1423 Lines in the Sand

'Today... I am not going to die.'

Sitting on the white sand, Sunny was staring at the crude map drawn in front of him. On it was Wind Flower — everything he had learned about the misty island, at least.

The hidden bay where the Chain Breaker had crashed served as the southernmost point. To its east were the bone orchard and the Hollow Butterfly. To its west were the hunting grounds of the Rotting Leopard. Undying Slaughter was straight ahead, to the north, and behind her was the Seeker's Tower.

There were many more marks in the sand, of course. Sunny had marked the location of every Nightmare Creature he knew of — and there were plenty, many of whom had killed him at least once — as well as all the landmarks he had discovered.

The millipede chasm separating the far side of the island, the abandoned port where the harrowing Vine Terror dwelled, the overgrown shrine that was like a nightmare within a nightmare, the inescapable lake which had turned red because of the gargantuan carcass floating in it, the deathly ring of black obelisks...

There were all kinds of ways to die on Wind Flower.

He briefly wondered if there had ever been a map that cost its creator so much suffering.

'The worst part is that it's nearly useless.'

One map was not enough to help him navigate the island. The Nightmare Creatures populating the fog did not stay in place, making his attempts to mark their locations pointless. Devouring Beast especially had a way of appearing in the most unexpected places due to her speed. The indescribable being that hid in the mist above the island was unpredictable, as well.

So, what he had to do was to not only map every powerful abomination imprisoned on Wind Flower, but also map their movements. The drawing in the sand was only the starting point — Sunny had to mentally construct dozens more, each slightly different.

Only then would he get a clear picture of where the most terrible

Nightmare Creatures were at each moment of the loop, and know how to avoid them. That, in turn, would allow Sunny to chart the fastest path to Effie and back.

The problem was that tracking the abominations was not easy. If anything, it was absolutely lethal. And Sunny did not just have to find each of the horrors once... he had to find them repeatedly at different times, all the while evading the rest of the deadly creatures.

He had just started on the task, but was already feeling utterly spent. The mental fatigue that had accumulated in the process of exploring the island was finally becoming unbearable. Sunny couldn't even think straight... drawing multiple imaginary maps was out of the question.

'Ah... I'm tired...'

He rubbed his face, feeling rather strange. His body was full of vigor and energy, but his feverish mind longed for sleep.

"Keep this up, and you'll really become the Mad Prince. Well... mad, at least. Gods know no one in their right mind would call a hideous worm like you a prince."

Sunny turned his head slightly and stared at the Sin of Solace. He was too exhausted to even get angry.

"...Who are you calling hideous? We look exactly the same, idiot." Shaking his head, he turned back to the map.

At that point, someone's shadow fell on him. Looking up, Sunny saw Nephis... he was startled a little.

'I guess I'm really out of it.'

Not only had Sunny missed the movements of shadows, he had not even noticed the quiet ringing of her silver anklets.

"This is a map of the island?"

Cassie and Jet were not far behind her.

In the recent few revolutions, Sunny had worked a lot on shortening the time it took to rescue Soul Reaper and bring everyone up to speed. Now, it barely took him twenty minutes.

Well... his companions were still full of questions, but he could tackle them gradually. Sunny had also discarded the habit of moving alone, at least for now, and was currently trying to involve the members of the

cohort in challenging the loop.

He nodded.

"Yeah."

Picking up a stick, Sunny pointed to the southernmost mark on the map. "This is where we are."

Then, he pointed to a mark almost all the way north.

"This is where Effie is."

Finally, he pointed to a mark near the Chain Breaker, and another one slightly above it.

"And this is where we need to go."

Nephis studied the map for a few moments, deep in thought. Although she remained silent, Jet asked in a hesitant tone:

"Why don't we just beeline it to that glutton?" Sunny shook his head.

"I've tried many times. But... it's too difficult. There are many Great abominations between here and there. Even worse, Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast are also wandering the forest. These two... they are the most dangerous creatures on this island, by far."

Then, he looked at the map.

"But there is a cave system running below most of Wind Flower. If we can move underground, we might get to Effie in time. So, we are going to the nearest entrance to the caverns... there are Nightmare Creatures below ground too, though, so we'll make a short stop first."

Jet stared at the map for a few moments, then nodded.

With nothing else to discuss, they left the Chain Breaker behind and set out east, heading for the bone orchard. Sunny walked just behind Nightmare, staring into the distance with an empty expression. He felt... half-asleep.

Nephis studied his face with a hint of concern. She hesitated for a while, then asked:

"Are you alright?"

Sunny flinched and looked at her in confusion. After a few moments passed in silence, he smiled.

"Sure. Just tired."

Her brow furrowed a little.

"How many of these... revolutions... have you been through, exactly?" He scratched his head.

"Ah... I don't quite remember, at the moment. About thirty, I think? Yeah, somewhere around that."

Sunny inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled.

"I guess we've been inside this Nightmare for five months, now. Well... fourteen months, disregarding the time storm. Time flies."

Neph's frown deepened. She stared at him for a while, then looked away. "Technically, it flows."

While he was considering if that had been a joke, she lingered, and then added in her usual even tone:

"Maybe it's time to take a break. Aren't you treating yourself too ruthlessly?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, surprised. Nephis was someone he would have never expected to say something like that. Wasn't she a person who treated herself most ruthlessly of all? A person who didn't mind burning alive endlessly if it meant reaching her goal.

Looking ahead, he smiled.

"Alright. If you say so, I'll find an opportunity to rest, soon..."

Sunny didn't add that if he was going to take a break, she would have no choice but to take a break with him.

'What shall we do?'

His smile widened, but then slowly grew dim.

...It didn't matter.

She was not going to remember any of it, anyway, as soon as the next revolution came.

Sunny would be the only one who did.