1269 Third Contender

This time, Nephis was the first to notice the anomaly. Sunny and she were resting after an exhausting spar — he was meditating with his eyes closed, while she was leaning her back on him, still catching her breath.

He sensed a sudden tensing of her muscles, and then the warm pressure was gone. Opening his eyes, Sunny glanced at Nephis and noticed that she was looking intently into the distance, where the endlessly flowing waters of the Great River were sparkling under the light of the seven suns.

The Azure Serpent was nowhere in sight, and the island was not trembling, which meant that it was circling the stone shell of the Black Turtle. The monstrous butterfly was a small black dot in the sky. What had caught her attention, then?

"What is it?"

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then pointed at a distant patch of water downstream of them.

"There. Can you see it?"

Following her gaze, Sunny studied the currents. After a while, a scowl appeared on his face, too.

"I can. But what are we looking at?"

There, still far away from the dark island, a span of the Great River seemed different from the rest of its vast expanse. From their position, it was no larger than a coin, which meant that the strange anomaly was thousands of meters wide.

It did not seem too threatening. The water surface was simply a bit rough there, as if rippling under a strong gale. The problem was that such a gale would probably affect a larger area, not just a relatively small and strangely distinct patch of water.

A much bigger problem was that this patch seemed to be moving purposefully in their direction. Sunny wasn't sure at first, but after observing the river for a dozen seconds, he grew certain that it was no mere coincidence.

In these dozen seconds, the rough patch had already drawn visibly closer. His face darkened.

"It has to be another abomination."

Nephis slowly nodded.

"I think so too."

For a few moments, both of them remained silent. It was only logical that a new Nightmare Creature would appear sooner or later — they had already met three, each of them harrowing in its own way. The arrival of the dark butterfly had also proven that the scent of Black Turtle's blood was like a lure for hungry abominations.

All they could do was wait and see if the approaching horror was of the kind that could climb onto the shell or not.

That was not the reason why Sunny felt somber, though. Rather, the appearance of the fourth threat had forced him to face an eventuality that seemed more and more like the truth.

That truth was that they would not be able to use the carcass of the Black Turtle as a ship to safely reach civilization, after all, no matter how much they had hoped that they would. It had seemed possible when there was only the Azure Serpent circling the island. The arrival of the dark butterfly made it questionable.

The appearance of the third contender was like a nail in the coffin of Sunny's hope. If there were three, there would be four, five, and more... sooner or later, one of the abominations would crawl onto the shell, discover the two humans, and devour them.

The corner of his mouth twitched. '...But what can we do?'

They couldn't escape by water, since it was populated by unthinkable horrors. They couldn't escape by air, either, since it was just as dangerous. Even though the carcass of the Black Turtle was slowly starting to seem more and more like a death trap, there was no way out.

He sighed.

"Let's just enjoy the show, for now. If I know anything about the old snake... it won't let the newcomer get close without a fight."

And indeed, no sooner than he said it, the crimson water foamed, and a gargantuan head of the great river serpent rose above its surface. This time, the creature's long snout was turned away from the island, facing downstream. The mad beast was watching the patch of rough water, too.

"What do you think it will be?"

Hearing the question, Nephis lingered for a moment.

"I don't know. It seems enormous, so... a whale? A cachalot? A giant squid, maybe?" Sunny shook his head.

"I bet it'll be something entirely eerie, like that crawling mass of seaweed, bones, and rotten flesh that Cassie told us about on the Forgotten Shore."

He paused for a moment, and then added doubtfully: "Also... what's a cachalot?"

Nephis let out a quiet sigh.

"...It's like a whale, but with teeth."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Did whales not have teeth? He knew what a whale was, in theory, but not the details. They were all extinct, anyway... probably.

Who knew what was happening in the oceans?

The two of them watched tensely as the patch of rough water drew nearer and nearer, revealing its true size. It was indeed several kilometers wide, and much more tumultuous than it had seemed from afar. The water inside the patch seemed to be boiling, which looked rather strange considering that the river around it was as calm as ever.

A minute later, the Azure Serpent let out an angry roar, and at the same moment, Sunny slowly rose to his feet.

'Curse it...'

The water... was not really boiling, and there was no titanic behemoth moving under its surface to cause the ripples.

Instead, there were thousands... perhaps even tens of thousands of small creatures moving forward at a terrifying speed, coming closer and closer to the island.

It had taken him so long to notice because their insect-like bodies were almost entirely translucent. Each was as long as his arm, with countless thin legs, beady black eyes, and long, disgusting mouths that were full of vicious, glass-like teeth.

Standing by his side, Nephis whispered:

"Krill..."

Sunny shifted his perception and shivered after noticing the vile darkness spreading through the bodies of the repulsive creatures. Each of them... was of the Corrupted Rank.

It was not another Great behemoth that had been attracted by the scent of the Black Turtle's blood.

Instead, it was a swarm of thousands and thousands of abhorrent Corrupted Beasts.