1313 Nightmare Within Nightmare

Sunny dreamt of a titanic gate that stood wide open, something boundless and entirely alien hiding in the darkness of its colossal maw. He was a spider with a severed leg, crawling away as broken chains fell to the ground all around him.

His mind was consumed by terror, while his heart...

His heart was full of a cold, bitter feeling of betrayal and regret. 'Escape... I must escape...'

Sunny pushed his small body across the stone floor. There were beautiful webs veiling the vast hall of the temple, their silk threads weaved into a grandiose tapestry. A spark flew, and a moment later, the webs were engulfed in fire.

They disappeared in a flash, leaving behind only clouds of acrid smoke that obscured the entire world.

At least he couldn't see the harrowing gate anymore.

Suffocating, he crawled through the smoke, and slowly, torturously, the terror devouring his soul dissipated. Sunny felt as if he had escaped the immediate danger... however, he was hopelessly lost. There was nothing except for searing heat and the dark glow of spreading flame around him.

His body was already starting to grow unbearably hot.

He froze for a moment, resting and trying to find the way out of the smoldering inferno. Then, for a moment... he felt a breeze caressing his singed carapace from somewhere ahead.

'There...'

Sunny rose to his seven feet and limped forward as fast as he could. Soon, he left the smoke and the fire behind.

There was a silent expanse of still water around him now. The smoke was gone, but a thick mist took its place. It swirled and moved, flowing slowly past the shivering figure of the small spider.

'Where am I?'

Sunny took a step and discovered that he could somehow walk on the surface of the water — just like he could within the Soul Sea. Advancing hesitantly, he ventured deeper into the fog. Some time passed — perhaps only a few minutes, perhaps an eternity — and he had lost all sense of direction.

There was nothing but mist in the world.

...Until something else appeared in the grey void. Sunny trembled.

There, ahead of him, someone... something... was sitting on the calm surface of the water, staring down. The figure was dressed in tattered rags, its gaunt body hidden from view. It seemed like a human, or was at least human-shaped. The man's dirty hair was hanging like seaweeds, and his face was hidden from view.

A jagged band of dark metal rested on his head like a tarnished crown. Suddenly, Sunny felt cold.

'The... the Mad Prince?'

It was one of the six Heralds of the Estuary... one of the Six Plagues.

The creature in front of him looked rather pitiful, but it was still a Corrupted Titan. He was in dire danger.

Luckily, the Defiled abomination did not seem to notice the small spider... Mad Prince was sitting motionlessly, staring at his own reflection with an absent expression. It was as though he existed in an entirely different reality.

A moment later, Sunny suddenly felt profound relief. A simple realization dispelled his fear and unease:

'...I'm sleeping. It's a dream.'

Of course, it was. Sunny was not a spider. He was currently in the temple of the Nightmare Spell, near Nephis and Ananke — not in the middle of a boundless sea, lost in the mist. The Corrupted Titan in front of him was not real, and the danger the creature represented was not real either.

'Thank the gods...'

As Sunny thought that, he was not a spider anymore. However, he was also not himself — instead, Sunny was tall and nebulous. He had eight nimble arms, one of them crafted out of pristine white porcelain. His slender figure was veiled by a dark mantle, and a mask of black polished wood hid his features.

Looking down from his towering height, Sunny studied the pitiful creature in front of him. The Mad Prince did not look that frightening, especially for a Titan. However...

For some unknown reason, the hunched figure filled Sunny with dread. It was just too... too familiar...

As if sensing a gaze, the tattered man suddenly shifted and slowly raised his head. A dreadful face that seemed like a ghastly mask of countless scars and two dark eyes burning with unfathomable madness revealed themselves, making Sunny take an involuntary step back.

Then, a whisper that was like broken glass resounded, scratching at his ears. The Mad Prince whispered:

"..Mho dares dream about me?"

And just like that, the relief Sunny felt was destroyed.

'W—what? He knows that this is a dream? No, that is not possible. How?!'

The eyes of the Defiled slowly gained refocus, becoming sharp and crushing. Pressed down by the unbearable weight of harrowing insanity hidden in their dark depths, Sunny took another step back and held his breath.

'It's a dream, it's a dream...'

The creature's lips, meanwhile, twisted in a wicked smile.

"Ah... it's you. Which one are you?"

The Mad Prince suddenly froze, then groaned and struck his head with a fist. "I can't, can't... can't remember. Ah, but it is also an answer."

His ugly face rippled, as if trying to assume a human expression. "You're... neither. You are an impostor?"

The creature's voice suddenly grew dark and vicious:

"You... murderer..."

An unhinged laugh escaped his lips, and then, the Mad Prince slowly rose. His tattered rags moved, shrouded in mist...

As Sunny took another step back, desperately trying to wake up, the Defiled took a step forward.

"How about it, murderer? Come closer... I'll tell you a secret. You deserve that much..."

There was suddenly nowhere to go. The grey mist became solid, blocking all paths to retreat. And Sunny... Sunny was, indeed, curious. Curious against his will.

He was a great lover of secrets, after all...

As he shuddered, feeling his thoughts spin out of control, there was suddenly a presence between him and the Mad Prince. Someone else was standing there, blocking the view of the mad creature with his back.

It was a young man in a black tunic, with long raven-black hair and a grim expression on his pale face.

The Sin of Solace. 'What is he doing here?'

The wraith seemed uncharacteristically serious as he stared the Mad Prince down. Without turning his head, the apparition said in a voice that was neither snide nor mocking...

Instead, it was grave:

"What are you doing, fool? Summon your horse and get out of here! Hurry!"