1455 Puppet Master

The white beach was shrouded in mist once again. The bright and beautiful vista of Wind Flower's dream was gone, replaced by the chilling gloom of reality. Surrounded by the flowing fog and dreadful silence, Sunny waited for a moment, then slowly straightened and looked around.

His heart was beating wildly, full of crippling panic and boundless dread.

...These feelings were not something he wanted to feel, or had a reason to. Rather, they were simply an instinctual response caused by meeting countless harrowing ends in this misty hell. Even when Sunny was calm, his body remembered every torturous death, every heart-wrenching loss, and every pained cry.

The sight of the white fog enveloping the Chain Breaker was a promise of many more torments to come. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm his heart... it was getting harder and harder to do with each new revolution.

A few moments later, Sunny let out a long sigh and turned around.

Cassie was facing him with a somber expression on her pale face. She lingered for a few moments, then leaned heavily on the Guiding Light and asked in a quiet voice:

"So? How did it go?"

He looked away.

"I met her. There is... a lot to discuss. We should bring Jet back first."

The blind girl nodded listlessly, then walked over to Nightmare, adjusted the stirrups, and climbed into the saddle. A few moments later, she disappeared into the mist.

Nephis had been observing them tiredly. Her brow was furrowed into a deep frown. Glancing at Sunny, she asked:

"What is going on?"

He met her gaze and sighed.

"Cassie... is off to find Jet. Let's just rest for a bit, please. I‘ll explain everything when they return."

She studied his face for a few moments, as if wanting to ask more. Eventually, however, Nephis simply nodded and said in her usual emotionless tone:

"You don't look too well."

Sunny looked at her. Neph was not in the best state herself... she seemed spent and exhausted, almost ready to topple at any moment. Her already pale face was drained of all color, her eyes sunken and slightly unfocused. The slumped shoulders, the sickly pallor, the feverish gaze... these were the symptoms of extreme essence exhaustion.

He smiled.

"You look beautiful, though."

With that, Sunny lowered himself to the deck and leaned against the railing. Nephis remained motionless for a few moments, flustered. Then, she silently sat down near him and rested the back of her head on the ancient wood.

"I'll wait until Cassie returns, then."

He did not answer, staring into the mist.

Sunny... had a lot to think about.

It had taken him a long time -— many lifetimes of dread, really -— to reach Aletheia's Tower. However, the truths Wind Flower had revealed to him were all worth it.

There was so much he had learned from the beautiful, forsaken Saint. The origin of the Dream Realm and the Waking World... the true identity of the First Seeker... the secrets of Aletheia's Island, and so much more. Even the impossible number of challengers who had entered this Nightmare had an explanation now.

But, most importantly...

He had learned a few things about the Mad Prince.

'At this point... I can't deny it anymore.‘

That Defiled madman... the future version of himself... had visited Wind Flower in her dream. Sunny might have met a strange echo of his corrupted future in a nightmare, but the bastard had spoken to Wind Flower personally. Which meant that the Mad Prince had the [Dreamwalker] Ability, just like Nightmare did, or something similar to it.

In all the years that Daeron's daughter had spent sleeping on Aletheia‘s Island, they were her only guests. That proved that very few beings possessed power over dreams, even here in the Tomb of Ariel.

And that meant...

'It was him.‘

Sunny exhaled slowly.

It was not Dusk, but the Mad Prince who had sent Ananke a dream message so that she would find the Children of Weaver... find Sunny and Nephis, and send them off to Fallen Grace.

It was that madman who had massacred Weave, then used its last priestess to guide them deeper into the Nightmare. Past the time storm and to the derelict of the Chain Breaker. It was also him who had created the Estuary Key and secreted it away in Sunny's soul, somehow.

He could have even been the author of the demented runes Sunny had seen on the piece of flotsam drifting in the upper reaches of the Great River.

Why had the Mad Prince done all these things?

'No, before that...‘

What else had that monster done?

Suddenly, Sunny was covered in cold sweat.

Now that he knew that the mysterious puppeteer responsible for many of the strange things happening in this Nightmare was none other than his future corrupted self, he couldn‘t help but perceive everything that had happened so far in a new light.

What else did not make any sense?

Too many things. But there was one in particular...

'Why wasn't Fallen Grace destroyed?‘

Led by the Six Plagues, the Defiled had successfully destroyed Twilight and every city of the sybils — except for Fallen Grace. That last city, though, had strangely been spared. It was attacked by the Defiled from time to time, sure, but none of the Heralds of the Estuary had ever shown up to erase it from existence themselves.

Their inaction seemed very strange, in hindsight.

Was it, perhaps, because the Mad Prince needed Sunny and Nephis to visit it one day, for some reason? To come into possession of the Guiding Light, perhaps?

...Or was it because the Six Plagues simply couldn't appear anymore?

The Defiled madman had treacherously eliminated Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast from the board, after all. Who was to say that Soul Stealer, Torment, and even the Dread Lord himself had not been dealt with in a similar fashion?

Sunny had thought that the final obstacle of the Third Nightmare would be the Six Plagues. But now, he was not so sure anymore.

'What the hell is going on?‘

Was the Mad Prince... actually an ally?

Remembering the visage of the horrid lunatic whose remnant once appeared in his dream, Sunny shook his head.

'No, that is impossible. He is a Nightmare Creature.'

But then again, Wind Flower had mentioned that the Mad Prince seemed strangely lucid for an abomination. Why would he be?

Suddenly, a strange idea appeared in Sunny's mind. He froze for a moment, then lowered his gaze and glanced at Neph's sword.

Was it because... the Mad Prince was haunted by the Sin of Solace?

The sword wraith was supposed to slowly drive a human insane. What would its effect on a Nightmare Creature be, then? What would madness mean to a being whose mind was inherently alien to all things human?

Sunny did not know why, but he felt that he somehow stumbled on a glimpse of truth. If the wraith born from a sinister whisper of Ariel, the Demon of Dread, had indeed helped his future self maintain a sliver of humanity even after becoming Defiled...

Then he still wouldn‘t be an ally.

However, it was entirely possible that the Mad Prince had other goals than the Plagues did.

‘Just what is my evil twin scheming?‘

Sunny did not know.

In fact, after learning so much, he felt that he knew even less than he had before.

He was sure of one thing, though.

The sinister shadow of the Mad Prince was behind everything that had happened in the Nightmare so far. And that...

Was an indescribably chilling thought.

Sunny knew himself all too well, after all.

Even slightly lucid, he was a very scary enemy to have.