1575 Free of Sin

Sunny had an inkling that the Mad Prince had not been willing to quietly disappear for a while now. However, it had always been just that — a suspicion, substantiated by nothing except for his knowledge of himself.

Sunny wouldn't have wanted to cease to exist, so why would his Defiled version be any different?

The Mad Prince had wished to be free, and in the process of fulfilling that wish, he caused Neph's death. His soul was consumed by the Defilement, but not entirely so — a small slither of his humanity remained due to the Sin of Solace, who preserved it to torment his host better.

And so, the vile madman came to regret pursuing his wish. He schemed and conspired to bring Nephis back to life and create such a cycle of the Great River where the Nightmare could be conquered by the cohort. He turned his friends into the Plagues, and then betrayed them, arranging for each to be slaughtered.

But was that all that the Mad Prince had wanted?

Apparently, no.

Sunny was a greedy person, and his past self had to have been, too. Therefore... there were at least two more things the Mad Prince had schemed to achieve.

The first one was more or less obvious. He had not only wished to bring Nephis back to life, but to be with her, as well.

Staring at the Sin of Solace, Sunny shook his head in disgust.

'That crazy bastard. Did he really think that Neph would accept a horrid Corrupted maniac like him?'

Well... it was in the name. Despite all his devious cunning, at the end of the day, the Mad Prince was exactly that — entirely and utterly mad. Sunny had no doubt that the lunatic imagined countless ways to bend the future to his will in that perverse head of his.

The Sin of Solace, meanwhile, smiled darkly.

"Oh... I see that you are starting to understand. I am sorry to say this, though — it's already too late for you."

Sunny simply stared at him without saying anything.

Indeed, he was starting to understand.

How the Mad Prince had planned to return, and why was it only happening now.

There was a second thing he must have wanted to achieve, after all.

And that thing... was to reach the heart of the Estuary.

Sunny could not have come to that conclusion before, but after witnessing the inner sanctum of the hidden lake and experiencing the chilling gaze of its guardian, he realized something.

There was indeed one last secret hidden at the very heart of the Estuary... perhaps the most terrible, and the most precious, of them all. And Ariel had arranged for that secret to be protected above all else.

Only those who passed the judgment of the guardian of the lake had the right to learn that secret.

That judgment... appeared to be a very simple one.

Why had the Great Nightmare Creatures that found their way into the Estuary been slain, while Sunny was allowed to pass?

...It was because their souls were Corrupted, while his was not.

Corruption was not allowed to come near the heart of the Estuary, as if Ariel had not wanted for whatever was hidden there to be sullied by its vile touch.

And, therefore... the Mad Prince had not been able to witness the final secret, either.

As the Sin of Solace looked at him mockingly, Sunny smiled.

'Of course... it was so obvious.'

How could the Mad Prince, a Corrupted Titan, infiltrate the heart of the Estuary if no Corrupted creature could?

The answer... was oblivion.

He had to forget the knowledge of the Void that planted the seeds of Corruption into his soul at the start of each cycle, pass the judgment of the lake guardian, and then regain his memories again.

So, the Mad Prince had created the Key of the Estuary — a Memory meant to get him to the innermost sanctum of the Estuary intact. A Memory that placed a seal on the Sin of Solace, thus preventing the sword wraith from sharing the knowledge of the Void and the memories of all previous cycles with Sunny.

Only for that seal to be broken once it served its purpose and got Sunny past the lake guardian.

Thus bringing the Mad Prince back in all his unholy glory.

The Sin of Solace chuckled.

"Ah... don't look so dejected. Whatever anger you feel, I feel more of it. Being stuck with you is already bad enough, you worm. Being stuck with the other guy? Gods. I've endured that for too long already."

He sighed.

"But, well. What's done is done. There is no way to escape the inevitable, now."

Sunny glared at him and outstretched a hand, summoning the jade jian into existence.

The Sin of Solace laughed.

"Oh, wait... I guess you can just destroy me before your soul is corrupted, huh?"

The sword wraith was immune to the flow of the Great River, keeping his memories of all the past cycles. And, since he was nothing but a splintered piece of Sunny's own mind, that knowledge would slowly seep through and contaminate the rest of his mind — like it had happened on Aletheia's Island.

The Sin of Solace could just whisper the secrets of the Void to Sunny directly, but he did not have too. Eventually, that knowledge would infect Sunny's mind simply because it was already there.

However... it would not happen instantly. Just like it had happened on Aletheia's Island, and even earlier with the cycles of the Great River, Sunny had some time before the contamination started in earnest.

If he was to somehow destroy the Sin of Solace during that time, the splintered part of his mind would be eradicated, and the terrible knowledge contained within it would be erased without a trace.

The problem was...

The beautiful jian appeared in Sunny's hand, its blade carved from pristine white jade.

[Perfect Jade] Enchantment Description: "This blade is carved from a piece of sublime jade, and as such is sharp and durable beyond logic and reason."

The Sin of Solace was a Transcendent Memory with an enchantment that drastically enhanced its durability, while Sunny was merely an Ascended. Was he even strong enough to break it?

And if he did break it... would the wraith born from it truly disappear?