1757 Hollow Mountains

Sunny had felt bold not too long ago. Transcendence had increased his power tremendously, and reuniting with Serpent added another fearsome Shadow to his dark legion. He had braved the dark depths of Earth's oceans, slaughtered his way across the Antarctic Center like a Grim Reaper, slain the Winter Beast, and crossed the Chain Isles as if he was walking a walk in the park.

His power had gotten to his head, and he had thought himself truly strong.

...The Hollow Mountains disabused him of that notion.

Wandering the endless expanse of flowing mist, lost among jagged peaks, Sunny was reminded of how weak and insignificant he was in the grand scheme of things.

Effie had once said that the Dream Realm was a dark paradise... but as far as Sunny was concerned, it seemed more like hell.

If the conquered regions of the Dream Realm were hell, however, the Hollow Mountains were a deeper and much more dreadful abyss. The horrors that dwelled here were beyond all reason, unfathomable and indescribable, possessing the power to reshape the world with the chilling malice of their alien wills.

Great abominations, and even Cursed ones… Sunny saw their grotesque shapes moving in the mist from time to time, making him shudder.

Sometimes, a vague silhouette of a vast creature would pass his hiding spot, wreathed in wisps of fog. Sometimes, an entire section of a mountain would come alive, sliding away to reveal itself as a gargantuan tentacle that had been wrapped around the towering peak. Sometimes, he would hear eerie sounds echoing in the mist, and feel as though his very mind was being consumed by them.

If not for the Onyx Mantle, which granted him a high degree of resistance to soul and mind attacks, those eerie cries alone would have been enough to kill him.

This was a land of death, after all. Humans had named such regions Death Zones for a reason there was no place for mortals here.

...And yet, Sunny was here.

He might have been humbled by the dread of the Hollow Mountains, but he was not deterred by it. Even if he was not powerful enough to face the creatures dwelling in the mist, he was strong and resourceful enough to survive them.

As time went on, he learned to resist the will-eroding pull of nothingness better. It still strained him, but pushing against the dissolution of his self had eventually become a habit. He moved stealthily and stayed out of sight, making sure not to attract the attention of the Great Nightmare Creatures, and retreated at the mere suspicion of a Cursed One being close by.

Of course, he was not always able to escape.

As months went by, Sunny failed to evade the attention of powerful abominations a few times. Navigating the mist was difficult, and his senses were impaired... so were theirs, but that simply meant that many things were up to luck.

And Sunny had no luck to speak of.

When he was forced to fight, the battles were chilling. The black rock shattered, and the mist boiled from the furious forces unleashed by the combatants - Sunny had to give it his all to simply survive, testing the absolute limits of his Transcendent power and using every ounce of cunning dwelling in his devious mind.

Sometimes, he killed the enemy. Sometimes, he repelled their assault and escaped.

Sometimes, he hurt them enough for their will to be shaken, and let the mist finish the job.

...It was strangely convenient. Unlike the Nightmare Creatures, Sunny never surrendered to nothingness - no matter how badly he was hurt, how terribly his flesh was mangled, and how much agony he was in, his will and desire to exist never wavered.

That was an advantage humans had over the abominable beings of Corruption, it seemed. The abominations had never had a strong sense of self, to begin with, while humans prized themselves for being highly individualistic.

ة

Sunny had never thought that there would come a time when his only enemies would be Great Nightmare Creatures, but here it was.

The Hollow Mountains were a natural preserve for the most dreadful of beings. Only those whose will was strong enough to exist in nothingness could survive here, after all...

Sunny was one such being, as well, it seemed.

He had wandered the steep slopes of black rock for months, persistently searching for safer paths and seeking shelter in shallow caves when his body needed rest. Being surrounded by terrible enemies who were much more powerful than him and hiding from them like a tiny bug in order to survive... ah, it felt a little bit nostalgic.

Sunny felt as small and powerless as he had on the Forgotten Shore. But, at the same time, his mind was as clear as it had been there. He just had to survive, using all possible means there was just life and death, with nothing in between.

