1462 Smooth Ride

Eventually, Sunny reached the far side of the island. Diving out of the shadows, he staggered a little and sighed.

His reserves of essence were mostly empty. Luckily, the speed with which he was losing essence was not that great, by now... which meant that many of the risen corpses had already been destroyed by the prisoners of Aletheia's Island.

His journey across the misty forest had been much more swift and uneventful than it would have been otherwise, though, so it was well worth it. Come dusk, his essence would be replenished...

That said, he was going to have to be very careful after reaching the blood lake.

Sunny shook his head and headed forward, with Nightmare following him in the shadows. His steps were fast and silent. He crested a tall hill and jumped over a rock outcropping, then raised a hand without ever slowing down.

Catching a lightning-fast spear, Sunny grunted and slid back a few steps. Then, he walked over to Effie and nonchalantly put the spear into her hand.

"Here. You dropped this."

The huntress stared at him in bewilderment.

"...Doofus?"

He let out a mental sigh.

'Here we go again...'

Sunny patted her on the shoulder and smiled.

"Who else would it be? Yes, it's me. Before you ask... this is not the first time we're having this conversation. Actually, time moves in a circle on this island..."

He gave her a short explanation, going over the strange nature of Aletheia's Island and their plan.

"...So, in conclusion, don't feel too disappointed. I promise, I was utterly flabbergasted and thoroughly teased by you the first ten times around. Nephis, too! Anyway, Uncle Sunny is here now. You can relax."

Sunny stared at her for a moment, and then added stiffly:

"As for that guy... whatever his name is... not going to lie, I was going to give him a proper beating at first. But then I remembered that I already gave him a good slap once."

Sunny watched over the nameless Sleeper during the young soldier's First Nightmare, and welcomed him back to the waking world with a slap... just like Jet had once welcomed him.

He sighed dejectedly.

"Now that I think about it, maybe I slapped the poor guy too hard. Something has to have broken in his head for him to get with a gluttonous brute like you... so, the next time we meet, I'll probably only beat him a little..."

Effie smiled and supported her protruding belly with both hands.

"Keep talking, Uncle Sunny. If you want something to break in your head, too."

Sunny chuckled.

In all honesty, he had no desire to get violent with the nameless father of Effie's child. He just said those things to distract her from the fact that her lover was, most likely, either dead or lost by now.

But then again... the guy had devil's luck. If anyone could pull through the winter solstice in Antarctica, it would be him.

Following a mental command, Nightmare rose from the shadows. At the same time, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer.

"In any case, there is no time to waste. The others should already be approaching the shrine I mentioned. So, we must hurry to the lake."

Effie glanced at the dark destrier with doubt.

"Uh... I'm not sure that I can ride your pony, Sunny..."

The red flames burning in Nightmare's terrifying eyes quivered. Sunny was pretty sure he had never seen his loyal Terror with such a strange expression...

'A... a pony?!'

He swallowed an indignant retort and forced out a smile.

"Who says you're going to ride my big, proud, and powerful steed?"

Taking a step to the side, he pointed to the big alloy chest standing on the ground between them.

"Climb on. That's your ride for today."

Effie studied the Covetous Coffer for a few moments, then awkwardly climbed on its lid. She flashed Sunny a grin.

"Now, what was it about riding your big and..."

Before she could finish, though, countless alloy legs appeared from beneath the large chest, rising it above ground. Surprised, Effie let out a short yelp.

Sunny grinned.

"Meet the Locomotive Chiffonier. The smoothest ride on Aletheia's Island!"

With that, he jumped into the saddle and sent Nightmare into a medium trot. The alloy chest scurried to follow them, its countless legs rustling as they tore the moss.

Effie remained seated atop the Covetous Coffer with a very strange expression on her face. Nevertheless, she seemed rather comfortable, and the speed of their small party was not at all slow.

In fact, they were moving very fast.

Most of the Nightmare Creatures inhabiting the island had been lured south by the shambling corpses, so Sunny could allow himself to head straight to the lake without any delays.

After a while, the ancient pines receded, and they came into view of a large open space.

The mist here was less thick, so Sunny stopped Nightmare at the edge of the forest. He did not want to risk attracting the Harvester's attention, even if the hidden horror of the skies had been attacked by the Hollow Butterfly not too long ago.

In front of them was a vast plane of dark crimson liquid. The lake might have been crystal clear once... but now, its waters were painted red by blood.

The source of that blood could be seen in the distance, drifting on the lake's surface. It was a gargantuan, dreadful creature that vaguely resembled a winged... something. Its dark flesh was torn and mutilated, and many horrible wounds revealed its glistening innards.

Sunny shuddered to imagine what kind of enemy could have killed the winged giant so brutally. He did know one thing, though...

The blood lake was absolutely deadly. Every time Sunny had tried to explore it, he had died in harrowing agony without even knowing what killed him. Anyone who touched the bloody water would die.

Still sitting atop the Covetous Coffer, Effie shivered.

"So... what kind of terrible abominations live in this charming lake?"

Remembering what Wind Flower had told him, Sunny stared at the crimson liquid with a dark expression.

"None... sort of."

He sighed.

"Instead, the lake itself is an abomination."