1573 Stone Maze

Sunny turned away from the chilling testament that Ariel had left behind in the silent waters of the still lake and continued forward.

There were a million thoughts in his mind. The magnitude of the revelation he had received dwarfed almost everything Sunny knew — the very reason for the cold reality he was born into now had an explanation. The future, too, had become much clearer. And it was a frightening future, as well.

The gods were dead... but not all of them.

The seventh god was still alive, slumbering in the cradle of the Void. All of existence was already infected by the horrors of his nightmare, and once the Forgotten One awakened, even that ailing world would come to an end.

And yet, Sunny had no desire to ponder these truths right now.

The matters of corrupted gods and dying worlds were far away. The dreadful future they promised was far away, too... although perhaps not as far as he would have hoped for. In any case, none of it held any meaning as long as he was bound.

As long as he wasn't free.

Free to live his life the way he wished to live it, as well as free to try and change the predestined outcome. Even if the end promised by the truth of Ariel truly came before Sunny died peacefully of old age, even if he failed to change anything, in the end... there was really only one thing sadder than living as a slave.

It was dying as one.

So, Sunny wished to gain freedom even more desperately now.

And, unlike the dreadful truth, his freedom was near.

The Guiding Light was still shining, pointing across the dark waters. Sunny followed that light through the darkness.

As he walked across the still lake, subtle ripples spread from where he stepped. His reflection walked alongside him, and a few steps back, the Sin of Solace followed, staring at Sunny with hateful eyes.

'Why is he being so quiet?'

There was something strange happening to the sword wraith. He seemed... different, somehow, ever since they had entered the Estuary. Sunny had long grown accustomed to the company of the loathsome apparition, but now, he was growing wary of its presence.

Not the least because he knew now what harrowing knowledge the Sin of Solace was harboring, prevented from sharing it only by the seal placed on him by the Estuary Key.

Just like the Void could break its seal and consume all of existence, the knowledge of it that the wraith possessed would consume Sunny should the Estuary Key disappear.

The thought was chilling.

'It's... a good thing I never tried to transfer the Key of the Estuary to someone, I guess.'

Sunny continued to walk across the dark lake, losing all sense of time —or rather, what little of it he had left. There were no lights shining under the surface of the water anymore, but gradually, the lake itself changed.

Its surface, which had been calm before, was slowly growing restless. There were powerful currents moving underneath the surface, making the dark water stir and surge, forming waves. Soon, advancing had become harder.

Eventually, Sunny saw something in the distance. Jagged rocks were rising from the water, resembling cliffs. The water was flowing between them, restless, and wisps of mist rose here and there.

The silence was broken by the sound of rushing water and the whispers of distant currents.

Sunny reached the towering black rocks, looking at the surging water with a complicated expression. There was a labyrinth formed by the passages between the jagged cliffs, shrouded in mist. The water traveled through the stone maze, disappearing from view.

He could hear it roar in the distance, as if plunging from great heights.

He could also feel the very fabric of reality grow thin and strange all around him.

'What is this place...'

Sunny did not know... but he had a suspicion.

And that suspicion only grew when he noticed something at the base of one of the cliffs. There, a mark had been left on the black stone, as if cut into it by a sharp blade.

Two runes, one meaning "sun", the other meaning "loss".

'The Mad Prince passed through here.'

And not only him.

Looking into the passages formed between the cliffs and listening to the distant roar of water, Sunny felt sure that here, the lake hidden in the inner part of the Estuary connected back to the Great River.

Only, since the lake existed entirely outside of time, the connections it formed were special.

If he followed one of the streams, he would most likely be able to exit the Estuary. He would also enter the Great River at a point in time different from where he had left it — perhaps far in the future.

Or, perhaps, far in the past.

Long before the day he had entered the Nightmare.

That was how the Mad Prince had been able to invade a cycle of the Great River where he was not meant to exist — and had taken the future Plagues with him. Cassie had said so herself...

What had her exact words been?

'After reaching the Estuary and using it to invade the next cycle of the Great River, the two of them meticulously prepared the playing field for the arrival of us, the new challengers.'

Sunny had not paid attention to these words back then, overwhelmed by other matters, but now, he finally understood what Cassie had meant.

The Estuary existed outside of time... or rather, time itself did not exist yet in the Estuary. So, the relationship between this eerie place and the rest of the Tomb of Ariel was tenuous at best.

By choosing the right passage, one could escape the usual cyclical flow of the Great River and travel to a different time — not the subjective time of the Great River represented by its current, but the objective time that dictated the rise and fall of its civilization.

If Sunny had a thousand attempts, he could map the labyrinth and find a way to come and go as he pleased, visiting different eras of the Tomb of Ariel. He could even travel to a time before the Plagues invaded the latest cycle, prepare for their arrival, then destroy them in one fell swoop.

They had not been as powerful back then, after all.

That way... perhaps, the River Civilization would not decline as fast. Perhaps the Twilight would not be destroyed, yet. Perhaps the Nightmare could be conquered differently.

But then again, maybe not. Maybe Twilight had always been fated to be destroyed by the forces of the Defilement, and the beautiful cities of the sybils had always been fated to fall apart and drown.

In any case, he did not have a thousand attempts.

He barely had one.

And so, Sunny entered the labyrinth and followed the Guiding Light, wondering where it would lead him.

Would he return to the Great River?

Would he be sent into the future? Or into the past?

Whose True Name had Torment delivered to Cassie, and how would finding that creature — or place — release him from the chains of fate?

He was going to find out.

Eventually, there was nothing left around him except for towering cliffs and rushing water. Sunny used the Dark Wing to glide between the jagged rocks, propelling himself forward with stunning speed. He felt a need to hurry, knowing that Nephis was somewhere out there, leading an assault on Verge...

In the end, the Guiding Light led him to neither the future nor the past.

Instead... the radiant crystal simply showed him the way through the labyrinth, keeping away from the sound of roaring water.

Escaping the misty labyrinth, Sunny found himself in front of a vast body of water once again. He was back to the calmer reaches of the dark lake.

The part of it hidden behind the maze of cliffs, though...

Was entirely different from what he had seen near the shore.

'W—what is this...'

Sunny froze for a moment, gazing forward with a pale face. In front of him... countless corpses were floating in the water.

It was very much like the dreadful sight of the slaughter that had happened at the approach to Twilight, but with one striking difference.

If the carcasses littering the still water there belonged to the Defiled abominations, then here, all of them seemed to belong to Great Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny knew it because there were numerous husks of Dark Butterflies among the floating corpses, all lifeless despite having no discernible wounds.

Something had violently destroyed their very souls, leaving only lifeless corpses behind.

And there, far away...

Did it only look that way, or was something dark rising from the water?

The Guiding Light was pointing directly at that distant speck of darkness.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then gritted his teeth and took a step forward.

As he did, something vast moved in the depths of the still water...

And gazed at him.