1500 Perfect Trap

'What?!'

The members of the cohort all stared at Mordret, their expressions grim. Noticing their reaction, he smiled.

"I was rather surprised to learn about the identities of these Six Plagues, but it seems that you are already familiar with them. Good. It will spare me the explanations."

At that moment, Jet, who had been keeping quiet until then, finally spoke:

"Soul Stealer is here, in Twilight?"

Mordret remained silent for a few moments. Eventually, he sighed.

"He is. I've been playing hide and seek with him for... gods, I don't even know how long. Time is a funny concept here in Twilight, really. And let me tell you, there is no worse company than a demented Nightmare Creature version of yourself."

He remained silent for a moment, then added matter-of-factly:

"He's not the only one, either. The Dread Lord is here, too."

Sunny flinched, experienced a visceral reaction to those words.

'Damnation!'

Suddenly, he felt vulnerable and exposed, surrounded by terrible danger. None of them had felt safe while approaching Twilight, but still... the sense of pure dread he felt at the mention of the ruler of Verge was almost palpable.

It was not that Sunny was afraid of the Dread Lord — he knew that the cohort would have to clash with the leader of the Plagues eventually. But facing him already was simply too unexpected, too sudden...

'What the hell is happening?!'

Twilight was supposed to be their last stop before the final battle... not the final battle itself! How could the tyrant of Verge already be here, within reach?

How could they already be in his grasp?

Nephis gripped the hilt of her sword, clearly thinking the same. Mordret, meanwhile, shook his head.

"Oh, please forgive me. I should have mentioned first that you don't have to worry about the Dread Lord. He can't harm us. In fact, Soul Stealer can't harm us either, unless we enter his territory. They are just as trapped as I am. And your friend, Nightingale, is."

Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

"Can you just explain what is going on, damn it?!"

Mordret gave him an amused glance.

"Why, certainly. I was just getting to it... ah, but I've been waiting for this moment for so long. It will be a shame not to enjoy it."

He looked at each of them with a pleasant smile, and then shrugged.

"Where do I start? First... as you might have noticed, there was a terrible battle here, in Twilight, countless years ago. The forces of Defilement... that is what it's called, right?... wanted to destroy the city, while the warriors of Twilight naturally wanted to prevent it from happening."

He sighed theatrically.

"Sadly, they failed. Suffering terrible losses, the abominations broke through the outer barrier and breached the walls of the city. From what I gathered, that was possible because the Defiled Legion was led by the Dread Lord, as well as my own Corrupted self. Mind you, everything I know was observed while exploring the mirrored version of Twilight. I haven't spoken to a soul since entering the Nightmare... so, my information might be wrong or incomplete."

Mordret remained silent for a moment.

"In any case, from the looks of it, the walls were breached, and the Dread Lord entered the city with the remaining Nightmare Creatures. The streets of Twilight are a battlefield... countless humans desperately fighting against the abominations and their terrible master, while some seem to be turning into abominations themselves. It's a proper mess."

There was something strange about what he had said. Nephis tilted her head a little.

"...Are a battlefield? Not were a battlefield?"

The Prince of Nothing nodded with a dark smile.

"Indeed. In the midst of this titanic battle, you see... someone activated the enchantment array of the city. A truly powerful sorcery was awakened, its influence swallowing all of Twilight..."

Sunny groaned inwardly.

'Wind Flower did tell me about it, didn't she? That the defensive array of Twilight was similar to the vast enchantment of Aletheia's Island. Both even used a fragment of the Estuary as a core.'

He sighed.

"Don't tell me. Does the same day keep repeating itself in Twilight?'

Mordret gave him a strange look.

"What? No... what gave you such an odd idea? That would be quite bizarre."

'Huh?'

Sunny stared back at him, confused.

"Then what did the activation of the defensive array do?"

The Prince of Nothing lingered for a moment, then smiled.

"Well... simply put... it froze time."

The members of the cohort stared at him incredulously.

"Froze... time?"

Effie's voice sounded a bit exasperated, as if she was tired of time behaving in all the wrong ways here, on the Great River.

And who could blame her? Sunny felt the same. