1758 Something Wicked This Way Comes

Even if Sunny found a tentative way to survive encounters with the creatures of the mist, and even if he was slowly learning how to survive in the battles against the Great Nightmare Creatures, claiming their lives one after another... even if he avoided the Cursed Ones with utmost caution... there was still one big problem he had to contend with.

The Hollow Mountains themselves.

The Forgotten Shore was a vast land, one that probably had been its own realm once upon a time. The Nightmare Desert was of the same size, if not larger. And yet, the mountain chain stretched from east to west like a great wall, bordering both of these regions, and a few others. It was simply enormous.

Worse than that, the jagged peaks were shrouded in thick mist, which made navigating them all but impossible. Sunny was mostly sure that he had not lost his understanding of where the north was... but after dozens of furious battles and narrow escapes, his certainty was not absolute,

Maybe he was hopelessly lost, or maybe the Hollow Mountains were simply too vast. In any case, his journey was taking longer than he had expected,

Much, much longer.

Out there beyond the mist, Rain's family had already left the waking world behind and settled in Ravenheart. Sunny's avatar had approached her and somehow talked his way into becoming her teacher.

But Sunny was still wandering the mist, hiding from the unspeakable horrors that dwelled within it, and clashing with them when there was no chance to escape.

At times, he doubted that anything except for the white mist had ever existed. He was so accustomed to the flowing fog and the black rocks, so used to the harsh life of the weakest being in the mountains, and so familiar with the strange nature of existing in the sea of nothingness that his past did not seem real.

Wasn't it ironic? The only thing that seemed to have existed was non-existence.

The warm and endearing life of his distant avatar seemed like a dream, instead.

'Funny.’

Beaten and battered, hurting all over, Sunny was slowly learning how to fight and function without the Nightmare Spell.

Tired of only working on turning the Covetous Coffer into an Echo, he tried to envision a Memory that would replace some of the rudimentary functions of the Spell - especially those having to do with presenting information in an easily digestible manner.

Such a Memory was not that hard to weave, but actually designing It required some creativity. After all, the source of all that information would not be the Nightmare Spell, but Sunny himself - therefore, he had to find a way to automatically convert things he knew or perceived into runes. That was an interesting challenge.

Apart from that, he was also trying to teach himself how to enter his Soul Sea. Some of the things he had learned with the help of the Nightmare Spell had remained with him, like muscle memory - the acts of traveling between realms and placing realm tethers, for example.

But some, like visiting the Soul Sea, were completely gone. So, he had to relearn them.

The ancient people of the Dream Realm had been able to enter their Soul Seas long before the Nightmare Spell was created, so there was no reason that he couldn't do the same. In fact, there had probably never been a Transcendent who did not know the way into their Soul Sea, so Sunny felt a bit ashamed of himself.

It was just hard to find the way without a teacher. Nevertheless, he eventually succeeded... even if it had taken him slightly more than a year.

After entering the Soul Sea, Sunny confirmed two things. The first thing was that the Memories he could not summon... were truly gone, instead of being simply unavailable. That gave him a sense of bitter melancholy.

The second thing he learned was that the formless shadow of the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn was gone, as well - just as he had suspected. The loathsome creature had claimed its odious chick

A year had already passed, and he was still in the Hollow Mountains. He had celebrated his twenty-second birthday in a tiny cave on the side of a misty mountain.

Sunny felt thankful to the Onyx Mantle and the Puppeteer's Shroud - if not for the fact that both of his armors could repair himself, he would have been wearing rags.

He was also thankful to the Endless Spring because of Cassie's gift, he was not only able to quench his thirst whenever he wanted, but also wash himself regularly. Otherwise, every creature in the region would have probably detected his stench.

He was also thankful to Bone Weave and his Transcendent teeth. Most of the provisions he had stored in the Covetous Coffer were long gone, so his diet consisted predominantly of the meat harvested from the Great Nightmare Creatures slain by him. It tasted heavenly, but chewing it often was something only Saints would be able to do.

A few months after gaining access to the Soul Sea, Sunny successfully turned the Covetous Coffer into a flawed Echo.

