1577 Past, Present, and Future

Limping across the dark expanse of still water, illuminated gently by the pure radiance of the Guiding Light, Sunny stared at his battered reflection. A dark grin twisted his lips into a crooked line.

"Look at us... nearing the finish line, and not anywhere near dropping dead."

The situation was quite unfamiliar. Usually, Sunny would have been at the very doorstep of death, or even past its threshold with one foot by now. But he was strangely in one piece. Sure, he had been mauled and mangled by plenty of dreadful Nightmare Creatures on the way to the Estuary —however, his state was nowhere near as rough as the norm in such moments.

Had he been lucky, or had his tenacity finally reached such an unreasonable level that it was simply too hard for anything to truly bring him down without outright killing him?

"Well, in any case... I'm not complaining. Let's finish this, then..."

His reflection did not answer, leaving Sunny in tranquil silence. He was momentarily unnerved by the lack of a mocking retort, but then remembered that the Sin of Solace was gone. His mind was free of the voice that had haunted it for so long with maddening whispers.

It felt... very strange.

'Sort of... peaceful?'

Now that the curse that had plagued him was gone, Sunny realized that he had been under constant pressure without even noticing it. His mental resistance had prevented the insidious whispers from truly driving him mad — but the act of resisting the loss of sanity itself had been putting a burden on his mind.

That burden was no more, filling him with a sense of levity.

However, he was also exhausted, drained, and deeply shaken by the secrets he had learned. It was a strange mixture of emotions.

'One step at a time.'

Sunny continued walking toward the vague shape rising from the water in the distance. As he did, he wondered about himself and the Mad

Prince... about all the versions of himself and the Mad Prince that had reached the Estuary in the previous cycles.

How was it that Sunny — the current him — was the only one who had made it that far?

'I guess it's simple, really.'

It was already indescribably hard to find the entrance to the Estuary within the Source. Beyond that, though...

To get to the heart of the Estuary, one had to possess three things. The first one was a soul that was free of Corruption — made possible by the Estuary Key. That requirement itself demanded that he succumbed to the Defilement, invaded another cycle of the Great River, and spent centuries accumulating power and knowledge.

However, it was also the easiest of the three.

The second requirement was the ability to pass the stone maze that served as the border of the inner lake without falling back into the cycles of the Great River. Sunny did it without much trouble, but that was only because of the Guiding Light and the True Name that Torment had delivered to Cassie. How many cycles had it taken for the duo of conspiring Plagues to learn that True Name?

He did not know. What he did know, however, was that the story of this Nightmare was the story of the gradual accumulation of knowledge. The more cycles the Mad Prince and Torment had survived, the better they had been able to prepare for the last one.

The third requirement was, perhaps, the most dire one, and depended entirely on that accumulation. It was to have no desire to turn back and start a new cycle.

Even now, Sunny could turn back, return to the stone maze, and dive back into the Great River. However, he did not want to, and had no reason to... because the Mad Prince and Torment had already arranged for the Nightmare to end perfectly, with every member of the cohort — and Nephis — surviving its dreadful challenge.

How many attempts had it taken before they learned to manipulate all the events of the cycle in their favor? Too many to count, perhaps. And it was for that reason that Sunny was not tempted to try anew, aiming for a better, and less heartbreaking result.

In short...

Sunny made it that far because he was the inheritor and beneficiary of all the countless past versions of himself that had failed.

It was somewhat poetic, then, that he could only reach the heart of the Estuary by forgetting them all.

And a little bit sad.

...Soon, he could see the dark shape more clearly. As it revealed itself, a strange expression appeared on his face.

Out there in front of him... a mountain of black rock rose from the still water of the hidden lake, rising into the darkness. Its rough slopes were almost vertical, and it had two peaks, one of them broken, one of them as sharp as a spear.

Surrounded by water, the dark mountain looked lonely and forlorn in the empty expanse of the Estuary.

It also exerted a palpable pressure, making Sunny groan and shudder in dread.

'What the hell is this...'

Sunny lingered for a few moments, staring at the peak of the mountain and wondering if he would have to scale it. But then, he noticed a wide vertical crack at the base of the slope.

It looked like an entrance.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny smiled darkly and headed for that entrance. Passing its threshold, he plunged into the darkness dwelling inside the mountain and found himself in a long, winding tunnel.

There was water rushing beneath his feet, flowing to somewhere deep inside, and the walls surrounding him were rough, untouched by any tool.

'Not creepy at all.'

Somehow, Sunny felt... solemn. It was as though the mountain he had entered was a consecrated place — a place more holy than any temple he had ever visited, and therefore more divine.

Perhaps he had only been able to enter it because of the flame of divinity burning in his soul.

But at the same time, the sacral nature of the dark mountain felt strangely mournful.

Frowning, Sunny gripped the Guiding Light and ventured deeper into the tunnel.

He walked for a few moments — or maybe an eternity — before the walls of the tunnel widened, opening into a vast cave.

And as soon as Sunny entered that cave...

He suddenly turned blind.

The radiance of the Guiding Light was swallowed by darkness, and he lost the ability to see through it. What rattled Sunny the most, though, was that it was not the true, elemental darkness that had robbed him of vision.

Instead, he was still surrounded by deep shadows, which were like family to him. It was just that these shadows did not respond to him anymore, as if subjugated by some other, much more powerful and terrifying being.

At least his shadow sense was still with him.

Therefore, he sensed something vast moving in the darkness — in front of him, behind him. All around him.

Slithering like the coils of a gargantuan serpent.

Shivering, Sunny gripped the Guiding Light and lowered it slightly, ready to defend himself...

It was then that a harrowing voice resounded from the darkness, enveloping him like a hiss of the lightless abyss:

"Turn back."

Sunny gasped, feeling an almost overwhelming desire to kneel under the cold authority of that sinister voice.

He swayed, leaning on the Guiding Light for support. A tortured groan escaped from his lips, but in the end, Sunny somehow managed to remain standing.

'Damn it...'

He muttered a stifled curse and gritted his teeth, staring blindly into the darkness.

The shadows did not respond to his calls.

Sunny felt... strangely betrayed by their silence.

The harrowing voice resounded again, making him shudder:

"Leave."

Sunny grimaced.

Then, he sighed, and answered in a dark tone:

"...You can drop the theatrics, you know."

There were a few moments of silence, and then the voice resounded again.

This time, it did not sound like the hiss of the abyss itself. Instead, it was quite human, although still strangely coming from all directions.

The voice laughed.

"Ah... damnation. I really wanted to give a good performance. You are such a killjoy..."

The darkness was suffused by the dying echoes of humorless laughter for a few moments, and then the voice added, its tone incredulous:

"But then again, I can't really blame you. I vaguely remember this conversation, after all. It's a bit weird, to finally find myself on the other side of it."

Sunny winced, a resentful expression appearing on his pale face.

'Curse it. Of course, this had to happen... why the hell wouldn't it?'

He had already dealt with a past version of himself. The Mad Prince was no more.

Now, however...

There was the future version of himself, as well.

The voice — Sunny's own voice — spoke placidly from the darkness:

"When did you figure it out?"