1800 Return to the Black Mountain

Sunny often thought about the slave caravan, but he never actually tried to learn more about the events that had transpired in the Nightmare.

He knew that they had happened at the dusk of the Golden Age, not long before the start of the Doom War. Back then, the gods had grown indifferent and distant, and the soldiers of an expansionist empire that worshipped War wiped out the Shadow cult, burning down all its temples.

However, he did not know much about that empire and the lands it had conquered. The history of the Dream Realm was overshadowed by the calamitous destruction of the Doom War, and while it was possible to learn a thing or two about the previous eras, the devastation had erased most traces of the last human civilizations.

So, Sunny had never actually expected to behold the Black Mountain again.

He stared at its distant peak in bewilderment. Then, a sense of subtle curiosity bloomed in his heart.

‘...Might as well take a look'

Sunny actually felt a hint of sentimentality.

Back then, it took the caravan days to scale the mountain pass, Sunny remembered the agony of walking up the mountain road vividly - the cold, the pain, the biting touch of the iron shackles that shredded his wrists. He had felt so tired and weak, not knowing if he would survive the cruel march.

Many of the slaves had not, and ended up being tossed off the cliff after falling into the snow.

It was a hard thing, to climb a mountain while hungry and on the verge of freezing.

Today, Sunny simply stepped into the shadows and appeared halfway up the slope.

Step, step, and another step.

Just like that, he was standing below the towering edifice of the Black Mountain.

Thousands of years had passed since the day the slave caravan was destroyed. The mountain road had already been old and crumbling back then now, no trace of it remained.

For a few moments, Sunny contemplated staying here for a while to find the old bones. He was curious to know what had actually happened to the nameless slave and Auro of the Nine. Had they escaped the Mountain King? Or had they perished?

He was quite certain that Auro had survived. But what about the young temple slave?

However, Sunny quickly dismissed that idea.

It would take him months, or maybe even years, to dig through the snow and find the traces of the caravan if any traces remained, Even then, there was no guarantee that he would be able to tell anything about the past from them.

So, with a sigh, Sunny looked up, at the peak of the Black Mountain.

The only place he could visit was the mysterious temple that had stood there, surrounded by bones.

But before that...

He could feel enemies rushing at him from all sides. A moment later, the snow exploded, and hideous figures lunged at him with frenzy burning in their milky-white eyes.

The slaughter was swift and ruthless.

Sunny did not even summon a weapon, using the spiked gauntlets of the Onyx Mantle to crush the abominations. He danced between them like an omen of death, coldly and methodically destroying one after another.

Until none remained.

The snow was painted red by blood, and a fine crimson haze hung in the air.

‘Huh.'

Sunny studied the broken corpses, which littered the ground like a carpet. The creatures were hideous and appalling, resembling something that a mad artist would paint after waking up from a feverish nightmare, Most of them were Fallen Beasts and Monsters... and although he was sure that he had never fought such creatures before, they reminded him of something.

Mostly because he had subjugated a legion of Mountain King's Larvae in Antarctica not too long ago.

Although these abominations were different and much more powerful, they resembled the Larvae a lot.

Sunny smiled faintly.

‘Will I be reunited with the Mountain King?’

If that thing wasn't dead, it would have grown much more powerful by now...

But no, the chances were slim. The forces of Valor had eradicated the most dangerous Nightmare Creatures in this area of the Dream Realm during their march north, and they would not have tolerated a powerful Tyrant remaining in their rear.

Even if the Mountain King had survived the thousands of years without leaving the Black Mountain, he would have been dealt with by someone like Whispering Blade, or maybe even Anvil himself.

With a sigh, Sunny took another step through the shadows and appeared directly on the peak of the Black Mountain.

He stood there motionlessly for a while, looking ahead with an expression of awe on his pale face.

The nameless temple... was still there, under the moonlit sky.

At the highest point of the mountain, a vast expanse of flat rock was covered with snow. In the center of it, illuminated by moonlight, stood a magnificent temple. Its colossal columns and walls were cut from black marble, with exquisite reliefs decorating the stygian pediment and broad frieze. Beautiful and awesome, it looked like a palace of a dark god.

At least it did once. Now, the temple was in ruins: fractures and cracks marred the black stones, parts of the roof had collapsed, letting in ice and snow. Its tall gates were broken, as if smashed into pieces by the hand of a giant.

The black temple did not change at all. It was as if thousands of years had no effect on it whatsoever.

The only thing that changed was that now, there were even more bones surrounding it. There were thousands of bones scattered around, carpeting the ground. Some belonged to Nightmare Creatures, while some seemed to be quite human.

Come to think of it...

‘Why are there so many bones here?'

Was this where the Mountain King had devoured its victims? Somehow, Sunny doubted it. The Tyrant had consumed the slaves right where he had killed them, after all.

No, before that.

What was this temple, exactly?

Back then... Sunny remembered Scholar mentioning that pilgrims used to climb the mountain in the ancient times. Who were these pilgrims, and what had they worshipped?

He had assumed that this was one of the Shadow God's temples that the Empire had destroyed, but the timing did not make sense. The destruction of the Shadow cult was a recent event during his First Nightmare... however, the temple looked as if it had been ruined thousands of years ago even then.

And when Sunny spilled his blood on the altar, the Spell described it as an offering to all the gods. It was just that Shadow had been the only one to answer.

Stranger still...

The gods had still been alive at the time of the Nightmare. And yet, the Spell spoke of them as dead.

Sunny shivered.

Had his offering... reached the actual gods, and not a substitute of them put in place by the Spell? Was the Spell even capable of creating illusory copies of the gods?

Probably not.

If so, what did it mean? And how had Shadow God granted him a blessing from beyond the grave?

Well... that last part wasn't that surprising. The gods were the ones who had created things like time and death, after all. So, it wasn't strange to Imagine that they had a special relationship with these laws, A god could very well respond to a question before it was asked, and bless a slave who had offered himself as a sacrifice despite being dead.

Especially if that altar stood in a very special place.

The black temple...

Sunny hesitated, unsure of what to think. Now that he had found the ruined temple again, he realized that he didn't actually know anything about it.

He was certain of one thing, though. This place...

It felt sacred.

A sense of solemn, silent sanctity was emanating from the obsidian walls of the ancient temple. It looked majestic and beautiful in the moonlight, and although the ground around the ruin was littered with bones, it did not feel vile or ominous at all.

With a sigh, Sunny headed toward the broken gates of the temple.

And as he was approaching...

He felt it.

He did not see it, and he did not hear it. He did not even perceive it with his shadow sense.

But somehow, he knew.

There was something in front of him... a vast, invisible, intangible being. One that was reaching out to him, emanating a subtle sense of purity, loneliness, and power.

Suddenly, Sunny realized why there were bones scattered everywhere at the peak of the Black Mountain.

However, the guardian of the temple did not seem to hold any malice toward him. Instead, there was a sense of... joy, and recognition.

The invisible being was reaching out to something in Sunny's soul.

The golden light... the flame of divinity.

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

'I... I didn't even know.'

Back then, he had felt nothing when entering the temple. But the bones had been there, which meant that the guardian had been there, as well. And yet, it let Sunny in instead of adding his corpse to the pile of bones.

Because it had sensed a faint mark of divinity on his soul.

...The Mountain King, too. Since the Tyrant entered the temple, it must have been touched by divinity once, as well.

Sunny had not known how close to death he had come, and how lucky he was to survive.

‘Would it let me pass now?'

Taking a deep breath, Sunny looked forward, and stepped through the gates of the nameless temple.