1796 End of the World

It was a black, glistening millipede that lunged at him from under the deadfall. Its armored body was about three meters in length, as wide as an adult man's torso. Instead of a pair of mandibles, it had an eerily human mouth full of sharp, needle-like fangs.

The millipede was a Corrupted Beast.

Sunny did not move from the saddle and simply turned his head with a dark look. Before the creature could reach him, dark tentacles rose from the blackened surface of the dead tree and enveloped it, slamming the abomination down. Then, they moved like saws, their undersides turning into sharp blades.

A few heartbeats later, the millipede was sawn into a dozen bleeding chunks. It struggled weakly, and then grew still.

Sunny dismissed the shadows and stared at the gruesome remains incredulously. Then, he sighed and looked up.

"...I'm supposed to eat that?"

Before he could jump off the saddle to harvest the millipede's meat and soul shards, though, he sensed a tide of shadows moving in his direction.

Soon enough, the broken forest came alive. It looked as if a flood of darkness flowed from under the ancient trunks, rushing at him with terrible speed. A deafening rustle assaulted his ears.

Sunny cursed in a stifled voice.

The flood of darkness was not the second coming of the Dark Sea - Instead, there were more millipedes slithering towards him. Thousands of them, at least, all of the same Rank and Class as the first one.

Sunny was powerful. He was even powerful beyond belief, if compared to an average Saint. However, he was not inclined to battle a swarm of thousands of Corrupted Beasts.

Dismissing Nightmare, he turned into a shadow and fled. A moment later, the tide of millipedes flowed over the remains of their fallen sibling, and in a split second, the meat he had been reluctant to collect was gone. Not even a piece of black chitin remained.

Gliding away stealthily, Sunny let out a bitter, mental sigh.

'No wonder.'

No wonder none of the Sleepers of the Forgotten Shore had managed to find salvation by trying to reach another region of the Dream Realm. Even if they somehow managed to traverse thousands of kilometers of the crimson labyrinth, hiding from the Dark Sea at night, all that awaited them beyond the coral was death.

Hollow Mountains and Nightmare Desert were a death warrant. But this Burned Forest was not any better. It was another Death Zone.

Sunny had no doubt that there was no salvation west of the Forgotten Shore, either.

‘Doesn't matter.’

Leaving the swarm of millipedes behind, he continued to move north.

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It took Sunny a long time to make his way through the Burned Forest. He was quickly reminded that he was at the bottom of the food chain - after that first encounter with the swarm of Corrupted Beasts, he met many more Nightmare Creatures, most of them much more powerful than the millipedes were.

There were plenty of Great abominations on the outskirts of the forest... as for its depths, Sunny had not dared venturing there, moving instead in a wide circle.

He had evaded some and killed some. His food stores were replenished, but his body was in a sorry state. It was to the point where he had to remain in the form of a shadow for a while, using one of the avatars as the main vessel of his consciousness instead.

His incarnations were independent of each other, so if one received a wound, it was not reflected on the rest. Because of that, he could rotate them when there was a need, letting the damaged ones heal while the fresh ones fought.

That way, he managed to survive crossing the Burned Forest.

There were days when he moved, days when he rested, and days when he hid himself in the darkness, scouting the way ahead with utmost caution.

During one of such days, Sunny witnessed something that rattled him to the core.

As his shadow climbed on the taller remnant left behind by one of the burned trees, he could suddenly see deep into the forest, where an enormous depression in the earth was carpeted by broken trunks.

And in the middle of that vast plain stood a charred stump.

The sight of that stump left Sunny speechless.

Its size was truly unimaginable. The surface where the trunk of the colossal tree had broken off was vast enough to be considered a plateau. Each bulging, blackened root was like a mountain. The creases of the scorched bark were like deep valleys, and the shadows populating them were enough to drown entire cities.

Sunny could not imagine what could have destroyed such a tree. When it had stood whole, its crown must have brushed against the stars, and the sun must have passed between its branches, following the moon.

If there had truly been a world tree, then this had to be its corpse.

Somebody had annihilated it, complete with innumerable living beings that must have lived on its colossal branches.

‘...I'm so small.’

Hidden far away, in a dark fissure between two fallen trunks, Sunny smiled darkly.

He was so far below the unimaginable tree, and the being who had destroyed it, that even thinking

about himself in that context was preposterous.

For now, at least.

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Not long after that, Sunny continued his journey. He arduously made his way through the Burned Forest, and eventually left it behind.

By then, the sun did not rise at night anymore.

The sky was not entirely black, though. It was illuminated by countless stars, and although the moon did not show itself, he could see a ghostly radiance sometimes, as if it was hidden just out of sight.

The weather slowly turned more and more severe. Sunny was no stranger to cold, but still, he was starting to struggle slightly.

The ground was slowly devoured by ice. Sunny continued to move north, and at some point, he could not see ground at the bottom of the deep cracks in the ice anymore - instead, there was only water.

By then, he really felt as if he was approaching the edge of the world.

Sunny journeyed on, overcome by strange excitement.

Would he really reach the boundary of the Dream Realm? There was curvature to the horizon here, so reasonably, this strange world was supposed to be a sphere, just like Earth. So, he might end up entering the Stormsea from the south.

However, reason did not always work in the Dream Realm. So, Sunny could easily imagine that the world would just end, opening up into an endless dark abyss. Or maybe an infinity of billowing white mist... into nothing.

What would it feel like, to stand on the edge of the world and peer beyond?

Suffering from cold and lethal wind, Sunny stubbornly moved further north.

There was nothing around him anymore. No ruins, no Nightmare Creatures, no signs of ancient battles. Only the wind, the ice, and the stars.

But then, one day...

Something suddenly appeared in the distance. A shape that was different from all the rest, too orderly and smooth to not be artificial,

Barely containing his fascination, Sunny walked in that direction.

He moved closer and closer, until the strange structure finally revealed itself.

Sunny stumbled.

His weathered face suddenly froze. All traces of excitement were erased from it, replaced by a deep, powerful emotion that wasn't quite horror and wasn't quite shock, but very close to both.

He swayed slightly.

"Aaaah...."

A slow exhale slowly escaped from his lips.

Sunny sank to his knees.

Tears rolled from his eyes, turning into drops of ice.

"Here... it's here."

It was.

A bitter smile split his pale face apart.

Out there in front of him, hidden in the ice... stood a small settlement. It was surrounded by a thick wall, which was now broken and covered in snow.

There was a large dome-like structure towering above the settlement, painted white against the backdrop of the starlit sky. It resembled a giant, perfectly smooth egg.

It was an observatory... a lunar observatory.

It was LO49.