1415 Empty Shells

Sunny would have held his breath if he wasn't a shadow at the moment. Out there, in front of him, something massive was hiding in the fog. If not for the slight movement just now, he would have mistaken it for another pile of towering bones... that movement might have saved his life.

'Curse it...‘

Because of the mist, he could only see a vague, dark shape. The details were obscured, and he could tell that the creature was enormous. It also instilled him with a deep, bestial feeling of dread.

A strange, sweet smell permeated the air.

Sunny froze, hiding in the skull of a dead leviathan. He did not know what to do — moving forward was out of the question. But moving back could potentially inform the enemy of his presence as well.

That only left Shadow Step.

However, before he tried to slip away, Sunny lingered for a few moments.

Something was gnawing at him. Why did this presence feel... familiar?

He had felt a strange familiarity ever since entering the monster graveyard. It was faint, but unmistakable.

'Why?‘

Had he been to this part of the island already, in one of the revolutions that he did not remember? No, that did not make any sense. Before becoming aware of the loop, Sunny had to have repeated the same actions over and over — going forward alone to rescue Jet, and dying to Undying Slaughter‘s ghostly blade.

So how could anything on Wind Flower feel familiar?

At that moment, a strong gale blew from the direction of the vortex, and the mist receded. The giant creature hiding in the fog was revealed in all its eerie, grotesque beauty.

Sunny shuddered.

The massive shape he had noticed... was a revolting butterfly.

The butterfly's wings and back were black, but its body and underbelly were the color of white bone. It had six long, seemingly fragile legs that ended in sharp points, and two enormous, faceted eyes that were like orbs of pure darkness. Between them was a disturbingly long, oily-black beak, which was currently bent into a spiral like an elephant's trunk. Two long antennae rose from its head.

The eerie black butterfly was about a hundred meters in size.

It was the same Great Monster that had battled the Serpent King for an entire month for the right to devour the remains of the Black 'l‘urtle.

'The... the Dark Butterfly? What is it doing here?‘

For a few moments, Sunny‘s mind was in turmoil. He had traveled so far into the past from the beginning of the Nightmare, and yet, this grotesque horror somehow ended up catching up to him nevertheless. Had it been following him and Nephis from the start?

But then, Sunny felt a hint of relief.

Although this abomination was almost exactly like the Great Monster he was familiar with, it was also subtly different. The pattern of bone—white scales on its belly was not the same. The jagged edges of its wings were not the same. The length of its antennae was not the same, either.

Sunny had been staring at the original Dark Butterfly for an entire month, so he remembered its ethereally alien appearance in perfect detail.

This one... might have belonged to the same tribe of Nightmare Creatures, but was a different abomination altogether.

Which was not to say that it wasn‘t equally harrowing.

'Damn it!‘

First a Great Beast, and now a Great Monster... just how impossible was this Third Nightmare supposed to be? And here he was, hoping that things would go easier if he chose a different path this time.

Sunny swallowed his resentment and stared at the gargantuan abomination. The thing was much, much larger than the Chain Breaker... if they tried to fly away from the island and were caught by it in the air, there was no doubt what fate awaited them.

Things had just gotten much more. complicated.

'l'll have to go around the monster graveyard, for now.‘

The mist was already flowing back to hide the eerie creature. Before it did, Sunny followed a whim and peered into the soul of the Dark Butterfly, wanting to make sure that it, too, was a Great Monster.

Then, he froze, dumbfounded. A few moments passed before a coherent thought could form in his mind:

'...What?'

Beneath the surface of the aerial giant's carapace, where the tendrils of the revolting darkness were supposed to be... there was nothing.

There were no nodes of spreading Corruption. And neither were there radiant suns of shining soul cores. Instead, the creature's soul was empty.

No. There was no soul inside that monstrous body at all.

The Dark Butterfly was...

'It's Hollow?‘

Sunny knew of Awakened who had lost their souls in the Dream Realm, and were left as empty shells — living, but truly dead. However, he had never heard of anything similar happening to Nightmare Creatures.

How could it, if abominations did not travel between the two worlds in their sleep? Their rotten souls were always safely anchored within their bodies.

of course... if an abomination's soul was somehow destroyed without damaging the body, there was a small chance that the body would continue to live on. Empty and void of conscience.

He hesitated for a few moments, and then cautiously left the skull of a dead leviathan. Sliding closer to the giant butterfly, Sunny extended his senses and studied its shadow. The shadow was empty, like the shadows of all inanimate objects were.

The Dark Butterfly that had frightened him so much... was it no threat at all?

Sunny remained in the form of the shadow for a while, observing the gargantuan creature. The Great Monster sat among the bones with its wings laying listlessly on the ground. It seemed to be breathing, but other than that, it remained absolutely still. Its giant, faceted eyes were dull and empty.

After a while, Sunny returned to his tangible form and cautiously approached the creature. Even when he walked to stand under its terrifying beak, the Dark Butterfly did not react.

'It truly is Hollow.'

He hesitated for a few moments, then looked down. There, in the shadow of the creature's wings, clusters of revolting eggs were embedded into slimy cocoons. Each egg was twice the size of Sunny and translucent. He could see the viscous, milky liquid and the shapes of giant worm—like larvae within.

The shadows of the eggs were just as lifeless as the butterfly itself.

Sunny stared at the eggs for a while, then threw a glance at the Great Monster. Then, holding his breath, he walked forward and sliced one open with the Sin of Solace.

The revolting larva fell apart and convulsed, dead.

However, the Spell did not announce a kill. He did not receive shadow fragments, either. There were no soul shards in the repulsive flesh of the dead, giant worm.

'...Hollow.'

Sunny shivered.

'What is going on?‘

Suddenly terrified, he backed away, then turned around and walked into the mist. It took him a lot of effort to not run.

All of it... the torturous deaths, the suffocating mist, the orchard of ancient bones, the Hollow monster... was too much to endure.

Walking among the remains of dead horrors, enveloped in milky fog, Sunny couldn‘t help but feel that this hell was everything there was to the world. Everything else — all that existed in his memory — felt like a strange, distant dream.

Climbing into the saddle of Nightmare, he raised the Guiding Light and slumped, trembling.

After a while, he said hoarsely:

"...Let's go."

Soon, the towering bones disappeared into the mist.