1408 Closest Path

By the time the three of them reached the line of footsteps in the sand, Sunny had formulated a rough plan of what he had to do during this particular revolution.

Well... it wasn't much of a plan. There were too many paths he could take, so he simply chose one that was the closest. Jet was not that far, and had to know more about what was happening on the island than he did. So, Sunny was determined to find her before Undying Slaughter did.

He was not enthused about the idea of fighting the dreadful wraith again so soon. Luckily, there was a high possibility that he could snatch Jet and escape without exchanging a single blow with the Defiled.

'What I need right now is not strength, but speed.' Sunny glanced at Nephis and Cassie.

He would have to share his knowledge with his companions sooner or later, without a doubt. Just imagining that conversation made him uncomfortable, though.

It was a rather bizarre thing to say to someone, that they had been living the same hour over and over again without ever realizing it.

'I'll tell them the next time... hopefully, there will be a next time.'

Sunny suspected that the loop was endless — it should have existed for as long as the colossal whirlpool existed, which had already been hundreds of years — but he couldn't be sure. So, for now, he had to treat each revolution as if it was the last one.

'I'll tell them after I'm back, then.'

Sadly, he had already wasted a lot of time coming to this realization, so there was none of it left for lengthy explanations.

Noticing his intense gaze, Nephis looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, considering his words carefully, then opened his mouth and said just three of them:

"Aster, Song, Vale."

Her expression changed slightly, becoming darker and more intense. It was not exactly the same murderous reaction as she had showed on the Ashen Barrow, but Sunny still felt a little uncomfortable.

Nephis frowned.

"Why..."

She paused for a moment, then took a deep breath.

"Are we under a mind hex again?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. But... something similar. Right now, I need you two to not ask questions and do what I tell you. Can you do that?"

Cassie had turned around in the saddle, a troubled expression appearing on her face. She remained silent, though, waiting for Nephis to speak.

Neph stared at him for a few long moments, then nodded slowly.

"Alright."

Sunny sighed with relief. He knew that she trusted him... but blindly trusting someone was not easy. It was even harder to suppress one's curiosity.

Personally, he would have had a lot of trouble both with the former and the latter.

He forced out a smile.

"Good. Then return to the ship and hide. Stay safe until I return."

Sunny had no idea if returning to the Chain Breaker was indeed safe... but it was the best temporary solution he could come up with.

Turning to Cassie, he added:

"I'll need Nightmare."

The blind girl swiftly dismounted, allowing him to hop into the saddle. Looking down, Sunny lingered for a moment, then commanded Saint and Fiend to protect his companions.

A moment later, he was galloping through the fog.

He wanted to avoid fighting Undying Slaughter, which meant that he would not need his combat Shadows. If he still ended up facing the mist wraith, summoning them to him would take only a couple of moments.

'Faster!'

Nightmare, however, was the fastest of his followers... his speed was far superior to even Sunny's own, as well as that of his shadows. To find Jet and bring her away from the misty forest unscathed, Sunny would need his steed the most.

He sent all five shadows to augment the dark destrier.

The two of them flew along the line of lonesome footprints, swiftly approaching the wall of black cliffs. The black stallion scaled the stone steps without ever slowing down, his adamantine hooves sending sparks flying from the black rock, the melodious staccato traveling through the mist like the rumble of war drums.

Soon, they entered the forest.

Sunny was way ahead of the previous revolution... Jet should not have entered the clearing yet, so she could be anywhere. That was a problem, considering that he did not dare send his shadows to scout anymore.

'Quite a predicament...'

He could use the Silver Bell to point Jet in his direction... the problem was that Undying Slaughter would recognize its ringing as well. Not to mention that there were most likely other deadly creatures on the island.

It was a shame that the Guiding Light pointed to Effie, but not Jet. Otherwise, Sunny would have taken it with him.

Nightmare reached the clearing where Sunny had died the last two times — or however many times it really was — and crossed it in the blink of an eye.

'She shouldn't have come from the direction of the beach, so the most logical choice is to continue toward the tower.'

The fog veiled everything, making the world appear only a couple dozen meters wide.

'Damn it!'

He could stumble on Jet at any moment... however, he could also stumble on Undying Slaughter at any moment.

Sunny was hesitating to send his shadow in all directions, after all, when he suddenly smelled it.

The stench of blood.

Following his mental command, Nightmare slowed down, and then came to a halt. Sunny looked around, inhaling the wisps of mist, then sent his steed toward a particular tree.

The ancient pine reached further than he could see, but there, on its bark, was a spot much darker than the rest of it. A bloody handprint, as if someone wounded had leaned on the tree trunk.

He spun in the saddle and finally noticed another bloody print. That gave him a direction to follow.

...Coincidentally, that direction led back toward the now-distant clearing.

Sending Nightmare into a gallop, Sunny feverishly took in his surroundings. Despite the fact that the trunks of the tall pines were flying past him with terrible speed, he still managed to notice the marks. Sometimes, there were bloody handprints on the trees. Sometimes, there were drops of blood on the ground.

Sunny guided his steed to follow the bloody trail. And then, finally...

A human figure appeared from the fog, leaning heavily on a tree. She was hunched and pale as a ghost, but her glaive was raised, ready to attack.

He heard a hoarse whisper:

"Come get me, wench..."

It was Jet.

A moment later, the image of an infernal black stallion appearing from the mist reflected in the icy depths of her piercing blue eyes, with a rider in a flying black mantle leaning low in the saddle.

Her pupils widened in astonishment.

"S—Sunny?"

Extending a hand in Jet's direction, he shouted:

"No time to explain!"

Her hesitation lasted only for a split second.

Dropping the glaive to the ground, Jet reached out with her own bloodied hand. Grabbing it, Sunny pulled. A moment later, Soul Reaper was sitting right behind him, clutching onto the folds of Ananke's Mantle.

The glaive disappeared into a rain of sparks.

Sunny commanded Nightmare to get the hell out of the misty forest as soon as possible. As the Shadow carried the two Masters away, Jet leaned forward and asked in a pained voice:

"I'm... not complaining... but... how the hell are you here?"

He grinned.

'What a complicated question.'

"How else? I came on a ship!"