1351 Beware of Future Versions of Yourself Bearing Gifts

The Sin of Solace.

These words were clearly a part of the ghostly spellweave of the Estuary Key. Sunny stared at them intently, feeling a strange mix of confusion, curiosity... and dread.

What the hell was the meaning of this?

Shifting slightly, he looked at the sword wraith. The apparition stood in the shadows, wearing a bored and resentful expression. Sunny had grown so accustomed to the company of the Sin of Solace — first in the form of a disembodied voice, then of a vague figure, and finally of a perfect reflection of himself — that he rarely paid it much attention these days.

But the sword wraith was not at all benevolent or harmless. In fact, he was a sinister and insidious being, spawned from the whisper of a fearsome daemon and meant to drive the wielder of the sword mad.

The fact that Sunny still had his sanity intact... or rather, somewhat intact... was only due to his extraordinary mental resilience and resistance to mind attacks. Most humans would have already been turned into raving lunatics by the jade jian.

Sunny, though? Apart from looking like a madman from time to time due to an outwardly strange habit of talking to himself, he only found the presence of the Sin of Solace frustrating, nothing more.

'...Is there more to this damned curse?'

He knew that the apparition would never give an honest answer, but nevertheless asked:

"There's no reason your name would be etched into the weave of the Estuary Key, is there?"

The sword wraith gave him a disdainful look.

"I don't know. Maybe there is... you're the great sorcerer, so you tell me." Sunny took a deep breath.

"You are keeping a lot of secrets these days, huh? Makes me wonder if I should just feed you to Nightmare. Better safe than sorry, that is what they say."

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Go ahead, get rid of your most powerful offensive Memory. Why not? You're going to die in this Nightmare, anyway. In fact, I encourage you to destroy me! Oh... do you think that I want to be here? Gods, no."

He grinned.

"Ah, but there's a problem. Are you sure that destroying the sword will get rid of me? It might, it might... but then again, maybe it won't. Maybe the damage to your mind has already been done, and we are stuck together for the rest of your short, distasteful, pitiful life. What a cruel fate!"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

Indeed... he couldn't afford to destroy the Sin of Solace, and neither was he certain that doing so would banish the apparition. They were truly stuck with each other, at least for now.

'And I won't get any information out of the bastard, either.'

So... there were only two ways to solve the mystery of the Estuary Key and its connection to the Sin of Solace. One was to find the great sorcerer who had created the ominous Memory. The other was to deduce the truth, somehow.

Sunny looked away with a somber expression.

'Now that I know that the Sin of Solace has something to do with the Estuary Key...'

He suddenly felt cold.

After entering the Nightmare and discovering that he had somehow come into possession of a Supreme Memory, Sunny made several theories about how it could have ended up in his Soul Sea. One of them was that the Soul Serpent had slain a Great Nightmare Creature out there in the real world...

The other was that it was Sunny himself who had created the Estuary Key far in the future, but somehow received it in the present due to the strange nature of the Great River.

And now that he had learned certain facts and knew that the name of the Sin of Solace was etched into the weave of the unexplainable Memory, a chilling suspicion was getting harder and harder to deny.

Looking down, Sunny slowly clenched his fists.

'It was him... the Mad Prince. He must be the one who created the Estuary Key.'

Simply thinking these words made him shudder.

But it was just too compelling of a theory to discard. Sunny had suspected that the mysterious Memory had been created by a future version of himself. He also suspected that the Mad Prince was one of his possible futures.

So, wouldn't it be logical to assume that the future version of himself who had created the Estuary Key was the Mad Prince?

The name of the Sin of Solace etched into the weave, the ghostly strings of shadow essence, the unexplainable nature of the Key... and the strange words describing it.

The answer is oblivion. 'It had to have been him.'

How many weavers were there who could create threads out of shadow essence?

Sunny was certain of it.

Then... what exactly did it mean?

'If that abomination really created the Estuary Key...'

Did it prove that Sunny was really inhabiting the body of one of the Six Plagues? That would certainly make things easier for the cohort. One adversary was already gone, after all. And it didn't even have to be just one... what if each of the members of the cohort had been sent into the bodies of these powerful Defiled?

...Actually, that was a chilling thought. Because while it would really be wonderful to not have to deal with the Six Plagues, it also meant that the other members had been sent directly to the heart of the Defilement, the city of Verge. The Mad Prince was the only one of the Defiled champions who had traveled into the far reaches of the future, after all, from what Sunny knew.

Surely, the Nightmare Spell wouldn't have been so unjust in setting up its trial.

Still, if Sunny had indeed taken the role of the abomination from the future... he could also tentatively explain the sudden change of the Sin of Solace.

Why had the sword wraith suddenly grown to look so vivid and real at the start of the Nightmare, almost indistinguishable from the real thing?

Was it, perhaps, because Sunny had actually inherited not one, but two things from the Mad Prince? One was the Estuary Key... while the other was the Sin of Solace.

What if the sword wraith that had greeted him in the Nightmare came from the future, just like the Estuary Key? What if the Sin of Solace had been by his side all the way to becoming Defiled and then spending gods knew how much time haunting the Great River? Hundreds of years, at least, judging by how superior the madman's weaving was to Sunny's own.

...And had been then passed down to the younger version of its corrupted master through some bizarre anomaly or dark scheme.

The apparition had let it slip that he knew the Mad Prince by interfering with the dream where the abomination's vestige showed up. Was that why?

Sunny scowled.

Suddenly, the idea of feeding the jade sword to his Shadows did not seem so crazy anymore.

'I'll wait and see.'

Sunny glared at the Sin of Solace, distrustful and wary. Glaring at him back, the sword wraith grinned.

"Look at you, figuring things out. Ah... there's really no sight more comical than a fool who thinks that he's smart. Wouldn't you agree?"

Sunny grimaced and remained silent. Was that a confirmation? Or simple mockery?

He gritted his teeth, knowing that there was no way to tell.