1437 One Pebble

Throughout the rest of the loop, Cassie continued to be a little off. The changes were subtle, but Sunny could easily spot them. After all, he had been going through these tribulations for a long time now... anything that was different from how things were supposed to go drew his attention.

Cassie was clearly in a slightly dazed state — not unlike how he had been the first time around. Otherwise, she would have realized that having a persistent sense of deja vu on an island where time endlessly repeated itself had to mean something.

Then again, she might have simply attributed it to the time loop and moved on. It was only Sunny who knew that the blind girl was acting differently from how she had in the previous revolutions.

'Why is this happening?'

Cassie was distracted because of her strange mental state, while Sunny was distracted because of Cassie. The cohort had slain the Cavern Terror, traversed the system of caves, and obliterated the swarm of black millipedes.

Finally, they climbed out of the chasm and ventured into the misty forest.

Now that it was submerged in darkness, Sunny found it much easier to move forward. He was in his element. He could also track the movements of the Nightmare Creatures populating this part of the island, not to mention the fact that he already knew what they were capable of.

Some abominations had to be avoided at all costs, some could be challenged. It was easier to avoid the former, and not as hard to slay the latter. Armed with knowledge and the element of surprise, the cohort made swift progress.

Eventually, there came a moment when Sunny told everyone to slow down and took the lead. Banishing the mist from a small area in front of them, he called:

"Effie! Do not..."

As soon as he spoke, a grey spear flashed toward him with tremendous speed, as if shot from a devastating siege engine.

Holding back a sigh, Sunny moved to the side and effortlessly caught the spear with his bare hand. The power of Effie's throw was scary enough to drag him back a few steps, but he easily kept his balance.

"...throw that damned spear at me!"

Nephis and Jet had barely had any time to react. They both stared at the deadly weapon held in his hand with astonishment.

Cassie, though... did not seem too surprised. Her soft lips moved, as if she was whispering something to herself.

Effie's figure was already revealed, standing in the darkness. "D—doofus?"

Sunny scoffed.

"Who else would it be? Come, take your spear back. It's heavy."

The rest of the revolution went without anything dire happening. Sunny was in no mood to try anything dangerous, anyway — he was busy recalculating various possibilities, coming up with new solutions, and observing Cassie.

From time to time, he also looked at Effie.

The boisterous huntress had been put off a little at the start, noticing that he was not reacting to her teasing. But after Jet explained the nature of the loop to her, she understood why Sunny seemed different from his usual self.

Tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, Effie looked at him bashfully.

"Ah... so you've heard all these jokes already? Dozens of times? Uh... crap... I didn't think I was that predictable..."

Luckily, Nephis was there to be flustered in his place. Watching the huntress explain what had happened to her, Sunny couldn't help but think about Effie.

It was... an incredibly stupid thing, what she had done. Getting pregnant in the middle of a war was not exactly smart. Even if it had not been intentional, the result was the same. Still...

He could understand, somewhat. Passions were high on the battlefield, and even the smartest people were prone to making mistakes when they were not thinking straight. Gods knew he had made his own share of stupid decisions. Plus, modern medicine was often unreliable when it

came to Awakened, especially the more powerful ones...

Sunny did not know if Effie had taken steps to prevent this exact situation from happening, but even if she had, they might have ended up failing her.

Even if that was not the case, he could understand.

But how the hell had she ended up being pregnant in a Nightmare?

'...Bad luck, really. An avalanche of misfortune that started with a single pebble.'

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

Indeed, Effie had never had any intentions of challenging the Third Nightmare. She was only here because of a series of tragic events that no one could have foreseen.

It had to have started not long after she found out about her condition. Back then, the government forces escorting Wake of Ruin were never meant to participate in a large-scale battle. They were simply there as observers... and yet, when the Great Gates opened during the Battle of the Black Skull, Effie had no choice but to escape into the Dream Realm, just like the rest of the Masters and Saints there.

In the Nightmare Desert, Beastmaster offered her a way out. But the members of the cohort had no plans of challenging a Seed then. Their goal was to reach the Black Pyramid... Effie must have thought that they would either escape or die in a matter of days, or weeks at most. Her pregnancy was not supposed to become an issue.

Unlike the rest of them, Effie had already lost one cohort. Her original companions had all perished in the catacombs below the Dark City. The thought of becoming the lone survivor once again... must have been unbearable.

So, she chose to remain with her friends.

It was only after Beastmaster, Seishan, Morgan, and Sir Gilead left that a decision to follow Mordret into a Nightmare was made. At that point, the only choice Effie had was to challenge the Seed with them... or remain in the desert alone to not become a burden to her companions.

But even if she had chosen the latter, the members of the cohort would have definitely not allowed her to commit suicide out of misguided consideration for their well-being.

And here they were.

Sunny looked away and sighed again. '...It must have been hard on her.'

Effie always put up a carefree front, but he knew that behind it, she had known just as much heartbreak and sorrow as the rest of them... if not more. Making the decisions she had made, no matter right or wrong, could not have been easy.

In fact, it was the opposite. Every step of the way must have been frightening, heavy, and difficult.

'I have to get her out of this hellhole alive.' They would deal with the rest later.

...Eventually, the revolution came to an end.

And when the next one started, Sunny was startled by an unexpected noise.

Looking back, he saw that Cassie had dropped the Guiding Light, which clattered and rolled across the deck.

Her expression was frozen.

Taking a step toward the blind girl, Sunny lingered for a moment, and asked:

"What's the matter?"

Cassie slowly turned to face him and took a shallow breath. Her words were exactly what he expected to hear:

"Sunny. I... I... I remember."