1489 A Variable

It had to be true.

The Mad Prince must have traveled in time to become Sunny... for one simple reason. Sunny could not possess the Key of the Estuary otherwise.

He took a deep breath and grasped his head, feeling dazed.

'There are answers... too many answers. For once.'

The turbulent swarm of revelations was yet to settle in his mind, and there was no clear picture.

'Everything makes sense now. But also, nothing makes sense.'

Sunny felt that he understood the true nature of the Great River. He also understood the sequence of events that had transpired prior to the current cycle. It all came together nicely... except for one glaring inconsistency.

The existence of the Six Plagues was a paradox that could not be explained by what he knew. But that was alright. He did not know everything, after all, especially not in a place as bizarre as the Tomb of Ariel.

However, if Sunny simply accepted the paradoxical existence of the Plagues as fact, everything would fall into place. For example, the fact that Wind Flower had met both the Mad Prince and Sunny — just like Effie and Jet coexisted with Devouring Beast and Undying Slaughter, Sunny coexisted with the memories of his previous self.

The vile madman was gone, but the scars he had left on the Great River remained. Like Weave, which he had destroyed. Or Ananke, whom he doomed to a life of loneliness and loss.

'So, how did it all happen?'

Sunny contemplated the Third Nightmare, numb to his surroundings.

The first thing he had to admit was that he did not know, and would most likely never learn, what the initial shape of the Nightmare had been. The reality of the Great River had been irrevocably changed by the Six Plagues. So, the challenge the original cohort had faced was entirely different.

It were the Six Plagues, after all, who had taken control of Verge and led the forces of the Defilement to devour the cities of the River People, undoubtedly accelerating the demise of the River Civilization. Without them, the cohort might have found many powerful allies to aid them in slaying the First Seeker.

However, during that first cycle, something had gone wrong. Somehow, the cohort ended up entering the Source instead of laying siege to Verge...

'No, not quite right.'

It was possible that everyone had entered the Source — but not necessarily so. Sunny could have attempted to find the Estuary alone, for some reason. But he definitely had entered the mist and crossed the boundary. That was how the first cycle had ended.

And, therefore, an unknown number of cycles began.

Eventually, influenced by the [Hideous Truth] enchantment of the Sin of Solace, Sunny had grown immune to losing his memory of the past cycles. Becoming... a variable. A single variable that broke the system, introducing chaos to a predetermined flow of events.

At that point, several things could have happened.

Perhaps he continued to search for a way to conquer the Nightmare and preserve the lives of his companions, failing cycle after cycle and eventually going mad. Perhaps, guided by unknown reasons, he continued to search for the entrance to the Estuary that was hidden somewhere in the mist of the Source. Perhaps, by then, he was already infected by the cursed knowledge of the Defilement.

In any case, eventually, there came a time when Sunny was returned to the beginning of the Nightmare already harboring the seed of Corruption in his mind.

And that, of course, changed everything.

The other members of the cohort were infected by the Defilement, as well. Nephis died at their hands.

...Kneeling on the deck of the Chain Breaker, Sunny shivered. His face was deathly pale.

'What happened next, then?'

It was obvious...

The Mad Prince was released from Shadow Bond, finally fulfilling his wish... becoming free.

However, his freedom did not last long.

Ironically, the madman was enslaved by one of the people he had surrendered to the Defilement — Kai. Then, the corrupted cohort found a new goal. To conquer the Nightmare and be released into the real world by obliterating the River People civilization.

And so...

They somehow found a way to travel into the distant past, to the days long before the first day of the Nightmare... and at the same time became foreign invaders of the new cycle. Sunny did not know how, but he had an inkling that the Source and the Estuary were somehow responsible for the birth of this bizarre and eerie paradox.

Over time, the members of the corrupted cohort grew stronger, eventually Transcending... or rather, falling deeper into Corruption. Ananke had already told Sunny that it was possible for those who followed the path of Ascension to reach Transcendence without conquering a Third Nightmare. Similarly, it was possible for Fallen Nightmare Creatures to become Corrupted.

The Fallen Terror of the Crimson Spire, for example, had been evolving into a Corrupted Titan when Nephis killed her. The former members of Neph's cohort achieved a similar feat inside the Tomb of Ariel.

And thus, the Six Plagues were born.

They subjugated Verge and led the forces of the Defilement to annihilate the River People. Even Twilight, the city of challengers led by the Serpent King, fell to their insidiousness and might.

They should have conquered the Nightmare decades ago, by all accounts...

If not for the Mad Prince.

An eerie, twisted smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

Conquering the Nightmare was what the Dread Lord wanted. But it was not what his slave wanted.

And so, the vile madman conspired against his master.

It seemed that the Mad Prince was still harboring a desperate obsession.

One that had nothing to do with spreading the Defilement to every corner of the Tomb of Ariel, obliterating the River Civilization, or unleashing the Six Plagues into the real world.

Sunny did not know what that obsession was...

But he could guess.

'Be careful of what you wish for.'

Those were the words that the Mad Prince had carved into the piece of flotsam drifting in the mist of the Source, over and over again, with his nails. It wasn't hard to guess that he regretted fulfilling his wish.

What did Sunny want?

To be free.

That wish of his... had killed Nephis.

He shuddered.

'The Mad Prince, that bastard... was that what he wanted to achieve?'

To rewrite history and ensure that Nephis survives.

'Perhaps...'

And so, the Mad Prince started scheming as he prepared for the arrival of the members of the cohort. He trapped Undying Slaughter and Devouring Beast on Aletheia's Island. He had met with Wind Flower and learned how to create the Estuary Key.

He massacred Weave, and then sent a dream message to Ananke, instructing her to meet Sunny and Nephis in the far reaches of the future when the time came.

...And gods knew what else. Sunny simply did not know the extent of preparations the Mad Prince had undertaken to ensure that, in this cycle, the events of the Nightmare went exactly as he planned.

The reality of the Great River had already been entirely changed from how it had originally been by the existence of the Six Plagues. And the vile madman manipulated it even more, purposefully setting the stage for his future self.

And then, when all the preparations were done, he simply entered the Source and ceased to exist, transferring the Estuary Key to Sunny.

Ensuring that he would not be poisoned by the Defilement immediately after entering the Nightmare, unlike how it had happened in the previous cycles.

And here they were.

Sunny let out a long sigh.

'That treacherous madman...'