1475 Defiled Saints

By the end of the day, Aletheia's Island had grown silent. It was still shaking from time to time, the quakes growing stronger each time... which meant that the sorcery keeping the island afloat was slowly coming undone.

But its surface had become strangely peaceful.

Sunny was pretty sure that, apart from the motionless Nightmare Creatures on the stone bridge, there were only two abominations left on the entire island — Devouring Beast and Undying Slaughter.

The former was messily consuming the remains of the dreadful fiends in the obliterated forest. Deep wounds were covering her towering body, but the bestial giantess did not seem affected by her Flaw, yet.

The latter had just broken free from the circle of black obelisks, shattering most of them in the process. Whatever horror had dwelled within the circle was now dead, while Undying Slaughter... she, at least, appeared to be running low on essence.

Sunny could not see much from his observation post at the top of the tower, and he did not even dare to look at the Defiled Saints directly, afraid that they would sense his gaze. But he could tell that battling the being that had been imprisoned by the black obelisks took a lot out of the hateful mist wraith.

Undying Slaughter had a more cruel Flaw than the bestial giantess. Not only was her essence constantly being drained, but she also had to spend it while fighting powerful opponents. As a result, her entire existence was a perilous balancing act.

And right now, the mist wraith was out of balance.

Sunny watched as she prowled the island, searching for new victims. She even approached the tower and spent some time observing the Nightmare Creatures on the bridge. In the end, however, Undying Slaughter backed away and disappeared into the mist.

'She's running out of time.'

Sunny felt a spark of hope ignite in his heart. Come dawn, the cohort was going to leave the tower and face the Defiled Saints in battle. The weaker their enemies would become, the better their chances of survival were going to be.

Still... he did not feel confident. If anything, Sunny felt that they would be marching to their deaths.

'Maybe we should rethink our plans and try to escape stealthily, instead.'

There was still a little bit of time left. He would try to talk some sense into Nephis in the morning.

Sunny continued to monitor the island until dawn, dreading the next day.

He... could imagine killing one of the Defiled Sense. With him and Nephis working together, both being Terrors, with Jet's lethal Aspect, Cassie and Effie supporting them from the back, Saint and Fiend holding the vanguard positions, and Nightmare affecting the enemy with his insidious powers, there was a chance.

Most importantly, he possessed the most precious advantage — detailed knowledge of what the two Plagues were capable of and experience fighting them.

However, Sunny could not imagine surviving a battle against both abominable fiends at the same time, no matter how drained and heavily wounded they were.

...At the very brink of dawn, when he was wondering if there was a way to separate them for a sufficiently long period of time, there was suddenly movement in the shattered forest.

Sunny was distracted from his heavy thoughts and peered into the distance through one of his shadows.

'What is she doing...'

Out there in the mist, Devouring Beast suddenly froze and let go of the horribly mutilated corpse of a Nightmare Creature she had been chewing. The ghastly carcass fell down, sending a cloud of dust and splinters into the air.

With blood streaming down her face, the colossal giantess looked down coldly.

It was only then that Sunny noticed another figure standing some distance away from her, this one much smaller. Undying Slaughter was obscured by the mist, but now that it had become much thinner, the wraith was easier to spot.

Not that she was hiding. On the contrary, it was as though she wanted to be noticed.

Undying Slaughter did not look that well. Her elusive figure seemed even less substantial than usual, as if on the verge of dissipating into a wisp of fog.

The two Defiled Saints stared at each other silently for a while. Sunny did not know if they were capable of communicating with each other, or if they needed to. From what he could tell, there was an unspoken understanding between these harrowing abominations.

Eventually, Devouring Beast grinned wickedly, revealing her bloodied teeth.

'They... they are going to...'

His eyes widened slightly.

At the same time, a ghostly blade appeared in Undying Slaughter's hand, and she moved forward.

It seemed there was no loyalty among the Defiled.