And just like on the Forgotten Shore, the more he survived, the stronger he became.

Battling Great Nightmare Creature in the flowing mist was just as merciless of a crucible as the Crimson Labyrinth and the Dark City had been for him as a Sleeper. He was slowly coming into his own strength, learning how to wield the vast power of a Transcendent. He also gained terrible experience of facing such creatures.

With every dreadful abomination that fell by his hand, Sunny learned how to kill the next one better. And with every abomination he managed to elude, he learned how to escape from the next one better. Fighting opponents stronger than himself... that was the best way to grow.

... Of course, it was not all battles here in the Hollow Mountains. In fact, Sunny spent most of his time hiding and creeping stealthily between the jagged peaks. He was tense and on edge most of the time, but sometimes, he was also very bored.

There were long stretches of time he had to spend holed up in some cave or hidden in the dark embrace of shadows, waiting for the danger to pass. Sunny entertained himself by working on the project he had started in the Tomb of Ariel - trying to turn the Covetous Coffer into an Echo.

He was making steady progress, slowly learning how to make that particular Memory into a vessel for the shadow of the Mordant Mimic. Now that Sunny had lost the assistance of the Nightmare Spell, he wasn't sure if he would even be able to make the conversion... but he still wanted to try, since he knew that he would not be getting any new Echoes for the same reason.

Fighting powerful Nightmare Creatures was more than exciting, but he needed some variety as far as entertainment was concerned. Weaving provided a nice change of pace,

Of course... Nightmare Creatures were not the only beings dwelling in the mist.

There were also the others.

Sunny had only encountered the creatures of nothingness after leaving the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains and venturing deeper into the vast expanse of the deadly region. His very first encounter had almost become his last.

Whispers of long-forgotten voices, echoes of long-extinguished wails... they surrounded him from all sides, drifting in the mist. Sunny had his eyes tightly shut, hiding in the shadows and praying for the eerie being to move past without noticing him. Somehow, he knew that if he saw it, he would not survive.

Or at least his self would not survive - who knew, perhaps six lonely shadows would be left wandering the world in his wake.

Eventually, the whispers grew distant and disappeared.

The deeper into the mist Sunny went, the more of these creatures he encountered. He had never gazed at them, so he didn't even know what they looked like, or if they looked like anything at all. He could allow himself to fight the Nightmare Creatures, but every time he encountered a mist being, he either hid or escaped.

It was only that... after a while, Sunny started to doubt if they were even creatures at all. It almost felt as if the voices wandering the fog were strange phenomena, instead. As though the eerie remnants of things and beings erased by nothingness drifted in the mist. attracted to each other by the ancient vestiges of erased wills.

He had a particular suspicion, though...

‘To be is to be perceived.’

There was a school of thought that claimed that things only existed if they were perceived. That which was not perceived did not exist, but since one could not perceive nothing, everything they did perceive had to be something.

In other words, nothing would become something by the mere act of being perceived.

Like a reflection, perhaps, which was only there when one stood in front of the mirror.

It was a bit of a strange philosophy, and one that depended on the existence of an omniscient God to make sense - a God who perceived all of existence, and therefore made it real.

The gods were dead, of course, and more than that, they had never been omniscient. So, that disproved the whole notion... but Sunny still felt that there was a kernel of truth to it.

Perhaps things could exist without being perceived, and nothing would not become something even if it was witnessed.

But he felt that the beings of the mist would definitely become more real if they were witnessed. To behold them was the same as giving them power, Looking upon them would make nothing become something enough to come into contact with existence... and tear it apart.

At least that was what he thought.

For that reason, Sunny did not only close his eyes near the mist creatures, but also covered his ears and retracted his shadow sense, turning himself blind, deaf, and mute.

Being devoid of most senses in the middle of a Death Zone was its own kind of terror, but he simply gritted his teeth and endured.

Sunny did not know if what he was doing had any meaning... but the creatures of nothingness had never managed to consume him, so maybe he was doing something right.