1753 Runaway

In the morning, Sunny woke up and simply remained on the cot, staring at the ceiling. He felt strangely apathetic.

Yesterday, he had considered whether it was worth it to continue studying Nether's writings. There wasn't much left for him to learn from the runes... as soon as that idea entered his mind, all the motivation and excitement he had been feeling about translating them disappeared. Without something to look forward to, he could not find a reason to get up.

How long had he spent in the Sky Below, anyway? A month? Closer to two?

In any case, he had beaten his previous record.

'Might as well get comfortable…’

Sunny closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

He spent the next few days doing nothing. Sometimes, Sunny would go outside and look at the sea of flames. Sometimes, he would remain in the Ebony Tower, staring at the walls. Only his incarnation that guarded Rain remained active, which was the sole reason he was not dying of boredom.

Eventually, however, he became fixated on a strange thought.

‘...Can I cross the Hollow Mountains?’

The question seemed rhetorical, but it was not. Sunny did not dare delve into the hollow interior of the great mountain chain, where elemental darkness dwelled. But what about braving the mist shrouding it to traverse the exterior?

If the mist enveloping the jagged peaks was indeed pure nothingness, then anyone who entered it would become nothing. At least that was what one would think... they would think wrongly, though.

Sunny had undeniable proof that it was possible to survive in the mist, at least for some time. It was the fact that Saint Cormac had spent months exploring the Hollow Mountains on behalf of Clan Valor before being killed by Saint Tyris.

What had been his goal? Searching for a way to cross to the other side? Looking for an entrance into the Underworld, where Nether's stronghold was supposedly located? Or something else entirely, which Sunny could not even guess?

In any case, if Cormac could do it, then Sunny could, too.

'Should I try?'

He had no plans and no particular desires, except for the desire to be far away from everyone. Was there a more distant place than the unexplored vastness beyond the Hollow Mountains? There, Sunny would be truly and utterly alone, which was what he wanted.

The romance of the unknown....

His curiosity and wanderlust were calling him.

On the other side of the impregnable mountain chain... lay the Forgotten Shore.

It was now a desolate land of perpetual darkness. Most of the creatures that had populated the coral labyrinth were gone, annihilated by the Terror of the Crimson Spire. The dark sea was gone, as well, sealed by his own hand Maybe a few abominations still survived, somewhere in the darkness... but he still wanted to visit that place one more time.

Sunny could retrace the steps of the journey he had made with Nephis and Cassie. He could make sure that the Soul Devourer was dead, and if not, fulfill his promise to burn the damned thing to the ground. He could return to the Dark City and sift through the scorched ruin of the Bright Castle, find the statue of the Slayer that he had never seen, and sleep on his own bed in the ruined cathedral.

And that was not all.

Humans knew about the Forgotten Shore now. They also knew that the Nightmare Desert lay to the east, thanks to Nephis making the journey. However, no one had even learned what lay to the west and north of that cursed place.

Sunny could become the first human to ever set foot in those mysterious regions of the Dream Realm. Sure, no one would ever learn about his discoveries... but he would know, Doing it for himself was enough.

A subtle sense of excitement slowly took hold of his heart.

‘No, no... I must have lost my mind.’

The Hollow Mountains were vast, and they were called a Death Zone for a reason. Who would want to enter a Death Zone of their own free will? One would have to be completely insane to do something like that!

He would never.

Shaking his head, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer and went about cooking himself a dinner. The dimensional storage was still full of monster meat, but there were plenty of ingredients from the waking world, as well. Feeling a bit down, Sunny decided to pamper himself a little.

Pulling out a printed cooking book from the alloy chest, he turned the pages absent-mindedly. Eventually, his attention was drawn to two recipes.

Sunny frowned.

"Huh."

Waffles? Or pancakes?

He wasn't very knowledgeable about these staple dishes, so deciding which to make was a big problem.

In the end, he decided to make both.

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Sunny had abandoned the thought of crossing the Hollow Mountains,

Or, rather... he had tried to.

However, it was stuck in his mind like a catchy melody. The more time he spent idling in the Ebony Tower, the stronger the call of adventure became. He had come up with all kinds of reasons for why it was a terrible idea... and yet, it only grew more alluring.

'Can I do it or not?'

He probably could.

Sunny continued to hesitate, wasting time in indecision.

In the end, the decision was more or less made for him.

One day, he opened his eyes earlier than usual. His five shadows had all been resting on the floor, but now, they seemed alert. His shadow sense had long ago enveloped the island, so he could instantly feel the most minute changes in his surroundings.

Someone was moving on the highest floor of the Ebony Tower.

‘The portal.’

Sunny rose from the cot noiselessly. He had been careful not to leave any traces of himself anywhere on the island, so all there was to do was place his pillow back in its original position.

The shadows wrapped themselves around his body, and a moment later, he dissolved into the darkness.

Soon enough, a delicate figure walked down the stairs, followed by a few more. It was Cassle and a few Fire Keepers... who seemed to have undergone the Ascension, already.

"Gather everything. We will be leaving shortly"

Sunny observed as the Fire Keepers went about dismantling their makeshift outpost. The cots were disassembled. The enchanted lanterns were gathered and prepared to be carried away. The modest kitchen was taken apart and stored in crates for transportation.

'What are they doing?'

Cassie looked a little bit disheveled, which was very unlike her usual tidy self. She observed the Fire Keepers silently, but at some point, a slight scowl appeared on her face.

The blind seer wandered the hall for a bit, seemingly without aim. Eventually, she stopped near the cot Sunny had slept on and touched the pillow briefly. He was about to grow tense, but at that point, one of the Fire Keepers called out to her:

"Cassie... are we really not going to be able to return here?"

Turning around, she lingered for a few moments, then answered with a sigh:

"I don't know. The Ivory Tower is about to leave the Chained Isles. The connection between the two portals might depend on distance, or it might not.... in any case, it is better not to take the risk.”

Hiding in the shadows, Sunny was momentarily stunned.

'Right... Nephis told Cassie to take the Ivory Tower to Bastion.’

He had forgotten all about it.

What would have happened if he stayed on the Ebony Island until the connection between the two portals was broken? Was he capable of ascending all the way to the Sky Above on his own?

Probably... after doing some weaving, at least.

But it would be such a pain.

'It seems I can't stay here anymore.’

It was so sudden.

But it was also... a relief.

Feeling strangely liberated, Sunny silently hid himself in Cassie's shadow and stayed with her until the outpost was completely disassembled. Then, he followed the blind seer back to the portal... on the way, Sunny said a silent goodbye to the statue of Storm God and threw one last glance at the map carved into the wall on the fifth level.

The Hollow Mountains were calling to him, and he had no reason to refuse the invitation anymore.

Once Cassie and the Fire Keepers returned to the Ivory Island, taking him with them, Sunny silently reached down with his senses and used Shadow Step to teleport to the distant land far below.

He stepped out of the shadows on the Southern Island, in the ruins of the ancient stronghold that had once belonged to Shadow Lord, and where he battled Nightmare many years ago.

In the sky above, the beautiful silhouette of the Ivory Island was drifting among clouds.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, looking up. Eventually, the flying island slowly moved, traveling south... crossing the chasm separating the Chained Isles from the rest of the Dream Realm, and leaving them behind.

It was time for him to go, as well.

He watched the Ivory Tower float away, and then turned around, facing north.

"...Goodbye."

Taking the first step, Sunny headed away from the ruined stronghold, never looking back.