1456 Do What You Want

Cassie and Jet soon returned to the Chain Breaker. Sunny had explained the basic information about the loop to Nephis by then — however, he kept the things Wind Flower had told him to himself, for the time being.

Not because he was reluctant to share the knowledge, but simply because he did not want to repeat it all for the second time once they reached Effie.

The cohort set out to the far side of the island without any delay. As they traveled, made weapons, fought abominations, and hid in the forest to wait out the more harrowing ones, Sunny couldn't help but think about Wind Flower...

And the oath he had made.

'Kill her...‘

Sunny's Flaw did not compel him to fulfill any oaths... it just prevented him from making an insincere one. Still, he was free to change his mind at any moment.

'Can I kill her?‘

Of course, he could. However, it would be an understatement to say that Sunny was reluctant to.

He was not an innocent man. In fact, there was plenty of human blood on his hands. He had even enjoyed killing some of his victims, albeit very few. Mostly, he did not like it one bit.

The thought of killing someone like Wind Flower was abhorrent. lle... admired the charming Saint from a different world a great deal. He also felt a lot of compassion for her tragic plight.

And yet, bitterly, there was nothing else he could do for her. Death was the only mercy he could give Wind Flower.

'How... fitting. Shadow God would have been proud.'

Sunny had even considered surrendering the Mirror of Truth to her. But there was very little chance that it would help. Yes, Wind Flower would be able to delay the spread of Corruption by a few hours if she borrowed Neph's Aspect Ability. But there was almost no hope that the seed of Corruption would not only be temporarily hindered, but disappear as a result.

Once the Mirror of Truth crumbled, the seed would most likely still be there, in Wind Flower's soul. Then, only death would be able to save her.

...Even knowing that the chance was infinitely small, Sunny had still offered his Memory to the beautiful Saint. It was a very rare thing for him to act selflessly in that way. But she refused.

Wind Flower did not explain her reasons, but Sunny suspected that it was because of the First Seeker and how precious the Mirror of Truth would be if someone wanted to destroy the abominable creature.

'Curse it...‘

Feeling grim, Sunny went through the motions of traversing Aletheia‘s Island.

Some time later, the five members of the cohort were together once again. Sunny had finally shared his findings with his companions, not holding anything back. Their reactions, iust as he had expected, were very intense.

It was not every day that one learned about the origin of their own world.

Well... here on Aletheia's Island, one could. But generally speaking, news of this caliber was exceedingly rare.

Eventually, the heated discussion died down. Tired of trying to comprehend divine matters, Sunny and his companions turned their attention to more mundane issues.

The Six Plagues, and the Mad Prince.

"I just don't know what he wants. I see how that it's funny considering that he is me… but he is also a Nightmare Creature, and almost entirely mad. I can‘t tell."

The others remained silent for a while, their expressions somber. No one liked to know that their actions were being manipulated by a sinister Corrupted Saint.

Eventually, it was Nephis who broke the silence. Looking into the fire that they've made to prepare food, she said:

"I think we are asking the wrong question."

Sunny looked at her intently.

"Which question should we be asking, then?"

Nephis hesitated for a few moments. Her expression... seemed strangely distant. Leaning forward, she put more fuel into the fire and asked:

"What do the Six Plagues want?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times. Sitting to his left, Effie frowned.

"Isn't the answer obvious? They are doing what all Nightmare Creatures do. Trying to obliterate everything that is not Corrupted, until there‘s only Corruption left. Here in the Tomb of Ariel, it means eliminating all River People."

Nephis nodded.

"But why do they want to eliminate all River People?"

None of them knew what to answer, so they just stared at her in confusion.

Did abominations need a reason to slaughter humans?

She sighed.

"Let's go with another question, then. If the person who challenged a Nightmare succumbs to Corruption... what happens to them when the Nightmare ends?"

Sunny opened his mouth, feeling a bit stunned by that question.

"They will... they will..."

He hesitated. Nothing like that had ever happened, at least not to his knowledge. So, there was no definitive answer. The most likely one, though, was that...

"They will be expelled back to where they came from?"

Nephis nodded once again.

"So then. If the Six Plagues want to escape the Nightmare, they have to conquer it, just like we do."

She sighed.

"But how do they conquer it?"

let looked at her with a frown.

"They need to destroy the source of the Defilement and save the..."

But then, she suddenly fell silent.

The rest of them were silent, too.

'No... saving the River People is not the goal of the Nightmare.‘

Sunny gritted his teeth.

The goal of the Nightmare was never straightforward. There was one conflict at the heart of each Seed, yes, but many possible solutions. In the case of this Nightmare, the conflict was about the fate of the Great River civilization. One possible solution would be to destroy the source of the Defilement and save the River People...

But another, no less valid, solution would be to ensure their annihilation. Once every human in the Tomb of Ariel was either dead or Defiled, the conflict would have been resolved, as well.

His eyes widened a little.

"Are you trying to say... that the Plagues... went on a rampage across the Great River, destroying the cities of the sybils one after another... to conquer the Nightmare?"

Nephis stared into the fire, dancing flames reflecting in her beautiful grey eyes.

"That would make sense, would it not? Their goal is the opposite of ours. But, more than that... since we know what their ambition is and that it's different from the Mad Prince's… we can also guess what he wants."

She looked at Sunny and shrugged.

"It seems to me that what your future self wants... is to make sure that this Nightmare never ends. Or at least that it doesn't end the way the other Plagues desire. Ah, I might be wrong, of course."

Sunny suddenly remembered the dream where he met the remnant of the Mad Prince. The hatred in the abomination's voice when he called Sunny a murderer.

"Why would that bastard want the Nightmare to last forever? Or does he want something else?'

As a deep scowl appeared on his face, Cassie asked calmly, her voice pulling him back to their conversation:

"So, what then? Should we just sit back and relax while the Plagues conquer the Nightmare for us?"

Nephis glanced at her, then slowly shook her head.

"First of all, we don't know how long it will take. Secondly, I don't want to release these monsters into the waking world."

She looked at them somberly, remained silent for a moment, and then added in a flat tone:

"Most importantly... whether we like it or not, we are also here in the Tomb of Ariel. Cassie assumed the role of the ruler of Fallen Grace. Effie and Jet are the last of the River Nomads. If the Six Plagues want to eradicate all humans on the Great River... they won't be able to achieve that goal unless they eradicate us, too."

A strange smile appeared on his face.

"It's almost as if the core of this Nightmare is to throw two versions of our cohort at each other, and see which one survives."

She shook her head.

"Of course, one of these versions is vastly more powerful. While the other... the other has me.”