1795 Burned Forest

Before leaving the statue of the Knight behind, Sunny hesitated for a while, and then manifested one of his avatars. Taking control of that incarnation, he left a tether on the ancient stone.

Sunny had the ability to possess seven bodies now, but he still only had a single soul. Each of his incarnations was nevertheless capable of having its own tether. He wasn't sure that he would want to return to the Forgotten Shore, but since crossing the Hollow Mountains again did not sound particularly pleasant, decided to leave himself a path, just in case.

With that done, Sunny went north. Riding Nightmare, he traversed the silent darkness at a measured pace. The hooves of his tenebrous steed rustled softly in the ashen dust, and with each day, the distance between him and the distant human territories continued to increase.

He had never visited the northern reaches of the Forgotten Shore before, so everything here was new to him. Granted, there was not much to look at - at times, curious landmarks appeared on the horizon, but none of them managed to pique his interest.

There were crumbled ruins, bones of ancient leviathans, and frames of rotten ships. He left it all behind, feeling calm and unburdened, There was nothing he had to accomplish and no looming necessity urging him forward. Time lost all meaning to him.

He slept when he was tired and ate when he was hungry. Other than that, Sunny did not concern himself with anything.

Of course, he still forced himself to maintain vigilance. There could still be Nightmare Creatures left on the Forgotten Shore, and even if there were none, it was a bad idea to break the habit of always paying attention to his surroundings.

Eventually, the landscape around him changed.

Sunny first noticed that there was less and less dust covering the ground. Then, patches of dark soil started to appear with increased frequency. That meant that the coral labyrinth had been sparser here once.

A few days later, he started to encounter tall hills. There were more of them the further north he went, standing in a strangely orderly manner. After investigating one of the hills, Sunny discovered that it was artificial in nature. He could sense a vast burial chamber somewhere far below him.

It was a barrow.

Climbing to the top of the burial hill, Sunny looked around and counted. However, there were too many of them to count - giving up after a few hundred, he sat down and stared into the darkness for a while.

Then, he stepped into the shadows and descended into the burial chamber.

A broken sarcophagus stood there, at least ten meters in length. Inside were the bones of a nameless glant. There were remains of crude armor covering the bones, but time had erased all clues of who was buried here, and by whom.

There was no vengeful wraith waiting for Sunny in the burial chamber. Nevertheless, he suddenly felt cold sweat rolling down his spine. Trusting the sense of dire premonition, he threw one last look at the sarcophagus and dissolved into the shadows.

Returning to the surface, Sunny looked at the boundless black sky and climbed into the saddle. Even Nightmare seemed nervous in the vicinity of the ominous hill, so he wasted no time to leave.

Riding north, Sunny couldn't help but remember the Nightmare Gate near Rain's school. The abominations he had fought that day were called the Barrow Wraiths. Were they, perhaps, connected to the builders of these barrows?

...The next day, he saw sunlight for the first time in a long, long time.

At first, Sunny did not even realize what was happening, thinking that there was something wrong with his eyes. But then, he understood that he wasn't seeing things-the impenetrable darkness of the empty sky was indeed turning paler.

Stunned, he dismounted and sat on the ground, looking at the eastern horizon.

As the sky brightened, color slowly returned to the world. From black, to midnight blue, to pale lilac. And then, finally, beautiful magenta that gave way to a golden dawn.

The sun rose above the horizon like a chalice of divinity, illuminating the world.

'How strange.'

Sunny's face was wet.

He didn't even know why he was crying - he didn't feel particularly sad, or happy, or awed. It was just pleasant to witness something beautiful. To not be lost from light anymore.

His eyes had just grown accustomed to the peaceful darkness, perhaps.

‘I've left the Forgotten Shore.’

He smiled.

Sunny was pretty sure that no other human had ventured that far north before. He had discovered a new region of the Dream Realm.

That meant that there would be Nightmare Creatures waiting for him in the unexplored wilderness. Still, he wasn't discouraged.

His reserves of food were running quite low, after all.

When the sun rose and the sky was painted grey, Sunny continued on his way. This time, he was especially careful, knowing that unknown herrers could attack him at any moment.

Soon, a dark line appeared on the horizon. He assumed that there would be another mountain chain barring his path, but was proven wrong after getting closer.

Sitting in the saddle, Sunny looked ahead with an emotionless face.

Out there in front of him... a sea of jagged black pillars was rising into the sky, each as wide as a tower. It was as if countless dead giants were reaching toward the sky with twisted, skeletal fingers.

The pillars... were the blackened, broken trunks of great trees. He was looking at a destroyed forest of titanic proportions.

Sunny was struggling to imagine how tall the trees had been before they were broken and toppled, and how vast the forest was. All that he could tell was that it was a land meant for deities, not mortals.

Urging Nightmare forward, Sunny slowly entered the burned forest. Despite the thousands of years that had passed since it was devoured by flames, the scorched trees had not decayed and crumbled into dust. They were still intact, just broken - it was as if someone had vengefully shattered each one, so that none remained standing.

The broken trunks covered the ground, intertwined into an impassable disarray, Most of them were as wide as roads, stretching at steep angles or sloping down, into the dark depths of the deadfall. The layer of broken trees must have been several hundred meters thick, and there was no telling what hid in the gaps between the charred remains of the ancient trees.

Sunny had no desire to find out, so he sent Nightmare onto the nearest horizontal trunk.

Moving forward wasn't easy, since he often had to change directions, going up and down or jumping from one fallen tree to another.

A few hours later, Sunny encountered his first foe.