It was only an Echo in name, possessing the structure of one, but lacking the main component -th semblance of autonomy. Nevertheless, that was fine. Sunny did not need the Coffer to do anything that a real Echo would be able to do, he Just needed it to be the vessel for the shadow.

Once the faux Echo was turned into a Shadow, the autonomy would follow. It was just that it would be true autonomy, not the masterful imitation of one granted by the Spell.

It took him another month to figure out how to fuse the shadow of the Mordant Mimic with the Covetous Coffer. Strangely enough, Serpent was of great help in that regard - with its help, Sunny guided the dark flames of his soul to encompass both, and listened to his instincts from there.

Sadly, everything happened so fast that he failed to glean the secrets of the mysterious process. He still had no idea how exactly Shadows were made, just that his Aspect contained some sort of authority that allowed him to create them. Nevertheless, Sunny wasn't sure that he would be able to repeat the process just yet.

In any case, that was how the Marvelous Mimic was born.

Sunny had come up with the name himself, because that was how he felt after commanding his new Shadow to turn itself into a little hut.

Sleeping under an actual roof, away from the mist..., wasn't that simply marvelous?!

His journey through the Hollow Mountains was still exhausting and harrowing, but at least it had become a little more comfortable.

….In the end, it took him around a year and a half to escape that misty hell.

One day, Sunny was limping down a slope - one of the hundreds, or maybe even thousands of the slopes he had climbed - with an emotionless expression on his pale face. Of course, no one could see his face, because it was covered by Weaver's Mask.

Hidden from view, his eyes were bleak and lifeless. His hair had grown longer than it had ever been, and was tied roughly by a piece of string. The Puppeteer's Shroud was torn, tattered, and stained with blood - he had just escaped from a terrible fight, and had no time to dismiss the armor yet, giving it a chance to repair itself.

Four of his shadows were exploring the mist, surrounding him from all sides - far enough to serve as scouts, but close enough to escape back to him at the first hint of danger. Only gloomy remained glued to his feet.

Sunny was talking to it in a flat voice:

"Well... anyway... that might be true, but mind your manners. I am a Saint, you know. Saint Sunless. Would it kill you to flatter me once in a while?"

The shadow stared at him sarcastically, then suddenly rose from the ground, turning into an avatar. The avatar, unlike the original body, was clad in the Onyx Mantle.

The avatar sald:

"So what? I am Saint Sunless, too. I never lie!"

Sunny stared at the avatar darkly.

"What a hateful face. Stop staring at me, bastard."

The avatar scowled.

"Who are you calling a bastard, you bastard? Don't you have any respect for our mother?!"

Sunny hissed through gritted teeth:

"Be a bit louder, why won't you?! Do you want some Cursed creature to hear you?"

The avatar stared at him gloomily for a while, then looked away.

They walked side by side for some time, keeping quiet.

Eventually, Sunny spat angrily:

"Waste of essence."

The avatar grinned.

"I might be a waste of essence, but you're the one wasting essence to have a conversation with yourself. Fool."

Sunny widened his eyes.

"What conversation? It's a quarrel. A quarrel with myself! Get your facts straight. Idiot."

The avatar did not answer immediately, instead turning his head this way and that.

Eventually, he asked:

"Say... don't you think that the mist has been strangely thin recently? I can almost see the next mountain."

Sunny scoffed.

"That's just how it is..."

But then, he fell silent.

Because at that moment, Sunny fully realized that he was right.

The mist was, indeed, too thin. It was thinner than ever before, even.

He lingered for a moment, then dismissed the avatar, wrapped the shadow around his body, and hurried his steps.

He recalled the scouting shadows, too, augmenting his body further.

'Can it be? No, really... can it?'

The world was slowly turning darker.

'It can!'

Sunny forced himself to remain calm and alert, moving forward as fast as he could while remaining cautious.

Half a day later, he climbed a tall peak and looked ahead, staggering slightly at the sight.

He did not even register at first what he was looking at. The only thing he cared about was that he could see anything, at all.

Out there in front of him, there was no mist.

Instead, there was a vast and desolate expanse of flat land. A land shrouded in eternal darkness, with a starless void looming above it as a black sky.

Sunny inhaled deeply.

'No way...'

After all these years, he had returned to the Forgotten Shore.