1493 Sins of the Past

The plan of action was clear. In the next... however long it was going to take, the Chain Breaker would traverse the empty darkness and return to the Great River. They would aim to land as close to Twilight as possible.

Granted, no one knew where the lost city was located, exactly. All they knew was that it was situated in the reaches of the Great River where the sky was painted lilac by the light of dawn, as well as the general era when it had been established — the latter was inscribed on the slates recovered from the drowned temple.

So, Cassie was going to guide the Chain Breaker to the stretch of the River corresponding to that era, and they would explore the currents from there.

Sunny felt a bad premonition when he thought about Twilight, and the blind girl seemed troubled, as well. Neither knew what was waiting for the cohort there... but, whatever it was, two things were certain.

First, that they were going to face a trial no less dangerous, and most likely far more terrible, than anything they had experienced in the Tomb of Ariel yet... which was saying a lot, considering how utterly dreadful Aletheia's Island had been.

Second, that the Mad Prince had to have arranged something to happen in Twilight, as well.

There were four fixed events in each cycle, after all — Nephis and Sunny entering the Tomb of Ariel in the far reaches of the future, upstream of Weave, Cassie entering the Nightmare in Fallen Grace, Effie and Jet entering the Nightmare among the River Nomads... and Kai entering the Nightmare somewhere near Twilight, accompanied by Mordret.

It would be strange if the Mad Prince had not included the lost city in his schemes.

'Something unspeakable is waiting for us there... I can feel it.'

Sunny's expression was bleak.

Nevertheless, he felt strangely hopeful. Precisely because the Mad Prince had most likely already done something to give them a chance, no matter how small. Was it arrogance, to have faith in the devious nature of his former self? He did not know, and he did not care.

Additionally, Sunny had two more hidden advantages. The Crown of Twilight he wore was going to grant him a nearly inexhaustible reserve of essence in the land — well, waters — of constant dawn. More than that, it was a key to the defensive arrays of Twilight. All he had to do to gain control of them was reach Daeron's throne room.

He and Nephis were two of the most powerful Masters in history, and their power only became greater when they were together. Jet received her Aspect Legacy, while Effie could inspire all three of them with her Ascended Ability and support the cohort from the back with javelins.

There was Cassie, as well... the unassuming seer who was actually the hidden ace of the cohort. Her affinity to mysteries and revelations could resolve many problems that would otherwise be unsolvable, and warn them of the most dire threats in advance.

So, overall, he judged that their chances of tackling Twilight were not bad. Right now, however...

Sunny hid his face behind a cup of tea and furtively studied the faces of his companions.

There was another conversation they had to have. He sighed.

'This is silly...'

They had not discussed the revelations about the nature of the Great River, the true identity of the Six Plagues, and his own role in all that had happened yet.

It was indeed stupid, to feel ashamed of the actions of his Defiled past version... but he was. How did one go about telling his friends that he had turned them all into Nightmare Creatures in the past life?

Or maybe even in countless past lives?

'It is probably... just as awkward as telling the girl you're in love with that you killed her.'

Sunny coughed.

'But then again, adding that your evil version betrayed the other Defiled and brutally slaughtered countless innocent people just to create a future where she remains alive... should count for something, right? I mean... it's a bit romantic. Right?'

He suppressed the desire to groan and looked away.

What was this insanity? Who else had a life as unhinged as his? Eventually, Sunny sighed.

"Now, let's talk about the Great River itself. You should have realized something after seeing it from afar. I realized a few things, as well... and they might very well affect how this Nightmare ends."

Trying to keep his voice neutral, Sunny shared what he had deduced. The cyclical nature of the Great River, the existence of the Source and how the past and the future were connected through it, the fact that it wasn't their first time challenging the Nightmare, the commonalities between the great loop of the River and the artificial loop of Aletheia's Island...

Among those commonalities was his ability to slowly become aware of the repeating nature of time, which led to his eventual Defilement — and, therefore, to the Defilement of the rest of the cohort and Neph's death.

Lastly, Sunny explained why he thought that the Mad Prince was gone, and how the influence of his demented predecessor was still affecting everything that was happening on the Great River, and in particular to them.

He did, however, keep a few things to himself... for example, the fact that the vile madman had been enslaved by the Dread Lord.

As well as why the Mad Prince had been so obsessed with rewriting the past.

In the end, Sunny took a deep breath and said, his voice a bit stifled:

"So, uh... sorry, I guess. You know, for creating the Six Plagues."

The other members of the cohort stared at him silently for a while. He winced.

'You can at least say something, damn it...'

At that moment, Jet chuckled.

"What are you apologizing for? It's not your fault. You and I both watched over people who failed their First Nightmare and became Nightmare Creatures... so, you should know better than most that the person is not to be blamed for what the abomination does."

Effie looked at him with a mischievous smile.

"Right. But, since we're apologizing for what our evil twins did, sorry for squishing you like a bug. A very small, teeny-tiny... squishy bug. That's what Devouring Beast did, right? Should I feel guilty about it, as well?"

Nephis shook her head.

"We don't know what happened during our first cycle in the Nightmare, and how you ended up entering the Source. Perhaps the rest of us were already dead, by then... so, you might have saved us all, to begin with. The only thing that matters is what happens in this cycle. And making it the last."

Cassie didn't say anything, and simply nodded. Sunny sighed.

He didn't really feel responsible for the actions of the Mad Prince, but it was still nice, to know that his companions had his back... no matter what.

At that moment, Effie leaned back and said:

"On that note, doofus... can you tell your chest to stop trying to bite my arm off? I know there are still plenty of tasty things inside! I won't take much... well, all of it, at least..."

He laughed.

"Go get your own tasty things. Do you think we don't see you wolfing down those berries from your locket without sharing them with anyone?"

As the members of the cohort moved past the identity of the Mad Prince and started to discuss the bizarre secrets of the Great River, his gaze brushed past Cassie. The blind girl was listening quietly, cradling a cup of tea in her hands.

For a moment, a shadow ran across Sunny's face.

He had become aware of the loop on Aletheia's Island... but hadn't Cassie become aware of it, too?

Wouldn't the same had happened with the cycles of the Great River, then?

...And, unlike him, she didn't have the Estuary Key to prevent her from remembering.

Sunny studied the blind girl for a moment, then shook his head. No, that was impossible.

Back on Aletheia's Island, Cassie must have regained her Memories because of being exposed to the Sin of Solace through him... even if she had never admitted it. So, the restriction placed on the sword wraith was protecting her, too.

Otherwise, it would be not Cassie, but Torment sitting across the table from him.

Watching as the blind girl took a sip of her tea, and then smiled at Effie's joke, he finally allowed himself to relax.

There was little time left for them to rest and recuperate.

Once the Chain Breaker reached Twilight... Sunny had a feeling that none of them would have an opportunity to rest for a long while.