunny had made a promise to himself. A promise to come back and destroy the Soul Devouring Tree one day.

Now, many years later, he was here to fulfill that promise.

He had been descending into the colossal crater for a while, but now that its heart was behind him, the ground was slowly starting to slope upward. Sunny rode Nightmare with a cold expression on his face, holding the ghostly torch in his hand.

The light of the eerie flame reflected from the polished surface of his armor and danced wildly in his onyx eyes.

It took some time to traverse the crater, but eventually, Sunny saw it.

The branches of a great tree covering the black sky.

A faint smile appeared on his lips.

'It lives.‘

He had a feeling that it would.

Sunny... had changed greatly since leaving the Ashen Barrow.

The Soul Devourer had changed, as well.

The insidious fiend had already been enormous back then, but now, it had grown even taller, reaching into the black sky with its obsidian branches.

This tree towered above the sea of ashen dust like a majestic mountain. Its bark was as black as the lightless sky, while its leaves were as red as blood... of course, Sunny could not really see color in the darkness. But he remembered their crimson splendor vividly. The crimson crown of the magnificent tree had used to cover the Ashen Barrow in its shade, but it was much richer and more expansive now, reaching far into the crater.

'That thing... has evolved.‘

Sunny sighed.

It was understandable. Since the Soul Devourer had managed to survive the rays or the annihilating sun, it would have been left with no competitor on the Forgotten Shore. The Crimson Terror was gone, and so was the Dark Sea. The other powerful abominations, like the Lord of the Dead, had been slain by the Sleepers of the Dark City.

The insidious fiend growing on the Ashen Barrow would have used the vacuum to enhance its power.

Sunny shifted his gaze, looking beneath the obsidian bark.

Then, a sad chuckle escaped from his lips.

'A Fallen Terror...‘

He was more or less sure that the Soul Devourer had been an Awakened Terror before. It seemed to have risen to a higher Rank... or rather, fell to a lower one? Sunny wasn't sure what the correct wording would be for a Nightmare Creature.

He did feel a certain sense of... disappointment, though.

He had been so terrified of that thing once. But now, it seemed so weak, and insignificant.

Dismissing Nightmare, Sunny landed on the ground, then walked up the slope of the crater. The ghostly light of the torch illuminated his way.

From the Ashen Barrow, he must have looked like a small mote of light in the ocean of darkness... drawing closer and closer, growing brighter, and more chilling.

Sunny might have been illuminated by the pale flame, but his presence drowned the area in deathly cold. Outside the small circle of light, the absolute darkness seemed to become even deeper, darker, and more impenetrable.

inescapable.

He heard the leaves of the magnificent tree rustle in the wind, their murmur seemingly anxious.

It was as though the rustling leaves were saying:

"Stay away! Don't come closer!"

Untouched by their alarm, Sunny stepped through the shadows and appeared on the Ashen Barrow.

Instantly, he felt an insidious influence trying to subtly twist his mind.

The tree was beautiful... the tree was generous... the tree was kind.

It was weak and benevolent, and its fruits were sweet.

'Huh...‘

The fruits of the Soul Tree were indeed sweet. More importantly, they were quite useful... each contained a shadow fragment for Sunny to consume, after all. Best of all, the ancient fiend could grow them indefinitely.

Perhaps he should collect the fruits and keep the Soul Tree intact. Otherwise, there would never be another harvest...

Sunny smiled subtly and shook off the mental hex. It was too easy to do.

He had been a mere Sleeper the last time. But now, he was a Transcendent Terror. The Onyx Mantle was augmented by five shadows, and the measure of protection against mental attack it provided him with could not even be compared to that of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Resisting the manipulation of the Soul Devourer was quite trivial.

Its attempts to save itself... were a bit pitiful, really.

As soon as Sunny shrugged off the hex, the leaves rustled again, this time full of panic. He sensed movement all around him.

Hideous figures rose from the ash... one, two, three... a hundred. Nightmare Creatures — new thralls to replace Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie, who in turn had replaced the Carapace Demon.

The Soul Devourer needed someone to protect it. The abominable tree must have worked hard, luring so many of the Nightmare Creatures that had survived the annihilating sun under its branches. Sunny would not have been surprised if these were all of them, really — every single creature that had avoided being consumed by the Crimson Terror, either through strength or by luck.

