1266 Unexpected Complication

"What's wrong?"

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Two identical questions sounded at the same time, but they couldn't be more different. Neph's voice was tinged with a hint of sincere concern, while the voice of the sword wraith was full of biting mockery.

Sunny was motionless for a few moments, still holding Nephis by her hand. He shivered slightly after his second attempt to use Shadow Step failed, and she must have felt it.

He looked up at her and hesitated. When he spoke, his voice sounded hollow: "My Ability... doesn't seem to work anymore."

An insidious fear suddenly drowned his heart, and at the same time, the dark island quaked again... the source of the tremor much closer than it had been before.

The fear was irrational and animalistic. It had little to do with their perilous situation, and more with that fact that his powers had abandoned him without a warning. It was as though he had suddenly found himself missing a limb. There was disbelief, confusion, dread... and, finally, terror.

It took all his willpower to push that terror down. The Sin of Solace laughed.

Ignoring it, Sunny forced himself to speak: "Just... just give me a moment."

He had no idea why Shadow Step, which had never failed him before, was suddenly ineffective. Perhaps something was wrong with the shadows populating the insides of the Black Turtle... if so, there was an easy way to check.

A few moments later, the Shadow Lantern appeared in his hand, and a flood of shadows flowed out of its open gate. However, the result was the same — it was not the shadows that were wrong, but Sunny himself.

"Ah... ah, really... such an idiot!"

The damned sword wraith was having the time of his life.

Sunny clenched his fists, then uttered through gritted teeth:

"I don't seem to be able to bring us away, at the moment. S—sorry..."

Nephis frowned, then carefully looked around. After a short pause, she suddenly said: "In hindsight... it makes sense."

Feeling a sudden sense of hope, he raised an eyebrow.

"It does?"

She nodded.

"It is a Great Monster, after all, and we are inside its body. A creature like that would have protections against someone like you bypassing its fearsome armor by teleporting directly inside. The Black Turtle is dead, but some of its defenses must still remain... perhaps if the gap in power between us wasn't so vast, your Ability could have still tore through them."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments. "...Why didn't I think about that before?" Nephis shook her head.

"I didn't, either. Don't bl... don't you think that blaming yourself is too much? We couldn't have known. We've never faced an enemy such as this."

She was right, but she was also wrong. Sunny might not have tried to enter the body of a colossal enemy through Shadow Step before, but he saw how the Azure Serpent had killed the Black Turtle. He could have at least considered the possibility of doing something similar...

In any case, everything seemed simple in hindsight. He winced, then looked at Nephis silently. As if reading his thoughts, she guided her flames from the blade of the incandescent dagger, through her body, and into his.

But the result was the same. Shadow Step was refusing to activate.

After feeling the warmth of Neph's flame leaving him, Sunny drew in a shaky breath and belatedly realized that he was still holding her hand.

...He was in no hurry to let go, finding it reassuring.

A deep frown appeared on Sunny's face as he looked in the direction of the entrance of the tunnel. Right now, the Azure Serpent and the Great Monster it was fighting were exceedingly close to the gaping wound, making the prospect of leaving the way they had come absolutely lethal.

What were their options, though? Staying here was tantamount to death, as well. 'Actually... there is a third option.'

Sunny turned around and looked into the depths of the tunnel, then pulled Nephis forward.

"Let's go. The entrance is blocked, but there's still the exit. The old snake burrowed right through, didn't it? The exit wound is on the other side of the turtle's body, under its flipper. We'll escape through there and climb back onto the island."

That was the most rational decision he could make.

The two of them hesitated for a moment, and then dove back into the seething water. Shortening the length of the golden rope to keep them closer to each other, Sunny and Nephis swam through the diluted blood of the slain behemoth. Even though fighting against the current was incredibly hard, they moved further away from the harrowing battle with each stroke.

'Hurry... hurry...'

Sunny felt a dire urgency and pushed himself forward with as much strength as he could muster. The tunnel was not that long... the entity body of the Black Turtle spanned less than two kilometers, and the bloody path the Azure Serpent had burrowed through had to be half that. Of course, it was twisting and turning, and the chaotic movement of the water made it difficult to advance.

But still. They were going to reach the exit soon.

As they swam, they witnessed more signs of the destruction that the great river beast had wrecked, both when killing the Black Turtle and while feeding on its flesh later on. The walls of the tunnel sometimes expanded into vast caverns where the turtle's organs had been, now torn to pieces and completely obliterated. Pieces of bone and tough cartilage protruded from the darkness.

Sunny found it all both grotesque and strangely, darkly mesmerizing. 'I am swimming through a Great Monster. I feel like it's a dream..." Well, it was. A Nightmare, to be precise.

Just as they passed the middle point of the tunnel and felt the current change, pulling them in the direction of their goal, he suddenly noticed something strange. Out there, a small distance in front of them... it was as though something was softly shining in the darkness. The glow was so faint that Sunny thought that he was mistaken, but the next time his head broke the surface, he saw it again.

After hesitating for a moment, he suddenly pulled on the golden rope and pushed his tired body against the current once again, trying to make his way to the source of the strange glow.

Nephis and Sunny climbed onto a frayed piece of cartilage and looked at the wall of the tunnel. Out there, hidden in the folds of torn flesh...

He took a deep breath.

...Was an enormous, radiant crystal that shone with ethereal light.

It was one of the two Supreme soul shards that the death of the Black Turtle would have left behind.

Sunny briefly glanced at Nephis, then summoned the Covetous Coffer once more. The shard was too large to fit into the opening of the alloy chest, so he concentrated and changed it, keeping the shape but changing the size.

A few moments later, the alloy chest seemed more like an alloy sarcophagus fit for a giant... or someone like the shadowspawn.

'I can't believe it. We came down to harvest some meat, but ended up with something like that.Gods... I can't even imagine how much it would cost in the waking world. Actually, it wouldn't have a cost. These things are so rare that they can't be bought with money.'

Even though they were pressed for time, he just couldn't let this chance slip through his fingers.

"Neph... can you help me?"

Together, they hacked at the fold of the turtle's flesh to widen the opening, and then used all their strength to lift the massive soul shard and load it into the opened maw of the Covetous Coffer.

After that, they had to plunge into the water again.

Several torturous minutes later, Sunny and Nephis used the silver chains at the side of the island to scale the slope of the Black Turtle's shell, and fell side by side on the rocks in exhaustion.

Knowing how Neph would look in her wet tunic, Sunny refused to turn his head and instead stared at the sky. The warm feeling of their arms touching was enough for him.

They needed to move... to hide... but he was too tired. 'Just a few moments...'

Sunny took a deep breath and tried to calm down a little. Then, he suddenly let out a low chuckle.

'Ah... but it's funny.'

After examining the Estuary Key, he had thought it impossible to collect one, let alone six Supreme soul shards. The idea itself seemed utterly preposterous.

And yet, here he was just a couple of weeks later, in possession of one. It had just fallen into his hands, almost on its own.

A strange shiver ran up his spine.

It was then that Nephis suddenly raised her hand and whispered. "Look..."

In the sky above the island, the monstrous butterfly was spreading its black wings once again.