1487 The Source

Sunny stared at the distant Great River, frozen in place. His face was motionless.

However, there was a storm raging in his mind. Fragmented truths that he had learned, witnessed, and experienced in the Tomb of Ariel were moving, colliding with each other, and clicking in place with a dreadful noise. The inconceivable truth of their Nightmare was slowly revealing itself.

From start to finish... it was all...

He was suddenly overcome with fear.

Shifting his gaze slightly, Sunny studied the beautiful ribbon that twisted on itself, forming an infinite loop.

Deep crimson, vibrant azure, soft lilac... the seven suns shining in the darkness...

It was like a dream.

'How can this be? How can the Great River flow in a circle?'

But then again... of course, it could.

In hindsight, it made so much sense.

There had always been a paradox in how the Great River was described. Because it was always described as "endless"... Sunny had not paid it much attention before, assuming that the word was simply there to provide flavor. But he should have known better. The Spell was always deliberate with its choice of words.

The description of the Stifled Scream read:

[...a great river was contained within it, flowing endlessly from the future into the past.]

But how could a river of time be endless? The past wasn't infinite. If the Great River really flowed into the past, anyone sailing it would reach the point beyond the origin of time eventually — so, by definition, it could not flow endlessly.

Only it could. Because its estuary was also its source... within the Tomb of Ariel, the past was connected to the future, creating a single whole. The proof was right in front of him.

There was a reason why the Nightmare Creatures populating the Great River were most powerful in the far reaches of the past, near the Estuary, and in the far reaches of the future, where Sunny had initially come from. The two were one and the same.

He frowned, then shook his head.

'No, wait... that doesn't make sense.'

If the Great River was an infinite loop, and the past turned into the future, having no end... then what about the Estuary? The existence of the Estuary was also undeniable. Not only was it mentioned in the descriptions of the Stifled Scream and the Shroud of Graceless Dusk, but it was the reason why the Seekers of Truth had come to the Tomb of Ariel, as well.

They had come to find the secrets that the Demon of Dread had hidden in the estuary of the Great River...

The hideous truth he had wished to be free of.

And when Aletheia, the First Seeker, had finally found it, the Defilement was born.

The whole purpose of the Great River was to reach a point before time existed — before the gods were born, and therefore outside their control. At least that was what Sunny and Nephis believed.

So how could there be no Estuary?

'There is. The Estuary exists.'

Shifting his gaze, Sunny studied the length of the beautiful ribbon. From this distance, he could not really see the current of the Great River, but he did see a few things.

For example, a stretch of it was shrouded in boiling clouds, which gave birth to immense cyclones. That was the area of the river that corresponded to the end days of the Doom War, while the cyclones were the time storms it created.

The colossal whirlpool where Aletheia's Island had been situated was hidden from view, but Sunny saw a tiny speck on the crimson layer of the twisting ribbon. That was Fallen Grace. He thought he saw another city on the lilac layer. That had to be Twilight...

The second most noticeable anomaly, though, was a spot where the surface of the Great River was obscured by mist. The mist was absolutely

impenetrable, covering a considerable length of the river. The flow of time near it seemed restless even from a distance, which meant that it was absolutely devastating up close.

Sunny suddenly felt cold, realizing that not only was there an Estuary...

'No, that is... that is impossible.'

...But he had already brushed against it.

Something seemed to explode in his head.

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'Of course...'

Looking at the distant Great River, Sunny took a shaky breath.

He was remembering the first few days he had spent in the Nightmare, drifting on a piece of flotsam in a place shrouded in mist

Back then, everything about the situation had seemed strange and bizarre. So, he had never properly questioned where that place was. However, now that he thought about it... even considering the general weirdness of the Great River, those first days were especially odd.

The mist, the piece of flotsam, and what had happened next...

Actually, Sunny had never seen his makeshift raft sailing out of the mist. Instead, he simply heard the water roaring and was thrown underwater when the suddenly furious current overturned the piece of flotsam. By the time he resurfaced, the seven suns were shining above his head.

Most importantly, the mist was nowhere to be seen — upstream or downstream. All around him, there was only the sparkling, dreamlike expanse of the Great River, as if the mist had never existed at all. There were also the demented runes carved into the underside of his raft.

...It was almost as if he had been sent there through time and space instead of simply being carried downstream by the current.

And now, Sunny felt almost certain that that was exactly what had happened.

That misty place where he had spent the first few days of the Nightmare... was the outer boundary of the Estuary. It was also the source of the Great River.

It was a place between the past and the future, where the laws of time were twisted and broken. The entrance to the true Estuary — the space that existed beyond time, containing Ariel's secrets — was hidden somewhere in the mist.

Aletheia had found it, but Sunny simply drifted past, being carried by the current. When the piece of flotsam reached the boundary of the Source, he was expelled from it, appearing in the far reaches of the future — in the area of the Great River corresponding to the point in time where the person whose role he took had entered the Tomb of Ariel.

'Wait...'

Sunny was suddenly covered in cold sweat when he remembered a few more details about his time in the mist... in the Boundary.

Hadn't he been tormented by nightmares of madness, despair, and dreadful obsession there? Hadn't he screamed, waking up...

'No, no... not again... please...'

Hadn't the Sin of Solace inexplicably become perfectly complete and real out there, in the mist?

And the Great River... was a loop...

Sunny shuddered.

A terrible premonition grasped his heart with icy claws.

Sitting on the deck of the Chain Breaker, he gazed at the distant river and whispered:

"The Six Plagues... are not the future versions of ourselves."

Sunny closed his eyes.

"...They are our past. They are us from the previous revolution of the Great River."