1497 Chain Barrier

The Chain Breaker rose higher, eventually cresting the wall of the floating stronghold and coming to a stop above the ramparts. From there, they could see a bit further into the haze.

Far away to their left, another floating fortress could barely be seen in the dim twilight, just as battered and forlorn as this one. There was one more to their right. All three had been connected by thick chains once, but those had long been torn.

Sunny remained motionless for a moment.

'...It's a barrier to block the Great River.'

There must have been a ring of these fortresses built around Twilight once, with massive chains strung between them both above and beneath the water. That way, the Defiled would have had to break through the chain barrier before reaching the city.

The other choice would have been to dive. much deeper and bypass the fearsome barricade of floating fortresses altogether. But that would have left their backs wide open to retaliation by the garrisons of the vanguard strongholds... in any case, it was easy to see that the Defiled had chosen to assault the chain barrier directly.

The fighting seemed to have been especially harrowing in the vicinity of the fallen fortresses. And beyond them...

Sunny shivered.

On the other side of the breached stronghold, there were so many floating corpses that he could barely see the water. it was to such a degree that one could probably walk from here to Twilight without getting their boots wet once.

Frowning, he placed his hand on the railing.

Before he did, however, Sunny hesitated for a moment and looked at his companions. Mordret...

The Prince of Nothing was their ally in this Nightmare — or at least, he was supposed to be. In truth, it was hard to predict what the devious bastard would do.

In the Second Nightmare, Mordret had slaughtered the entire population of the northern reaches of the Kingdom of Hope, all in pursuit of power. So, he was not someone who was going to have a problem with destroying the remains of the River Civilization to achieve his goals. Nor would he feel burdened by releasing the Defiled Saints into the waking world.

In other words, Mordret could have chosen to ally himself with the Six Plagues if he thought that their method of conquering the Nightmare was better.

However... Sunny was pretty sure that the Plagues needed to either kill or Defile every human in the Tomb of Ariel to win. And, no matter how odious, Mordret was still a human. Unless the Prince of Nothing was ready to surrender his soul to Corruption, his only way out of the Tomb was to destroy the First Seeker.

At least that was what Sunny hoped for... especially because Mordret was the only person who could teach them about Soul Stealer's Flaw, or at least use his knowledge of it to slay his past version.

Still...

Cassie was immune to Mordret's power due to being blind. Neph's Soul Sea was most likely just as dangerous as Sunny's — if Mordret tried to possess her, he would be incinerated in a radiant inferno of white flame. Jet's shattered soul could not be easily possessed, either, due to how unique her Aspect was.

But Effie had no defense against the Prince of Nothing. The anvil amulet forged by Mordret's father to protect people against his son was with Kai — back in the Second Nightmare, the huntress had refused to take it in favor of the charming archer.

Of course. it wasn't a given that Mordret would be able to defeat Effie in a soul battle. But Sunny did not want to risk it.

After hesitating for a moment, he looked at the huntress and said:

"Can you stay and guard the ship?"

She frowned a little, but then nodded and forced out a smile.

"Sure. You guys go and have fun."

With that, she took a step back and leaned on her spear.

Sunny took Neph's hand and pulled her into the shadows. The two of them appeared on the battlements below a moment later, while Jet simply jumped down. Cassie glided down with the help of the Quiet Dancer and landed elegantly among the weathered corpses. All around them were the skeletal remains of the warriors of 'l‘wilight. It was easy to see which had been Awakened once, and which had been mundane humans — the former were covered only by rotten fabric, their Memory armor long gone. The latter were suits of armor crafted from the hides of Nightmare Creatures and sublime steel.

The corpse Sunny and his companions were looking for was nearby, resting against the locking mechanism of one of the siege chains.

They approached the dead man carefully. SoonI Sunny could see the four of them reflected in the polished breastplate of the dead man... a white skull stared at him eerily from above it, the empty pits of its eyes full of darkness.

Sunny had expected to see Mordret hiding in the reflection, but, to his surprise, there were only four figures there — Nephis, Cassie, Jet, and himself.

'Just what is that bastard planning?‘

For a moment, he was even unsure if Mordret had anything to do with this place. Was it all a coincidence?

Then, however...

Suddenly, Sunny realized that he could not look away from his own reflection. He stared at it, feeling strangely drawn to the polished breastplate... as if an invisible force of attraction was pulling him in...

In the next moment, the world seemed to have flipped.

Everything remained the same, but also strangely... inverted. What was to his right was now to his left, while what was to his left was to his right. Sunny was more or less ambidextrous, but he still favored his left hand... now, he weirdly felt his right hand was more responsive.

The corpse in lustrous armor was still there. The sky was painted pale lilac by the light of dawn. 'l'he Chain Breaker hung above him, with only a few branches of the sacred tree visible from this angle.

But... only the flying ship was reflecting in the polished breastplate now. The reflections of the cohort were gone.

A cold chill ran down his spine.

‘I…’

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'...am inside of a reflection.‘

He perceived his companions through shadow sense, making sure that they were still with him. Thankfully, they seemed to be unharmed.

Before Sunny could ascertain the situation, though, a familiar voice resounded from behind him.

It was just as it had been years ago, in the empty darkness of the Sky Below:

"My, oh my. Sunless... ladies... ah, I am so incredibly glad to see that you've been able to make it..."