1413 Falling Trees

The Quiet Dancer zipped through the air and hit the base of the Great Beast's revolting tail. However, the sharp tip of the temperamental Echo bounced off the tough hide of the creature without leaving even a scratch on it.

At the same time, Fiend growled and put himself in the path of the creature's crushing paw. The towering ogre was barely able to grasp it — the decaying claws of the abomination struck him on the chest, leaving deep grooves in the black silver. The ground under the gluttonous Shadow caved in, but he remained standing.

For a moment.

Then, the horrid beast pushed Fiend down and covered him with its massive paw. At the same time, Saint dodged the snapping jaws and lashed out with her sword, leaving a thin crack on the creature's skeletal snout.

The dead sybil and the clockwork swordsman attacked the enemy from behind. Nightmare rammed into it, lowering his head to gore the abominations with his horns.

Then, all of them were flung aside. The steel mannequin dissolved into a rain of sparks, destroyed. The sybil collided with a trunk of an ancient pine, shattered it into splinters, and fell to the ground, unmoving. Nightmare barely managed to dissolve into the shadows in time, but still lost a large chunk of flesh. Saint blocked the blow with her shield and slid a dozen meters back.

The Shadows and the Echoes only lasted a second against the Great Beast's fury.

But that second gave Sunny time to call upon the shadows and manifest them into the Shadowspawn Shell. He wished he could assume the form of the Onyx Serpent, but it was poorly suited for battles on land.

A tide of darkness flowed from the open gate of the Shadow Lantern, rising to form into countless chains. They bound the ghastly creature like ropes, but were torn apart a moment later.

Sunny, Nephis, and Jet launched their attack.

Neph's silvery longsword ignited with blinding radiance as she dove under the abomination's jaws and thrust her weapon into its neck. Sunny delivered a devastating blow to the monstrous leopard's snout — empowered by the Crown of Dawn, the Sin of Solace sent a few small fragments of bone flying. Jet lunged at the Great Beast from the side, aiming to plunge her glaive into its very soul.

But before she could, the long, flexible tail of the horrid creature whipped around. Iet barely managed to avoid it by dashing back, while Sunny was not so lucky. His movements were suppressed by the need to keep himself away from the harrowing jaws, and so, the circular maw at the end of the segmented tail greedily closed on the side of the shadowspawn.

The right shoulder and side of his shell were entirely destroyed. Sunny instantly lost two of his four arms — one simply disappeared, the other fell apart, revealing shredded human flesh beneath.

Neph's sword pierced the Great Beast's neck, but before she could deal significant damage, a lightning—fast strike of a mighty paw destroyed the radiant blade and sent her rolling away.

Sunny stumbled back, desperately trying to prevent his shell from crumbling and using the shadows of the misty forest to try and hastily repair the damage.

They had managed to make the Great Beast bleed... or rather, delivered it a wound. The decaying creature did not seem like something that had blood running through its veins. However...

'Docs it even mean anything?‘

Just in a few seconds, one of Cassie‘s Echoes had been destroyed, while the other one was heavily damaged. Nightmare was already wounded. Fiend had escaped from beneath the creature's paw, and Saint seemed unharmed as well... but Sunny himself was already injured. His arm was a mess of torn flesh, and although he would not suffer from blood loss, it was in a bad state.

Would they be able to kill the ghastly abomination?

For a split second, the violence subsided.

Nephis had nimbly jumped to her feet and was already summoning a different weapon. Jet had regained her balance. Sunny switched to a one-hand grip and prepared both of his swords for an attack. Saint was already closing distance...

Cassie was moving forward, the Guiding Light shimmering in the fog.

The decaying leopard opened its skeletal maw and let out a chilling, gurgling growl. When Sunny heard it, his vision blurred slightly.

'A mental attack?‘

His resistance to mind attacks was high enough to shrug it off, but he felt cold dread nevertheless. Handling the overwhelming physical might of the enormous Great Beast was already close to impossible... if the abominations possessed more means of subjugating its enemies, this battle would swiftly turn from ugly to hopeless.

