1418 Point of Return

Luckily, Sunny managed to slide down the hill and escape into the mist before Devouring Beast noticed him. Still, he didn't dare to leave the embrace of shadows for a while.

'Effie...'

Effie's Aspect had always been uniquely powerful — which was no surprise, considering its Transcendent Rank. Even on the Forgotten

Shore, there had been few people more capable than her. Some, like Caster of Han Li Clan, had been superior to the solitary huntress in certain facets of physical combat, but none had been as well-rounded. That was one of the reasons why Effie had survived years of hunting the Dark City abominations alone.

Her Aspect was all about battle and physical prowess... so, Sunny was not sure that Devouring Beast even had means of destroying his intangible form. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

...His heart was cold and heavy. 'How do I fight something like that?'

Effie's Dormant Ability granted her a powerful and, more importantly, comprehensive physical augmentation. She was inconceivably strong, fast, enduring, resilient... now that Sunny was a Tyrant, the gap between them was not vast, but she was still superior to him in certain aspects.

The same went for her Awakened Ability. It basically made her skin as tough as steel... Sunny, on the other hand, had his Marble Shell. The two could be compared, but although the Shell was more versatile, it was not as stalwart in terms of pure defensive potential.

Of course, he had Shadow Step instead, making him much more mobile and elusive on and outside the battlefield. He had Shadow Manifestation, as well, while Effie's Ascended Ability was meant to empower her allies.

So, there was no question about who would win in a duel. No matter how much Sunny admired his boisterous friend, he knew that she stood no chance in a fight against him. With Shadow Dance, it would not even be close... much more so if his Shadows were involved.

But that was Effie. Devouring Beast, on the other hand...

Was a Defiled Saint. Her Transformation was to become a towering giant, and that giant inherited the benefits of her other Aspect Abilities, as well — all of them elevated to a higher Rank. The strength of a dozen men, the skin of steel. Her gargantuan figure would also be much more visible on a battlefield, making it so that entire armies would be able to see her and benefit from her Ascended Ability.

'What a monster...'

Sunny was already terrified at the thought of having to face the mist wraith in a battle. The bestial giant... was, in a sense, even more harrowing.

'Damn it! Damn it! Since when do I have to fight Saints on a constant basis?! And how did the Plagues all Transcend, anyway?!'

Facing Dire Fang was supposed to be an exception, not the rule!

Eventually, he decided that there was enough distance between him and the tower to return to his human form. Diving out of the shadows, Sunny leaned on the trunk of a pine tree, breathed in deeply, and then looked at the Guiding Light.

This escape through the shadows had consumed a lot of his essence, probably because he had brought the sacred staff with him. Usually, Sunny was able to pull a certain weight of inanimate objects into Shadow Step... but perhaps because of the staff's divine nature, it had taken a lot of effort to carry it with him.

To his relief, the Guiding Light was still pointing forward, not back to the tower. For a few moments there, Sunny had been concerned that it would lead him to Devouring Beast instead of Effie.

He hesitated for a bit, then thought about the bestial giant. The radiance of the soul crystal did not change.

After a moment, Sunny remembered how Cassie had described getting the sacred staff to work and coughed in embarrassment.

'Come on... really...'

Then, he concentrated and thought:

'M... Miss Guiding Light, can you guide me to Devouring Beast... please?'

Despite how foolish Sunny felt, the staff did not react. Its workings were really mysterious.

Shaking his head, Sunny thought about Nephis. The radiance of the soul

crystal changed, pointing back to where the Chain Breaker was. When he thought about Effie, it returned to its previous state.

'Strange.'

Pondering the mystery of how the Guiding Light worked, he commanded Nightmare to emerge from the shadows, climbed into the saddle, and continued traveling through the mist.

Wind Flower... turned out to be extremely dangerous, but not as dangerous as Sunny had imagined it to be. There were many harrowing abominations trapped in its fog, certainly — but not as many as he had feared.

There were three reasons for it.

The first one was pretty obvious, by now. Cassie had suggested that all Nightmare Creatures that had been caught by the vortex and managed to reach the island over the centuries were still here, reliving the same period of time over and over again inside the loop. She was both right and wrong.

The mist was indeed hiding countless terrifying abominations. Sunny shuddered at the thought of having to fight them all... no matter how powerful, cunning, and lucky the members of the cohort were, they would inevitably die under the onslaught of these ancient horrors — over and over again, until the souls collapsed.

But then again, not all of these creatures were still... whole. Many were motionless and empty, just like the Dark Butterfly he had found in the bone orchard was. The circular passage of time had long turned them Hollow.

Of those that remained, many were already dead.

While moving through the misty forest, Sunny found many areas where the trees had been broken, and bloodied remains of devoured Nightmare Creatures littered the ground. That was where Devouring Beast had passed through.

In other places, Sunny found ghastly abominations laying on the ground, dead, not a single wound visible on their bodies. That was where Undying Slaughter had passed through.

The two Defiled had already eviscerated many of the prisoners of Wind Flower, making the island safer for the members of the cohort in an ironic twist of fate. Without their bloodthirst, Sunny would have never made it that far in a single revolution.

He still had to flee and evade many terrible creatures, using Nightmare's speed to escape them. Luck was on his side.

And yet... Sunny still failed to find Effie, this time.

At some point, a wide chasm barred the way forward. Not knowing how long it was and not wanting to prolong the journey by riding around it, Sunny reluctantly dismounted and climbed down. His hope was to reach the bottom of the chasm, walk to the other side, and return to the surface.

However, a boundless swarm of monstrous black millipedes was waiting for him in the moist darkness. Much worse, the revolting vermin were somehow able to hunt him even in his intangible form.

Sunny was not devoured by the tide of worm-like creatures, but he was forced to move deeper into the chasm to escape them, eventually ending up in a system of caves below the surface of the island.

There, he felt the approach of the night. Sunny knew that the suns were setting because the enchantment of the Crown of Twilight suddenly activated, replenishing his spent essence.

'I... I need to get back to the surface.'

It was easier said than done, though.

The system of caves was not too vast, but he had to move with extreme caution. There was no need to thoroughly scout the caverns to know that there were indescribable horrors hiding in their darkness.

Indeed, not long after, he met a creature that tested his ability to remain composed. Even then, Sunny managed to flee with his life... but not before losing several chunks of flesh and most of the skin on his left arm.

He persisted.

Covered in blood, tired, he and Nightmare continued searching for an exit from the caverns. Eventually, Sunny felt the approaching dawn.

And before he knew it...

'I... I feel...'

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Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened. He was standing on the deck of the Chain Breaker, surrounded by mist.

'W—what?'

He... was back to the start. Even though he had not died, the time still reversed, and was now repeating itself.

A stunned expression appeared on Sunny's face.

'Did I... reach the end of the loop?'

He felt certain that he had.

The loop only encompassed a single day.