The battle against the prisoners of Aletheia's Island should have been like a feast for Undying Slaughter... but those harrowing abominations had not been weak. In fact, most of them had been superior to the mist wraith both in terms of Class and Rank. So, she had ended up burning through more essence that she received by killing them.

Which was why she needed to absorb more. And the only creature she could kill, by now, was the other Defiled Saint. Devouring Beast.

The two Plagues were going to clash with each other, and, as if answering their fury, the whole island shuddered. This time, the tremor was violent enough to throw Sunny down to the stone floor.

'This is our chance!'

The other members of the cohort had been checking their equipment, almost ready to leave the tower. However, Sunny saw an opportunity, so he turned to them and shouted:

"We need to go, now!"

It was going to take some time to get to where Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast were fighting. By then, one of the Plagues would already be dead... and there was not going to be a better moment to attack the remaining one than immediately after the battle was over.

Not unless they wanted to risk staying on the island until it collapsed into the vortex, at least.

The members of the cohort looked at Sunny, then exploded with motion. A few moments later, they were already passing through the gateway of Aletheia's Tower.

Out there in the distance, the Defiled Saints collided. Devouring Beast's towering figure shimmered, and then suddenly disappeared. Instead of a dreadful giantess, a savage-looking woman appeared amidst the toppled trees, her skin painted by dirt and blood... she must have realized that her size would only be a disadvantage when fighting the mist wraith, and so transformed back into the semblance of a human.

Her human form, however, possessed astonishing strength, explosive speed, and ferocious might. Even Undying Slaughter seemed to tremble in front of Devouring Beast's primal fury.

However, Effie's evil twin did not possess means of attacking intangible beings. Nevertheless, she was more than capable of dodging and evading the wraith's attacks... and remaining in the form of an apparition was costing Undying Slaughter essence.

In the end, the mist wraith had no choice but to abandon her ghostly form and face her sister as a creature of flesh, blood, and bone.

That was the last thing Sunny saw before commanding his shadow to abandon its crow's nest on the top floor of the tower and race to catch up to the cohort. He could not allow himself to leave any of his helpers behind — in the upcoming battle, he was going to need every drop of his strength.

"You know what to do!"

As the cohort was climbing down the narrow steps, Sunny jumped into Nightmare's saddle, commanded his shadows to augment the black stallion, and rushed forward on his own. For a moment, it felt as if they were falling... but then, his steed landed at the base of the cliff, took a sharp turn, and avoided the stone bridge by leaping over the moat.

Landing on the other side of the wide chasm, Nightmare flew in the direction where the two Defiled Saints were fighting.

The wind whistled in Sunny's ears.

And then, just as he was about to reach the vicinity of the dreadful clash...

The island quaked once more, and a terrible wail assaulted his ears.

Diving out of the mist, Sunny ordered Nightmare to stop and looked forward with wide eyes, his face turning white as a sheet of paper.

Out there in front of him, surrounded by signs of terrible destruction...

A tall, bestial woman was laying on the ground, her face covered by blood. Her whole body was trembling. Sunny thought that Devouring Beast was afraid, but then, he heard a strange, chilling sound.

...She was laughing.

A ghastly, mad laughter escaped from between her bloodied teeth, full of wicked glee.

It only grew quiet when Undying Slaughter, who was standing above the savage woman with a cold expression on her dreadfully beautiful face, ruthlessly plunged her ghostly blade into her sister's chest.

Devouring Beast, Heralds of the Estuary, one of the six Defiled champions of Verge... died just like that, slain to satiate another Plague's hunger.

'...They are the Five Plagues now, I guess.'

For a moment, Sunny was frozen in place, struggling to believe his luck. Then, Undying Slaughter retracted her blade, turned slightly...

And looked directly at him.

There was doom and inevitability in her emotionless, inhuman, piercing blue eyes.

He was suddenly very, very cold. The memory of that first harrowing death on Aletheia's Island resurfaced in his mind, making Sunny shudder violently.

'Not this time, wretch.'

Struggling against the instinctual terror, he met Undying Slaughter's chillinh gaze...

And smiled.