...It was then that another sound reached their ears.

Echoing eerily in the fog, a loud crack resounded, as if a tree had snapped and was falling somewhere in the forest.

The horrid leopard suddenly froze.

its skeletal snout turned, and it lowered its body low to the ground. The segmented tail rose like that of a scorpion, protecting the creature's back.

'What... what is this?l

Why did it look as if the Great Beast was... afraid?

Before Sunny could really react, the abominations suddenly moved... and rushed away, disappearing into the mist. The wind risen by its departure threw Neph's hair into disarray.

The members of the cohort remained motionless, confused and unnerved by what had just happened. Keeping their weapons in defensive stances, they covered each other's backs and stared tensely into the fog.

"What... what is going on?"

Jet's voice sounded grim and hoarse.

The thick fog veiled everything around. All they could see were the nearest trees and the cold ground under their feet. The ghastly leopard had disappeared like a ghost — there was nothing left but silence.

Then, another loud crack resounded somewhere in the forest, followed by a muffled rustling. Sunny spun, trying to pinpoint where the noise was coming from.

There was another echoing crack, and then another, louder one. Because of the mist, it was hard to tell where the trees were falling, and why. However... the cracks were growing closer.

'Damn it!‘

Slowly, the disparate cracks grew into a cacophony of noise, and Sunny felt the ground quaking beneath his feet.

...Then, everything suddenly grew silent once again.

Standing back to back with Nephis, Cassie, and Jet, he stared into the fog, feeling cold sweat rolling down his face.

The blind girl suddenly shifted, sharply turning around. Following her motion, Sunny saw something dark flying at them from the mist. Cursing, he dodged and felt a large object hitting the ground behind him.

Spinning around, Sunny raised the Sin of Solace... and froze.

His eyes widened.

Out there in front of him, laying on the ground, was the ghastly leopard. Or rather...

Its head.

The skeletal snout was shattered, and the gaping hollows where the abomination's eyes should have been were dark and empty. There was nothing below the creature‘s mangled neck, but it did not seem as if it had been severed. Instead, it seemed as if someone — or something — had violently ripped the abomination's head off with nothing but brutal strength.

The Great Beast was dead.

Sunny couldn't help but tremble.

'What... what the hell? What could have ripped a Great Beast apart?!'

Flinching, he forced himself to look away from the revolting head and peered into the fog.

'Where is it... where...‘

He couldn't see anything. He couldn't hear anything. He couldn‘t sense anything.

Sunny gritted his teeth and forced himself to calm down.

'Cassie.‘

Even if he didn't know from which direction the attack would come from, Cassie would. She could see a few seconds into the future, after all — it was all but impossible to get her by surprise.

Turning slightly, Sunny tensely studied the blind girl. She was holding the Guiding Light in front of her, ready to deflect a sudden attack. It seemed that she had not felt anything dangerous, yet...

'Maybe it's go...'

But then, Cassie's shoulders trembled slightly. Her Aspect Ability had shown her the future.

...She did not turn to face the unseen enemy, though.

Instead, her hands dropped, and she lowered her head.

Which meant...

That in the future Cassie saw, there was no escape.

Sunny stared at her in disbelief.

'No!‘

A moment later, he was swallowed by a heavy shadow.

Looking up, Sunny saw a hand stretching toward them from the fog above. It seemed like a human hand... except that it was almost the same size as the Great Beast had been. He could see the lines on the giant palm, and the blackened, broken, bloodied nails at the ends of the long, bruised fingers.

The giant hand moved deceptively slow... but before Sunny could even blink, it was already upon them.

Without ever slowing down, it smashed into the members of the cohort, squashing them like bugs.

Sunny died.

This time, his death was mercifully swift.

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...Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened.

The deck of the Chain Breaker felt solid under his feet. This time, he simply peered into the fog instead of looking around... not that he could see anything.

His gaze was dark and hollow.

'...I failed again.‘

His face was pale and unmoving.

In front of him, the mists of Wind Flower flowed slowly, swirling in indifference as they devoured the world.

Everything was as it had been before.