1906 Dark Armor

A moment later, he emerged from the darkness on the great pyre of burning rubble. The garden temple had indeed crumbled, consumed by a blazing inferno. The mountain of debris was still aflame, and the heat was so scorching that a mundane human would have been reduced to ash in an instant.

Even a Saint could have been burned to death or smothered inside the billowing cloud of black smoke. However, Sunny was more or less fine due to the Onyx Mantle — it might not have been comfortable, but he could explore the burning ruins freely.

It did not take him much time to find Saint. She was quite conspicuous — out there amidst the blazing debris, there was an area consumed by impenetrable darkness, its confines silent and tranquil.

His Shadow was inside. He couldn't quite see her, of course, but felt her presence, as well as that of his shadows.

Sunny hesitated at the edge of the sphere of true darkness for a few moments.

'...That's new.'

Saint had carried a bit of elemental darkness within her heart, true. But she had never been able to summon it in this manner — she could only use it to manifest a weapon or coat a Memory.

It seemed that killing the Reflection had filled the reservoir of the Heart of Darkness to the brim, allowing her powers to evolve. From the look of it, Saint had gained an Ability similar to what Revel was capable of — now, she could cover an entire area with her darkness. The area was not quite as vast as that of Revel, but that did not matter.

Sunny smiled.

What mattered was the synergy between this power and Saint's [Mantle of Darkness] Ability.

'When surrounded by darkness, and true darkness more so, her swiftness and might will increase. Her wounds will be healed...'

Now that Saint could freely unleash elemental darkness, she could be surrounded by it at all times. Which meant that she would almost always be able to receive the full boon of the [Mantle of Darkness].

There was more to it, as well.

Although Sunny was not sure how to help Saint evolve, he felt that this new power of hers... could

very well be the first step to becoming a Tyrant. After all, Tyrants were beings who exerted their authority on the world — much like the Sovereigns did, albeit in a different manner.

Most Tyrants controlled either a territory or an army of minions, usually both at the same time. And being able to drown an area in elemental darkness was very close to gaining control over it.

'Isn't it?'

Sunny walked forward and at the same time took control of one of the incarnations wrapped around Saint's body — otherwise, he would have been blinded by his own Shadow's power, which would be quite embarrassing.

Now that he was not consumed by the urgency of battle, Sunny felt stunned by how strange and miraculous the feeling of fusing with another creature was all over again.

He was dazed for a few moments, taking in the complex, alien sensation of being one with Saint's body. He also felt relieved, noticing that her terrible wounds were healing — she had spent all that time nestled in the embrace of her own summoned darkness, after all, being nourished and nurtured by it.

Then, a loud sound distracted him.

It was the sound of a battered onyx breastplate being dropped on the ground.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Then, he blinked a few more times.

'No, wait. What?!'

Saint... seemed to be removing her armor.

There was no mistake. He was looking at the world through her eyes, after all — the graceful stone knight was standing in the darkness, methodically taking off her shattered armor. She was already all but free of it, with only a few pieces remaining.

Sunny had caught glimpses of Saint's face and skin before, but he had never seen her out of the intricate suit of fearsome armor. It was quite a shock.

Saint was wearing simple garments beneath the onyx plate, much like any knight would. Her figure was alluringly flawless, fitting her inhumanly beautiful face. Her skin was the same color as the onyx armor, making it seem as if she was made of stone... however, she was not.

Although Saint's body looked like it was cut from stone and had many properties of stone, it was merely stonelike. Now that Sunny could sense it, he realized more clearly than ever that she was a being of flesh and blood... well, at least of flesh and dust.

And seeing her like this, Sunny couldn't help but remember the beautiful statue of Storm God he had seen in the shrine of the Ebony Tower once.

It was quite clear who Nether had used as inspiration when creating the Stone Saints, at least in terms of appearance.

Saint, meanwhile, spared him an indifferent look and continued removing her armor.

Her greaves and vambraces fell to the ground, leaving her entirely defenseless.

Sunny remembered that she had not come here to stare just then.

'But why is she taking off the armor instead of restoring it?'

His answer came a moment later.

Saint knelt beside the broken armor and stared it for a while.

It almost seemed... as if there was a hint of an unknown, somber emotion in her ruby eyes.

Then, she raised a hand and brought her fist down.

The adamantine onyx shattered like glass...

And was then absorbed into her body, just like the Memories she used to consume had been before.

Suddenly, the crimson flames burning in her eyes grew deeper, and Saint seemed to become stronger.

Standing up with a prideful expression, she straightened her back.

A moment later, her beautiful figure was enveloped by flowing darkness, and that darkness...

Solidified, encasing the body of the taciturn Shadow in an impenetrable carapace of intricate onyx armor. Pristine and new.

Sunny remained motionless.

'...I'll be damned.'

Saint had just manifested her own Onyx Mantle, it seemed.