1345 Monster Herders

"You are wasting your time."

"You will definitely fail."

"Just give up. You know you're not smart enough to accomplish anything worthwhile."

"Do you really want to make the woman holding your leash stronger? How foul."

"Your collection of failures just keeps growing, huh?"

...Ignoring the Sin of Solace, Sunny leaned against Ananke's ketch as he studied the Dawn Shard. His shadow hands continued to weave strings of essence. His concentration remained unbroken.

He even welcomed the derisive comments. The more the hateful wraith berated him, the more Sunny felt like he was on the right track. The Sin of Solace would not have bothered to interfere if there was no chance of success, after all — it was not in his nature to bet against Sunny when there were no stakes.

"What, you are ignoring me now? Or have you forgotten how to speak?"

Sunny threw a calm glance at the apparition, then turned back to the Crown of Dawn.

"We'll speak when you tell me how you knew about the Mad Prince."

The Sin of Solace scoffed.

"Gods. Why do I even bother? I am sick of this tired routine!"

He laughed bitterly, then added in a resigned tone:

"But there's nothing else to do. How boring."

The Chain Breaker was swaying gently underneath them. Saint was standing guard at the bow, Fiend and Nightmare were guarding the sacred tree, and Nephis was at the stern, steering the ship.

The seven suns had already descended into the depths of the Great River, and the deck was illuminated by a scattering of lanterns. The water glowed softly, diluting the impenetrable darkness of the night with ghostly opalescence.

Sunny smiled faintly.

"...Find a hobby."

The Sin of Solace stared at him, unamused. Then, he turned to the bow of the ship and sighed.

"At least there's spectacle."

Sunny paid it no attention.

"Uh-huh..."

Then, he hurriedly dismissed the Dawn Shard and jumped to his feet. 'Crap!'

Lunging forward, he felt the Chain Breaker shudder as a violent wave hit it from the side.

[Neph, we are under attack!]

Out there in front of the graceful ship, about a hundred meters away, the water had grown bleak and restless. A vast and ancient shadow was rising from the depths, surrounded by countless smaller ones. Twisting tendrils stretched toward the surface.

...Standing on the bow, Saint calmly raised her warbow and drew its string. Pure darkness flowed from the seams of her onyx armor, enveloping the black arrow that had manifested itself out of thin air. A moment later, she set it loose.

The arrow disappeared into the glowing water without a trace.

[...You have slain a Corrupted Beast, Drowned Outcast.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Saint was already drawing the bow again.

At the same time, long tentacles exploded from beneath the waves, rising above the Chain Breaker like dark, glistening towers. Shuddering, Sunny remembered his first night on the Forgotten Shore.

'Damnation... I'm going to have to repair the sails again!'

Smaller shapes were rising from the restless water and scaling the sides of the ship, swift and nimble. Sunny saw the pale glow reflecting on the blades of crude spears.

In the darkness below the tree, Fiend's eyes ignited with an incinerating red glow. The shadows around him moved, releasing a tenebrous stallion with adamantine fangs from their embrace.

An explosion of white radiance drowned the stern of the Chain Breaker in blinding light.

[Go. I'll handle things here.]

Hearing Neph's response, Sunny ran past Saint...

And jumped over the railing without ever slowing down. A moment later, he plunged into the cold water, rushing to meet the horror that was rising from the depths.

It was there, a massive shape that stretched its giant tentacles toward the moving vessel. Enormous, ancient, and harrowing... Sunny felt hundreds of eyes pierce him with an inhuman gaze, all belonging to the same creature.

'A Tyrant?'

Sunny's figure grew indistinct, surrounded by countless shadows.

Then, the maw of a furious sea serpent emerged from the darkness, bellowing in rage as it shot into the boiling depths. The long serpentine body followed, encased in onyx armor.

The Great River stirred.

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Some time later, Sunny climbed onto the deck of the Chain Breaker and huffed, red drops falling from his hair. He was drenched in blood... of course, that blood was not his.

There was a sizable sack in his hands. That suck was actually Ananke's Mantle — which was resistant to water — its sleeves tied in a knot.

Inside the improvised sack, two sizable Transcendent soul shards glimmered softly in the dark.

Sunny checked on them, then looked around the deck.

'Why did I even wash it? I mean... why did I even had Fiend wash it?'

The deck was littered with corpses. The creatures that had died here —cut, torn apart, and burned to ashes — resembled a weird mix between humans and sea creatures. They had humanoid torsos with pale skin, while their legs were replaced by long, powerful black tentacles. Their bodies were emaciated, with ghastly growths covering them like barnacles.

The sight was both repulsive and inspiring.

'Saint, Fiend, and Nightmare earned me a few shadow fragments. Even better, there are plenty of soul shards to be harvested in addition to the ones I brought back.'

The depth dweller he had killed was not a Tyrant, in the end. It was just a huge, nasty Corrupted Monster... it seemed that these Drowned Outcasts were not its minions. Instead, the smaller creatures appeared to have herded the enormous monstrosity, using it to attack larger prey.

'Waste of essence.'

If Sunny knew that in advance, he would have used the Nimble Catch and the Sin of Solace to cut the depth dweller down.

He froze for a moment, suddenly stunned by how odd the situation was.

'...Wait, since when am I so dismissive of Corrupted Monsters? That thing could have easily finished me if I wasn't careful. Damn it. Am I becoming arrogant? Arrogance gets people killed.'

Sunny was strong and skilled, but he wasn't invulnerable. Even though he could easily slaughter dozens of Fallen abominations or face Corrupted ones without fear, each of them could very well end his life with one strike... maybe two, considering the defensive properties of the Marble Shell.

'I better correct this attitude, fast.'

"Oh my. What a rare moment of self-reflection. You should correct the rest of your nasty personality, while you're at it. Maybe then people won't find you as uncomfortable to be around as they do now."

Looking up darkly, Sunny saw the sword wrath staring at him with disdain. The Sin of Solace was still as annoying as he had been before the attack.

Nothing much changed, honestly.

If there was one thing, though...

It was that Sunny had plenty of soul shards to turn into Memories now.

Standing up and summoning his clothes back, he looked around and noticed Fiend. The fearsome devil... seemed to be hiding from him behind the tree.

Sunny smiled. "Come here, buddy."

Fiend hesitated for a few moments, then reluctantly walked over. Sunny pointed to the gruesome corpses.

"Harvest the soul shards, then clean this mess up."

The devil's shoulders fell.

Sunny patted Fiend on one of these shoulders... well, he wanted to, but the bastard was too tall to do it comfortably. Plus, his body was covered in all kinds of sharp spikes. So, in the end, the gesture ended up being rather... reserved.

"Oh, and you can eat all these guys. Stuff yourself as much as you want! Now that your primary Attributes are set, you don't need to maintain a diet anymore..."

Ravenous sparks ignited in the depths of Fiend's fiery eyes.