1401 One of Those Situations

Sunny had recognized the voice. There was no doubt that the person screaming in pain in the depths of the forest was Jet... she was so close!

And in danger.

He hesitated for a moment.

'Bad, bad...'

His intuition was telling him that something absolutely deadly waited for him in the mist. Blindly rushing forward could very well invite disaster. And more than that, the scream itself was suspicious...

Was Soul Reaper Jet someone to scream from pain? No, she wasn't. Sunny had seen her maintain composure while impaled on a jagged piece of alloy. Someone... something could have been mimicking her voice to lure them into a trap.

He had met creatures that lived in the mist and mimicked human voices before, after all. The memory alone was enough to make him shudder.

And yet...

What if it really was her? If there was something on the island that had made Jet shriek in agony, then the danger she faced was truly dire. There was no time to hesitate at all.

"Sunny?"

He flinched, then looked at Nephis sombeerly. Despite Sunny's shaken state, he knew that he had already made the decision.

His voice was steady when he spoke:

"Someone is fighting in the forest, about four kilometers from the top of the stairs. It should be Jet. I'm going."

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded calmly and unsheathed her sword.

"We'll be right behind you, then."

As Cassie commanded the Guiding Light to point its radiance to where Sunny was instead of Effie, he dove into the shadows.

'I'm doing something very dangerous...'

Throughout the years, Sunny had often been forced to take unacceptable risks. But that was only because his back had been against the wall, and the circumstances had not allowed him to make a different choice.

If possible, he preferred to win every battle before it even started, or at least get as close to ensuring the favorable result as possible. Observing his enemy, making careful preparations, dictating the ebb and flow of the battle... that was where he felt the most comfortable, and where his Aspect truly shined.

Right now, Sunny had no idea what enemy he was going to face, was rushing into battle without having made any preparations, and did not hold any initiative at all.

Much worse, he was doing all these things here, in the depths of the Third Nightmare, surrounded by the mists of Wind Flower — it was hard to imagine a place more perilous than that.

'It's just one of those situations where I only have bad choicse. It's going to be alright, though... I've survived all the previous gambles, so I'll pull through this time, as well!'

Stepping out of the shadow that had heard Jet's voice, Sunny gave it an order to wrap itself around him and dashed into the mist with as much speed as he could muster. At the same time, he called the other two scouting shadows back.

It was going to take a bit of time for them to return, but still... he preferred to plan ahead.

Tearing through the fog, Sunny swiftly traversed the remaining distance to the place where the scream had come from. Soon, he broke free of the pine trees and entered a wide clearing.

The everpresent fog was a bit thinner here, allowing him to see a dozen meters or so in all directions. Sunny dug his heels into the soft moss and slid for a few meters before coming to a halt.

The Sin of Solace was already raised, ready to strike.

...But there was no movement around him.

Sunny froze for a split second, scanning the misty clearing. He didn't see or sense any enemies, at least not in the small area he could perceive. What he did sense, however... was the familiar smell of blood.

'There!'

Out there in front of him, hidden by fog, a figure was slumped on the ground.

Dashing forward, Sunny approached the figure and staggered.

'C—curse it...'

It was indeed Jet. However, she was... she was...

Her black leather armor seemed unbroken, and yet, Soul Reaper's beautiful face was contorted in a grimace of pure agony. A moment later, Sunny noticed a strange incongruity about her... looking closer, he understood that Jet's right arm was laying a bit too far from her body.

It had been viciously severed near the shoulder. The hand was still clutched into a fist, but the glaive gripped in it was broken, already dissipating into a stream of white sparks.

The moss was greedily absorbing dark, steaming blood. His chest suddenly felt constricted.

'N—neph has not recovered her essence yet...'

As he thought that, Jet suddenly opened her eyes. They had always been icy and blue, but now, the blue color had become so intense that it almost seemed as if it was glowing in the dim twilight of the misty island.

There was a hint of recognition in her dazed gaze. Her lips moved, but Sunny failed to discern the barely audible whisper.

'Hold on, Jet! Hold on...'

Kneeling in front of her, he lowered his head and listened. Jet's voice was weak and hoarse:

"Sunny... be... behind you... fog..."

