1411 Monster Preserve

Nephis, Cassie, and Jet stared at him incredulously. Pierced by three intense gazes, each belonging to a beautiful woman, Sunny shifted uncomfortably and pulled on the collar of the Shroud of Dusk.

'I, uh... I think I really need to start socializing with guys more... why am I always surrounded by lethal beauties?'

Eventually, Nephis repeated his words evenly:

"Moves in a circle?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. I only became aware of it a few hours ago... or a few revolutions ago, to be precise. Think about it — the waters of the Great River represent time, and we are surrounded by an enormous whirlpool. So..."

He pointed to Jet.

"You only remember being on Wind Flower for a couple of hours, but in fact, you've been here for almost a year. The time you spent in the Nightmare is the same as Cassie."

Looking at their tense expressions, Sunny sighed.

"Well, in fact, what I said earlier is not entirely accurate. It seems that Nephis and I entered the Nightmare four months ago, while you and Cassie entered it more than a year ago. But there is no telling how many times the time repeated itself before I became aware of the loop, so... although I don't think that it's the case, we might very well have been stuck on this island for a hundred years. There's no way to tell unless we leave."

Everyone remained silent for a while. When the pause grew too long, Cassie finally asked in a hesitant tone:

"These previous... revolutions... do you mean that we have already explored the island several times, but you are the only one who remembers it?"

Sunny's face grew dark. He looked away, grimaced, and then said somberly:

"Explored the island? Not really. We barely left the beach when Undying Slaughter attacked Jet in the forest... each time, I went ahead to try and stop her, and each time, I died miserably. Jet, too."

Soul Reaper threw a sharp glance at him and paled a little. It was not a pleasant thing to hear that you had been killed. The corners of her mouth twisted into a dark smile.

"...How regrettable."

He sighed.

"This is the first time I managed to live past an hour. So, I don't really know much about the loop yet. I'm sure it doesn't terminate each time I die, which means that Nephis and Cassie must have lived longer. You might have even survived long enough to reach the termination point —but since your memories are erased between revolutions, it's impossible to tell."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Why are you the only one who remembers?"

Sunny pointed to the Sin of Solace — the sword, not the wraith — which lay on a crate nearby.

"I suspect it has something to do with this cursed sword of mine. Its... spirit... was actually the first one to show signs of knowing about the loop.

She seemed to accept the explanation after thinking about it for a few moments.

Jet sighed and leaned forward to pour herself more tea. Cassie gripped the Guiding Light tighter, lost in thought.

After a minute passed in silence, Nephis looked at Sunny and asked:

"What is Undying Slaughter like?"

His expression froze. Struggling to suppress an involuntary shiver, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then said evenly:

"...She's a horror."

He grimaced, and then described his encounters with the Defiled monstrosity in as much detail as he could. As he did, the faces of his companions grew more and more somber. Eventually, Nephis briefly glanced at Jet, and then looked away.

"Formidable. If we attack together, what do you think our chances will be?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"At least some of us will die... all of us, most likely. Especially with how low on essence you are."

She sighed.

"...Then we avoid battle, for now."

He blinked.

"For now?"

Nephis looked at him and shrugged calmly.

"We'll have to face the Six Plagues eventually. Now, however, is not the right time."

Sunny was a little bit aggrieved.

'Did she not hear how absolutely terrifying that thing is?'

But then again... it was Nephis he was talking about. Actually, it was already incredible that she had not suggested attacking Undying Slaughter right away, saying something like "it's just a Defiled version of one of the most deadly Masters in the world, but long past reaching Sainthood".

That was personal growth right there! Cassie slowly shook her head.

"We might avoid fighting Undying Slaughter, but I don't think we can avoid battle."

Jet looked at her curiously.

"What do you mean?"

The blind girl hesitated for a moment.

"If it's like Sunny said, then I finally understand why this place feels so dangerous. Think about it... previously, we only knew that no one returns from Wind Flower. Human ships, the Defiled, Nightmare Creatures —very few things that enter the whirlpool can ever escape. I assumed that all these beings had perished here, somehow. But if some of them are trapped in this time loop just like us..."

Her face paled a little.

"...Then this island is teeming with all kinds of abominations that have been caught, but managed to reach the island instead of being swallowed by the vortex. How many of them must have accumulated here over the centuries? How many horrors are hiding in the mist?"

Cassie shook her head.

"If the time loop really exists, then Wind Flower... it's like a monster preserve."

And uneasy silence settled in the cargo bay. Everyone's expressions grew ugly.

'A monster preserve...'

Sunny looked resentfully into the distance. She was right... considering the pulling force of the vortex, all kinds of abominable creatures must have been caught by the whirlpool over the centuries. Most of them had perished in its depths, but plenty would have managed to reach the island. And since time here was stagnant, moving in a circle... all of them were still here, good as new.

A chill crept up his spine.

This place... just what kind of hell was it?

Nephis, meanwhile, rose and put her hand on the hilt of her sword. Her usually impassive face was somber, but determined.

"Be that as it may... our goal still remains the same."

The rest of them looked at her silently. She frowned.

"Our goal was to find Effie and Soul Reaper Jet, then return to Fallen Grace. We are still missing Effie, so... no matter if there is a time anomaly or not, nothing really changed. We have no choice but to venture out, find her, and escape."

Sunny gave her a grim look.

"There is one problem, though. Who is going to fuel the Chain Breaker with essence? Yours is already consumed, and it won't be sufficiently replenished any time soon."

Nephis shrugged.

"You can do it, as long as we time our escape and leave at dusk. Or dawn."

He sighed, then stood up and nodded.

"Alright, then. I agree... the longer we wait, the higher the chances are that Effie will meet fatal danger. Let's make a detour to avoid Undying Slaughter and follow the Guiding Light deeper inland."

Jet winced, but stood up, too. Her bandages were painted red by blood.

"Count me in."

Finally, only Cassie was left sitting.

She glanced at the sacred staff in her hand, then rose and took a deep breath.

"...No time to waste, then."

After spending a little time to discuss their strategy and prepare, the group left the Chain Breaker and stepped on the white sand once again.