1464 Sunny Submarine

Wrapped in the protective shell of shadows and the onyx carapace of the Mantle, Sunny breathed with the help of the Essence Pearl and fell into the murky depths. He had swum away from the shore and then manipulated his weight to plunge down like a rock. The water pressing down on him was crimson and dark.

It was also poisoned and teeming with myriads of invisible, gluttonous horrors.

'Ah…'

He didn't like it at all.

The poison of the Bitter Cusp had spread far, by now, and should have killed numerous microscopic creatures that permeated the bloody water. The rest should have been weakened, as well. But was it enough to save him?

Sunny was going to find out soon.

'I haven't received any fragments, either... what a scam...'

His Shadow Shell was like a diving suit, with no gaps or seams that could allow the terrifying tiny creatures to reach his flesh. The Mantle covering the Shell was like a layer of armor, reinforced five times over by his shadows. In a sense, Sunny was like a miniature submarine... his task, accordingly, was to explore the bottom of the lake without being crushed and swallowed by its depths.

However...

He could already feel myriads of tiny teeth — or whatever it was that the invisible horrors had instead of teeth — gnawing at his black carapace. The Mantle was holding, at least for now, but the Shell was sustaining damage. It was as if its outer surface was slowly dissolving and being washed away by the crimson water.

'That's... pretty bad.'

Feeling the lake starting to devour and digest his shell, Sunny felt cold horror wash over him. However, he managed to maintain his composure. In fact, the situation was better than he had expected. Sure, his improvised diving suit was being devoured... but at a much slower rate than usual.

The poison of the Bitter Cusp was doing its job.

As long as the Mantle held and the exposed surface of the Shadow Shell was limited, he could repair it faster than the lake was destroying it. Even if his onyx armor started to crack and disintegrate, he would be able to keep up with the relentless attrition for a while.

Summoning more shadows from the Lantern, Sunny went about mending the dissolving form of the Shadowspawn. At the same time, his feet touched the bottom of the lake. Pushing himself through the water, he walked forward.

Surrounded by the crimson gloom — and incalculable amount of abominable microscopic killers — he advanced deeper into the blood lake. Its bottom was strangely smooth and regular, hinting at its artificial origin. Well, the whole island was artificial, so Sunny should not have been surprised that this lake, too, had been created by Aletheia of the Nine instead of appearing naturally.

He... was starting to feel nervous.

Wind Flower had described what he had to find and what he needed to do, but she did not know the precise location of their goal. So, Sunny had to search for it himself. Depending on his luck, the search could take a relatively small amount of time, or last very long... the former was fine, but the latter meant certain death.

He did not have a lot of essence left to maintain the Shadow Shell, after all.

'Damn it...'

The deeper into the lake Sunny walked, the harder it became to advance. The rock surface under his feet was still smooth, angled down at a shallow angle, but there were more and more obstacles in his path. These obstacles... were the remains of numerous Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny had thought that the bone orchard was the only monster graveyard on the island, but he was wrong. It seemed that the blood lake was the place that Aletheia had used to dispose of the carcasses of the most abominations she slayed.

He couldn't help but notice that the towering remains he had to either climb over or walk around had all belonged to Nightmare Creatures that were not made of flesh and bone. Instead, these had been abominations whose monstrous bodies had been composed of steel, stone, clay, glass, and all kinds of different materials.

'What a treasury...'

Sensing his Shell starting to crumble faster and faster, vivid signs of corrosion appearing on the onyx plates of the Mantle, Sunny tried to distract himself from fear by thinking how great it would have been, to feed all these dead Nightmare Creatures to Fiend.

Sadly, the gluttonous Shadow had no chance of surviving the crimson depths of the blood lake. Even if his armor was in no way inferior to Sunny's Mantle, Fiend was a living being — the invisible killers living in the red water would have instantly infiltrated his body and devoured it from the inside out.

'If these are the corpses that are too tough for the lake to digest... then just how many dead abominations have been erased by it entirely?'

Had this harrowing place been created by Aletheia of the Nine... to dispose of trash?

The thought seemed darkly funny.

'More reason not to die here.'

The Shadowspawn Shell was falling apart. By now, the speed of its destruction was only barely slower than the speed with which Sunny was repairing it. The Mantle was on the verge of crumbling, as well. When it did... the shell would start to dissolve much faster.

In the end, Sunny would be devoured by the lake.

'Where the hell is it... where is it?'

He forced his way through the crimson murk, trying not to panic. The bottom of the lake was almost flat now, showing that he was close to its center. That was the place where what he sought was most likely located...

Sunny was almost ready to drown in despair when he finally saw it.

In front of him, something rose above the rock surface of the lake's bottom. It was a large circle of dark steel, a dozen meters in diameter. There were no runes engraved into the ancient metal, and there was nothing laying on its surface.

'Finally!'

Sunny laboriously made his way to the steel circle hidden at the bottom

of the lake and stopped near it. The metal ring was raised above the surface of the rock by about half a meter. It was hard to see any details in the crimson darkness, so Sunny simply felt its shape with shadow sense.

He hesitated for a few moments, then summoned the Sin of Solace.

There was a thin, almost invisible seam between the outer metal ring and the steel circle encompassed by it. Sunny cautiously inserted the jade jian into that seam and remained motionless for a second or two, gathering his courage.

Then, he called the shadows back from the surface of the Mantle and wrapped them around his body. Feeling his strength soar, Sunny ignored the net of cracks that immediately started to spread through his onyx armor, and pulled at the hilt of the Sin of Solace with all his might.

He was trying to dislodge the steel circle from the metal ring it was resting in.

Sunny used all his power, pulling and pulling...

His shell was being swiftly devoured by the tiny horrors of the blood lake. The Mantle was being corroded at a dire speed, ready to crack apart.

The steel circle did not move.

'Argh!'

Sunny felt like his muscles were about to explode, but then, finally, he felt the ancient steel give. The heavy circle rose above the metal ring by a centimeter, then a few centimeters more. Without wasting any time, Sunny plunged the Sin of Solace deeper, changed its angle, and continued to pull.

The lake was suddenly in mayhem all around him.

And then, finally, the impossibly heavy steel lid rose above the metal ring. Letting go of his sword, Sunny grabbed its edge with all four of his hands, grunted, and raised the lid as high as he could while displacing a great amount of water.

Standing on the metal ring, Sunny supported the lid with his shoulder and glanced down.

Below him... was nothing.

Or rather, a long vertical shaft cut through the bedrock that led to nothing.

He was looking at the abyss below the island.

And all around him, the crimson water of the blood lake was already rushing into the hidden drain, falling into that abyss from a great height.

The power of the current almost threw Sunny down, as well, but he somehow managed to hold on. As time passed, the pressure grew more and more terrible, as more and more water fell from the bottom of the island into unfathomable darkness like a red waterfall.

'Ah... hell. My shoulder hurts.'

Eventually, Sunny gritted his teeth and threw the lid of the drain sluice entirely open, then staggered back.

By then, the water was only high enough to reach up to his shoulders.

Some time later, it disappeared entirely, leaving him standing on wet rock.

The blood lake... was gone. Its crimson waters, and all the tiny horrors populating it, had been drained into the lightless abyss under the leviatating island.

Standing at the bottom of a vast bowl cut into the stone soil of Aletheia's Island, Sunny sighed and looked up.

Out there, far away, on the former shore of the lake, Effie was looking down at him with a strange expression.

He remained motionless for a moment, then raised a hand and waved at her.

Inside the shredded Shadow Shell, Sunny's face was pale. He had survived... somehow.

'Yeah. Let's not do anything like that again...'