1316 Limits of Power

Imp... or was Sunny supposed to call him Fiend now?... did not get new abilities. Which was logical, really, since the Black Turtle was only a Monster — and the gluttonous Shadow had not even consumed the flesh of the abominations, only its armor.

Still, the scrawny goblin had become a fearsome ogre. He was going to significantly increase Sunny's battle power, not the least because of his carefully chosen diet. Sunny had given up on feeding Ravenous Fiend a lot of valuable stuff so that his growth did not become muddled.

Imp's main affinities had to be established first — steel and shadows. The flames he had absorbed from the colossal body of the Sun Prince were a pleasant side effect, increasing the power of the steel devil's attacks... but what Sunny had really wanted was to make his youngest Shadow as indestructible as possible.

Saint possessed an incredible level of defense, which was only made greater by her masterful battle prowess. But Imp was different — if not guided cautiously, he could have ended up being vulnerable. Considering the types of situations Sunny often found himself in, that vulnerability was bound to result in him losing his first Shadow sooner rather than later.

Survivability was king. He had regrettably proven it himself over and over again, clinging to life by the skin of his teeth on many occasions.

Which was why Sunny was so impressed by how hard to kill the original Scavenger had been. He had experienced the toughness of the spiteful fiend's bone armor personally, after all, and wanted to make Imp at least as durable. If the ravenous Shadow managed to approach the level of defense Saint possessed, that would have been even better.

In that regard... Sunny seemed to have overshot his initial goal. By a lot.

Imp's [Complete Steel Body] was not only as durable as Saint's graceful body was, but vastly more so. His metal carapace was sturdier than her stonelike armor, and much more importantly, that durability encompassed the entire body of the ravenous devil, not just its surface.

Although Saint was hard to wound, she was actually quite vulnerable once her armor and resilient skin were breached. The internals of her miraculous stone body were well protected, but fragile. The ruby dust that flowed out of the wounds like blood was proof of that.

Ravenous Fiend, however, was now fully tempered, both outside and inside. There were no vulnerabilities that an enemy could exploit — at least not an enemy using physical attacks.

Which meant that while Imp could deliver fearsome blows, his true power lay in being

nearly impervious to physical harm. He could become the shield of the Shadow Cohort.

'...Or a punching bag.'

Sunny scratched the back of his head and looked in the direction where Imp was standing, hidden from view by a wall, with a guilty expression. The poor guy had not realized what the future held for him, had he?

'Sorry, buddy...'

He shook his head and remained silent for a while, thinking.

There were two fully matured Transcendent Devils serving him now. Sunny himself had become unbelievably strong due to Shadow Dance, at least for an Ascended. If augmented by Nephis, his power was probably comparable to some Saints now —enough to give him a fighting chance, if nothing else.

If Sunny was assisted by his Shadows, most Saints would probably be the ones at risk, not him. And that was without Soul Serpent, who should have become the strongest of the Shadows by now.

...But still, that power was not enough. After experiencing the dire perils of the upper reaches of the Great River, and knowing that he would have to venture far downstream, into the distant past, Sunny knew that even his current ridiculous level of strength was not enough to slay the kind of adversaries he would be facing.

The problem was...

'I am almost at my limit.'

There were very few things he could realistically achieve in a short amount of time to increase his power even further. The only feasible one was helping Nightmare evolve into an Ascended Terror and unlock his [Dream Curse] Ability. That was going to happen relatively soon, but after that, Sunny would reach a dead end.

With a lot of effort, he could potentially become a Terror. But even that boost was not going to be significant enough to change the odds in his favor. More Memories, and stronger ones at that, were not going to cut it either.

Sunny had grown a lot — more than any Master in history had, perhaps — but now, his head was pressed against an indestructible ceiling. The only way for him to leap to a new height was by breaking that ceiling and becoming a Saint.

Which could only happen after the Nightmare, meaning too late. Of course, he had recently learned from Ananke that people could Transcend without the assistance of the Spell — that path was open to him, but sadly, Sunny did not have a hundred spare years or more to slowly learn how to do just that.

What was left, then?

He frowned.

'Actually... I am thinking about it all wrong.'

Sunny had been a loner for most of his life, and even after learning how to rely on others and trust his friends, he still put a lot of meaning into personal strength. Which was not exactly unwise... but, at the same time, served as an artificial limit.

Although he had not lived through Neph's Second Nightmare, the lesson she had learned there resonated with his own experiences. Personal strength was important, but it paled in comparison to true power.

Take Antarctica, for example... Sunny had achieved incredible things there, but he had not achieved them alone. The evacuation of hundreds of millions of civilians was only possible because the government had mobilized vast resources to send the First and Second Evacuation Armies into the Southern Quadrant.

Without the Irregulars, without the mundane soldiers and thousands of Awakened who had fought and died to save the people of Antarctica, Sunny would not have achieved anything.

His personal strength was nothing when compared to the united determination of all those brave people.

...It was the same here in the Third Nightmare.

Sunny had to destroy a dire enemy — the forces of Defilement populating the corrupted city of Verge and the Six Plagues that ruled it. Dread Lord, Torment, Undying Slaughter, Soul Stealer, Devouring Beast... and Mad Prince.

So why was he only thinking about his personal strength? Wasn't the power of his allies also his power?

Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Kai, Jet, and even Mordret. They were as much a part of his power as Saint, Imp, and Nightmare.

Since Sunny had reached the ceiling of what he himself could achieve as a Master, wouldn't it be wiser for him to put his efforts into empowering his allies?

'This is it.'

Shrouded in darkness, Sunny slowly nodded.

That was the path he had to take if he wanted to survive the Nightmare. After reaching Fallen Grace, he and Nephis had to find the rest of the cohort. And once they found them, Sunny had to make sure that his friends — and Mordret too — grew as powerful as possible.

He had to make them into a force capable of defeating the Six Plagues. For their sake, and also his own.

Sunny sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. The future... was daunting. But when had it not been so?