1759 Return to the Forgotten Shore

The desolate expanse of the Forgotten Shore lay in front of Sunny, shrouded in darkness.

The black sky was vast and empty. There were no stars, no moon, and no sun populating the lightless abyss, making it seem boundless. Faced with the hollow eternity of its unfathomable grandeur, Sunny couldn't help but feel indescribably small.

Below the black sky, a barren wasteland stretched as far as the eye could see. The Forgotten Shore had changed, becoming almost unrecognizable... the Terror of the Spire, Nameless Sun, was dead, and the endless sea of crimson coral that had been born from her was gone as well, replaced by ashen dust.

The darkness shrouding the desolate expanse was absolute. But it was merely the absence of light, not the true darkness that dwelled in the abyss of the Underworld. Therefore, Sunny's gaze could pierce its veil without restraint.

The Forgotten Shore... had become a land of shadows.

His bloodless lips twisted into a pale smile.

"I'm back."

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It took him a few more days to descend from the Hollow Mountains and leave the dark slopes behind, finally setting foot on the Forgotten Shore again.

Surrounded by the sea of ashen dust and absolute silence, Sunny remained motionless for a while, gazing into the distance with a strange expression on his bruised face.

The lack of light, the lack of sound, the lack of life...

"How peaceful."

It was a land of death.

He walked a few steps forward, and then staggered, falling to his knees. His hands drowned in the dust, and his breathing had become labored, hoarse whistles escaping from his mouth each time his chest rose and fell.

"Argh... aaahh..."

Sunny was suffocating.

It was not for the lack of air, but simply because both his mind and body were in turmoil. He was having a strange semblance of a panic attack, caused by the fact that there was no mist around him anymore.

There was no nothingness, and therefore, Sunny didn't have to struggle to remain existing anymore. He had grown so accustomed to that constant necessity, though, that its lack was like a powerful shock. Everything around him was so solid and immutable, so tactile and palpable... so something.

Everything was something. Wasn't that bizarre?

As it turned out, it was possible to experience a panic attack from the sense of relief. That feeling was so powerful that it debilitated Sunny completely, making him unable to think, move, or control himself. He remained on his knees for a few moments, and then sprawled in the dust.

'It's so calm…’

Very soon, he curled into a ball... and peacefully fell asleep.

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Sunny slept without dreams for several days. He was both surprised and concerned by how long his original body remained asleep, but judged that it deserved a little rest.

Or maybe a lot of it. Spending a year and a half in the Hollow Mountains was not for the faint of heart... in fact, it was pure madness. If Sunny had known how long and dreadful his journey would be, he would have never ventured into the mist.

Or maybe not. Maybe he would have still gone into the nothingness. After all, even though crossing the Hollow Mountains had been a nightmarish affair, it had also been... fun, in a perverse and morbid kind of way.

It was also quite fruitful, tempering his will and sharpening his skills.

Sunny was a Transcendent now, and so, his skills needed to become transcendent as well. In fact, he had been contemplating the concept of a transcendent battle art as of late…

In any case, his body needed to rest, so he let it sleep. However, sleeping in the dust was not too comfortable.

He manifested an avatar and summoned the Marvelous Mimic. Once the Shadow turned itself into a hut, the avatar carried his body inside and put it on the makeshift bed - which was nothing more than an elevated platform formed by the Mimic on his behalf.

Saint, Serpent, Fiend, and Nightmare guarded the hut, each augmented by one of the shadows. The avatar, meanwhile, made a fire and went about preparing some food.

By the time Sunny woke up, there was a real feast waiting for him on the table. He remained motionless for a while, then sighed and sat up, rubbing his eyes. The pillow and blanket he had manifested before slowly dissolved into shadows.

The avatar gestured to the food with a grin.

"Come eat. I have ten different types of monster meat for you to enjoy."

Sunny was quite hungry, so he didn't waste any time.

Taking the first bite, he lingered for a few moments, and then asked somberly:

"Have we run out of salt?"

The avatar shrugged.

"You know we did."

Sunny let out another sigh.

"What about coffee?"

The avatar looked at him with amusement.

"There's a bit left. Let's save it for a special occasion."

Sunny did not need to ask himself these questions, of course, because he already knew all the answers. But, still... it was nicer to eat while enjoying a friendly conversation, even if he was talking to himself.

His retinue was great in many regards, but none of them were the talkative sort... in fact, the only one of who had ever spoken was Fiend, but that guy was better off keeping his mouth shut.

Finishing his breakfast, Sunny mounted Nightmare, dismissed the rest of the Shadows, as well as the avatar, and headed north.

The darkness took them in its welcoming embrace, and the ashen dust rose into the air, disturbed by the adamantine hooves of the tenebrous stallion.

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It was strange.

Sunny vividly remembered the long journey back to the Dark City that he and the members of the cohort had made after visiting the Hollow Mountains. Back then, it had been an endless battle for survival - the Crimson Labyrinth had been teeming with all kinds of vile Nightmare Creatures, and all those creatures had wanted to taste their blood.

But now, the Nightmare Creatures were gone, annihilated by the merciless sun.

The Crimson Labyrinth was gone, too, its demise caused by the destruction of the sun.

The coral maze had withered in the absence of its source, and crumbled into dust. Now, there was no one to lunge at Sunny from the darkness. There was nothing but death and desolation around him.

Silence and peace.

He rode the Nightmare north at a mild pace, not in a hurry to reach his destination. Rocking gently in the saddle, Sunny sipped water from the Endless Spring and looked around, his gaze full of placid curiosity.

'I think I recognize that place... no, do I?'

It was hard to orient himself in the sea of dust. There were a few landmarks that Sunny would have recognized, but he entered the Forgotten Shore in a different spot from where the cohort had gone. His route was entirely different, and he could have been hundreds, or even thousands of kilometers away from the places that the cohort had visited.

Well, it did not matter. If Sunny wanted to, he could spend the rest of his life here. He would find what he was searching for eventually.

No, actually, that was not quite right.

Since there were very few Nightmare Creatures on the Forgotten Shore now, if any, his supplies would run out eventually. So, his time was limited after all.

Sunny's laughter rang in the tranquil silence.

"Gods. Never thought I'd have such a problem..."

There were not enough abominations around! Such a travesty.

Wasn't that ironic?

Sunny traveled on horseback for a few days, then turned into a crow and flew into the boundless black sky. Drifting on the winds, he soared above the sea of ashen dust and made his way north while observing the desolate land for any familiar landmarks.

No monster lunged at him from the dust, or from the black abyss above. This land, which had become synonymous with dread and danger in his mind, was now strangely peaceful.

It seemed safer than even the waking world, let alone other regions of the Dream Realm.

Sunny opened his beak and let out a few piercing caws, laughing at the irony.

'It would be funny... if it wasn't so sad.’

...After flying above the barren wasteland for a few more days, he found what he was looking for.

The ruins of the Crimson Spire.