1574 Whoever Fights Monsters

Sunny staggered as the gaze of the being hiding beneath the still water of the lake fell on him. A scream almost escaped from his lips, but he gritted his teeth and pushed it down.

'Ah...'

The feeling of being looked upon by the invisible watcher... whatever it was... was unlike anything he had ever experienced. Sunny had been in the presence of powerful people before, and even more powerful Nightmare Creatures. He had been crushed by the suffocating force of their presence, and struggled to move while being pressed down by it.

But the gaze of the being hiding under the silent dark waves was entirely different.

It was not only heavier and more insurmountable, hinting at the terrifying power of the hidden watcher, but also did not feel the same. The force of oppression emanated by mighty beings was usually aimless and directionless, while the chilling gaze... was piercing and penetrating.

It felt as though the mysterious being was not simply looking at Sunny from beneath the mass of dark water, but rather looking through him.

Sunny's body, mind, and his very soul were like an open book in front of the hidden watcher, and they were being read, one page after another.

'G—gods, gods...'

His soul was being witnessed.

And, somehow, Sunny felt that it was more than that.

His soul was being judged.

Paled, he slowly looked around, seeing the floating corpses of the Great Nightmare Creatures in a new light.

Had all these harrowing abominations... failed to pass the judgment?

Just what was this place? Was there something else hidden at the very heart of the nebulous lake, even after all the forbidden knowledge left behind on its shore and in the depths of its outer reaches? Why had Ariel placed it behind the labyrinth of rushing currents and mist, leaving a fearsome guardian behind?

Sunny grimaced, swayed a little... and took a step forward.

Then, another.

'Go on, judge me. I... have nothing to hide...'

He did not know what he was being judged for, but the sincerity of his wish to be free was indisputable. Hopefully, the dreadful being would see its purity, and let him pass.

Feeling as if he was walking to his execution, Sunny walked toward the very heart of the Estuary — the speck of darkness that the Guiding Light was pointing at. He maneuvered around the motionless corpses of the Great Nightmare Creatures, who had all lost their lives in this eerie place, and forced himself to put one foot in front of the other.

One step at a time.

The harrowing gaze followed him for a while, inhuman and indifferent...

Then, the feeling of something vast and ancient watching him suddenly disappeared, leaving him shaken and rattled.

Sunny staggered again, filled with incredible relief, and almost let out a groan.

It seemed that he had passed the judgment.

'What was that thing looking for?'

Who was allowed to approach the heart of the Estuary, and who was not?

Why did the guardian let Sunny pass?

He regained his balance and looked forward with dark resolve burning in his eyes.

'Come on... you are almost there.'

Feeling battered and drained from being looked upon by the invisible, inconceivable guardian of the inner lake, Sunny forced his tired body to continue walking.

He walked and walked, eventually leaving all the floating corpses behind.

Now, there was nothing in front of him except for the still expanse of dark water and the vague shape rising from it in the distance.

...Oh, and one other thing.

A few dozen steps in front of him, a familiar figure was standing on the water, looking at him with no humor in its dark eyes.

It was the Sin of Solace, who had disappeared somewhere just before the chilling gaze fell on Sunny.

Now, the sword wraith was back, standing in Sunny's way with a cold expression on his face.

'I guess it's time, then...'

Sunny grinned darkly and took another step forward. As he did...

He felt something shattering within his soul, and the Spell whispered into his ear, its voice somber:

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

Sunny did not have to look at his runes to know which of his Memories had mysteriously destroyed itself.

It was the Memory that had appeared in his soul without an explanation, and was now gone without an explanation.

The Key of the Estuary.

Why had it been destroyed?

Well, that much was obvious...

It was because whatever door the Mad Prince had wanted to unlock with it was already ajar.

Feeling a dark kind of amusement, Sunny slowly walked to the Sin of Solace and stopped just a step or two away from him.

The loathsome sword wraith looked cold, not at all delighted despite being free of the seal that had constrained him for so long.

However, somehow... he also looked much more sinister than before.

The apparition stared at Sunny with a bit of contempt, a bit of resentment... and a bit of pity.

"Here we are... you fool. Really, how could you not expect that outcome?"

Sunny met his gaze and sighed.

How could he have not expected this to happen?

Of course, he had.

The actions of the Mad Prince had always been bizarre and almost

impossible to understand. The depths of the schemes the vile madman had woven were nothing short of unfathomable, destroying countless lives and reshaping the entire Nightmare to his will.

Sunny had long guessed what drove the Mad Prince... it was his desire to redeem the sin of killing Nephis and bring her back to life.

That said...

Who was to say that his previous self only had one goal? Who was to say that he had been willing to simply cease to exist, thus preventing himself from enjoying the fruits of his labor?

After all, if there was one thing Sunny knew about himself... it was that he was a cockroach.

He was very hard to kill, and even if something did manage to kill him, he had a strange track record of somehow finding a way to come back to life.

So why would the Mad Prince be any different?

Of course, there was a bit of contradiction between what the two of them wanted.

It was because, in order for the Mad Prince to come back to life, Sunny had to disappear. He had to become a vessel to the memories of the vile madman, and lose his sanity to Corruption.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny stared at the Sin of Solace silently.

So... which one of them would get to exist?

Which one of them would manage to outscheme the other?