His eyes widened.

A split second later, he was already moving.

Jumping to his feet, Sunny spun and brandished the Sin of Solace. He only had enough time to notice a vague shape in the swirling mist, elusive and ethereal, as if made out of the fog itself. The world around him was suddenly terribly cold, the breath escaping from his mouth as steam.

'Got you.'

The jade blade of the cursed jian sliced through the ethereal figure without meeting any resistance. Sunny was used to the feeling of the flesh of his enemies parting before the white jade like water, so he wasn't too surprised.

However... something was wrong.

Cursing, he jumped back, narrowly avoiding being grasped by the misty apparition. Cold sweat appeared on his face.

Sunny had no reason to believe so, but he felt as if he had just avoided certain death.

'What the...'

His thoughts were moving quickly. The Sin of Solace had passed through the enemy, but the enemy easily shrugged off the attack. How could it be?

'Elusive, ethereal, seemingly woven out of fog... an incorporeal enemy.'

This was not the first time he had faced murderous wraiths and ghost¬like abominations. Grimacing, Sunny let go of the hilt of his cursed sword and allowed it to fall to the ground.

Luckily, he had a weapon perfectly capable of destroying intangible foes... the [Ghost Blade] enchantment of the Cruel Sight allowed it to do just that.

Now, he just had to survive a few seconds until the somber spear manifested itself.

The problem was that he could not see the mist wraith anymore. After attacking once, it dissolved into the swirling fog, becoming utterly invisible. The next strike could come at any moment, from any direction.

The gloomy and happy shadows were already approaching from two different directions. Very soon, they would reach the clearing and augment his speed even more... this battle was not going to be as hard then.

'Now, I just need to...'

"Sunny..."

Jet's hoarse voice resounded from below, but he didn't allow himself to look down. All his focus was concentrated on the swirling mist, watching for the signs of the next attack.

"Be... careful... she's..."

Finally, the Cruel Sight appeared in his hand, instantly igniting with the radiance of divine flame. The fog around the silver blade seethed, evaporating. At almost the same time, the happy shadow reached the clearing and burst from the line of trees, flying toward him wit incredible speed. The gloomy shadow was not far behind.

The mist moved.

'Huh?'

Strangely enough, the wraith was not lunging at him. Instead, it was at the edge of the clearing, moving to... intercept...

'No!'

Suddenly, harrowing pain tore through Sunny's mind and body. Letting out a bestial wail, he fell to one knee, clutching at his chest.

"Aargh! Aaaa!!"

It was an agony unlike anything he had ever experienced.

As Sunny watched with disbelieving eyes, his vision blurry, the happy shadow was out there, in front of him... impaled on a ghostly blade. Once lively and joyful, it was now empty and hollow.

Dead.

The Spell whispered solemnly into his ear:

[Your shadow has been destroyed.]

[Your shadow core has been destroyed.]

'G—gloomy!'

Sunny was paralyzed by pain, but he tried to move nevertheless. However, it was too late.

The mist wraith was suddenly on the opposite side of the clearing, and he was brought to the ground by another wave of unimaginable, killing torment.

[Your shadow... has...]

[Your... core... destroyed...]

His soul was severely damaged. Two of his shadow cores had shattered, and his soul was falling apart.

'No, no, no...'

Letting out a tortured howl, Sunny struggled to stand up. But all he managed was to rise to one knee.

It was then that he felt a cold presence looming above him. Looking up, he saw it...

Two icy blue eyes, looking down at him with inhuman coldness.

Laying on the ground, Jet whispered in a voice that was like a dying flame:

"...me."

Then, a ghostly blade pierced Sunny's chest.

It passed through the dark fabric of Ananke's Mantle and the black silk of the Shroud of Dusk as if they were no obstacles at all. Neither Marble Shell nor Bone Weave offered it any resistance, either.

The blade did not cut Sunny's skin, not did it sever his flesh. Instead, it struck directly at his lightless soul.

Already damaged, it crumbled from that single strike.

...That was how Sunny had been slain by Undying Slaughter of the Six Plagues.

For the first time.