1263 Sea of Blood

Breathing with the help of the Essence Pearl, Sunny swam through the crimson waters of the Great River.

What they were trying to do did, indeed, seem a little crazy. There were two great abominations fighting on one side of the Black Turtle, and Nephis wanted to dive into the water on the other side to steal some of the turtle's meat.

Because she was hungry.

But, of course, it was really not that unhinged of a plan. She had not suggested it out of a burning desire to satiate her belly — rather, it was out of necessity. The longer they were to go hungry, the weaker they would become. The weaker they became, the slimmer their chances of survival would be.

Neither Nephis nor Sunny knew if they would get a better chance to harvest the Black Turtle's meat than now, when the Azure Serpent was distracted. In fact, they did not even know if they would live long enough to enjoy the fruits of this perilous decision.

If the monstrous butterfly won, they would probably die soon. But there was nothing they could really do about that... so, the only thing they could do was prepare for the other outcome to the best of their ability.

Grimacing, Sunny looked away and shook Imp off his thigh. "Curses..."

Then, he gritted his teeth and started climbing out of the fissure.

'Hungry... she's hungry... hungry, is she?! Just... just what sin did I commit in my past life to be cursed with all these gluttonous women?!'

Oblivious to his heartfelt plea, Nephis followed.

It took Sunny just a few moments to scale the vertical slope of the deep fissure and climb onto the quaking surface of the dark island. It was shaking and swaying, pushed by the harrowing fury of the unseen battle that was happening below the waves.

A split second later, Saint landed nearby, and a vast shadow crawled from the darkness to take the shape of a tenebrous steed. Neph arrived last, slowed down a little by the need to carry the fragile amphora in one of her hands.

Imp had been left in the relative safety of the fissure, since he was of no use in the current situation.

Sunny and Nephis glanced at each other, and then broke into a sprint without having to say anything. Their goal was the end of the island beneath which the Black Turtle's enormous head was floating in the crimson water.

It was also where the Azure Serpent had broken through the Great Monster's silver armor and burrowed into its flesh, leaving behind a gaping wound. Since the scales of the creature were all but impervious, the meat could only be harvested from inside such a spot.

As they were nearing the point where the shell of the Black Turtle started to slope down at a steep angle, Sunny sighed and dismissed the Shroud of Dusk. Left in just his underwear, he ignored Neph's strange gaze and summoned the Nimble Catch and the Essence Pearl instead.

"...I've traded a couple of Memories just for such an occasion from the House of Night."

She lingered for a moment, then looked away. "Oh."

While the Nimble Catch was weaving itself from the sparks of light, Sunny threw a glance at his body and frowned a little. He had always been lean, and while his muscles simply refused to gain bulk, they had been like taut steel wire cables ever since the Forgotten Shore.

Now, however, they had become a little bit too sculpted and defined. His abs were really like a washboard... which was not good at all. He had lost a lot of weight during the hellish journey through the Nightmare Desert and the days of hunger on the carcass of the Black Turtle. His body was all skin and muscle, with no fat left.

Which meant that it would start to devour itself next.

Some men strived for such a physique, but for Sunny, who had grown up in the outskirts, it was a worrying sign.

'We really need to get that meat.'

As the strange garb woven out of a fisherman's net covered his pale skin, he noticed that Nephis was giving him a sideways glance again, for some reason.

Slightly confused, he said: "Summon that..."

But he did not have to say anything. The familiar golden rope was already manifesting in her hands.

They needed to dive into the tumultuous red water to harvest the monster's meat, but they didn't have to be stupid about it. If something happened, Sunny could swiftly pull them away through the shadows — however, finding a proper shadow to dive into was hard underwater. And since the Great River was in the throes of the battle between the Azure Serpent and the monstrous butterfly, its current could easily pull Sunny and Nephis apart.

She threw him one end of the golden rope, and he hastily tied it around his left wrist while she tied the other end around her right.

At the same time, light swirled around Neph's slender legs and formed into two silver anklets. Sunny stared at them in confusion for a moment before realizing that their function had to be similar to the Nimble Catch.

He was a bit envious. Hers was not an armor-type Memory, so she did not have to dismiss the white tunic...

'Ah. I want to be sponsored by a guilt-ridden Saint too...'

Holding the black bow, Saint took a position that gave her a perfect view of the head of the dead monster and the seething water surrounding it. Her task was to protect... or at least try to protect them should either the serpent or the butterfly arrive.

Nightmare's could not help her in case the former showed up, but if the latter did, his speed would have to assist Saint in leading the butterfly away. The amphora was placed beside them.

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other one last time, then dashed forward and simultaneously jumped.

The wind whistled in his ears. A few moments later, Sunny hit the crimson water and was instantly swallowed by it.

It was like he had dove into a sea of blood.

Everything around him was murky and red. Despite his best efforts, Sunny was momentarily disoriented, but regained his bearings after feeling a sharp tug on the golden rope. He found Neph through shadow sense, and followed her as she swam forward with purpose.

She had already done this once, after all. Granted... there had not been two Great Nightmare Creatures creating a storm nearby at that time...

'We need to be fast.'