Nephis must have avoided this place because she had no means of protecting herself against the hex back then.

But what could all these abominations do to Sunny? Most of them had come from the coral labyrinth, and were therefore merely Awakened. There were a few Fallen creatures among them, but none of a high enough Class.

This time, it was his turn to be the horror.

This time, it was Sunny who was terrifying, inevitable, and full of murderous frenzy. ...The shadows stirred, and a hundred inky-black hands rose from the darkness. They grabbed onto the thralls, onyx claws sinking into their flesh. The next moment, the air was filled with the smell of blood. The massacre was harrowing and thorough, the silence broken by howls of agony and the revolting sound of flesh being torn apart.

Sunny walked through the mayhem calmly, not even sparing the dying abominations a glance.

Soon, he reached the trunk of the Soul Devourer.

The leaves were rustling, and the branches were swaying, their sound full of desperate fear.

He placed one hand on the obsidian bark and closed his eyes for a moment.

Then, Sunny poured his essence into the eerie torch. Opening his eyes, Sunny sighed... and set the magnificent tree aflanie.

'You really chose the wrong person to enthrall...‘

Then, he walked back to watch it burn.

The view was breathtaking.

Bright flames were climbing the towering trunk. The obsidian bark cracked, blooming with smoldering embers. Soon, the fire reached the leaves and exploded, spreading across the swaying crown of the Soul Devourer with tremendous speed.

When that happened, the darkness shrouding the Forgotten Shore was dispelled by the colossal ball of flame burning above it.

There was a cacophony of sounds. The roaring of the fire, the hiss of leaves being turned to ash, the cracking of dying wood- All of them fused into a chilling litany of pain, as if ten thousand souls were shrieking at the sky in agony.

It was... incredibly disturbing.

Sunny almost felt as if he was really hearing the ancient tree scream.

...It screamed for a long, long time.

The Soul Devourer was huge, so it took a while for it to burn down. The beautiful crimson leaves had turned to ash. The branches did, too, falling down in a whirlwind of sparks. The delectable, juicy fruits were ruthlessly incinerated.

The trunk had taken a few days to die, but it eventually turned into a scorched, broken, hollow husk.

But it was only when the roots died that Sunny felt... nothing.

He didn‘t feel anything at all. He was of a higher Rank than the Soul Devourer now, and so, killing the insidious fiend did not even give him a single shadow fragment.

A few days later, Sunny was still sitting on the ground, looking at the smoldering remains of the great tree. He could feel that the creature was dead.

He thought that exacting his revenge on the Soul Devourer would bring him joy, but it didn't. If anything, Sunny felt... sad.

Such a death was... almost humiliating. it was unworthy of the creature that had haunted his nightmares for so long. He never wanted to humiliate an enemy that had earned his respect.

'When have I become so strong?‘

He wasn't sure.

He wasn‘t that strong, either... but he did outpace most of the things in two worlds, as far as the acquisition of power was concerned.

Finally, Sunny stood up, summoned the Endless Spring, and washed the ash off his face. The Soul Devourer was no more, and so...

'That is done. Now what?"

There. He had kept his promise.

Somewhere in Ravenheart, the sun was rising.

Which meant that Sunny was twenty-four now.

It was his birthday.

Sunny stared at the ghostly torch, which looked like it was on its last leg.

With a sigh, he walked around and collected a few pieces of charred wood. Then, he used the last of the eerie flame to make a fire.

Summoning the Marvelous Mimic, he pulled an alloy pot from its maw, as well as a tin can. The tin can contained his last spoonful of coffee powder.

Pouring the coffee into the pot, he filled it with water from the Endless Spring and placed it on the fire. A few moments later, a delicious smell spread in the air.

Sunny summoned the Shadow Chair, sat on it, and waited for the coffee to be ready. Then, he brought the pot to his face and inhaled the fragrant aroma.

"Ah…"

He remained silent for a while, and then smiled.

"Happy birthday to me."

Relaxing in an opulent chair that stood on top of a tall hill, surrounded by boundless darkness, Sunny sipped his coffee and enjoyed the view of fiery sparks dancing in the boundless black sky.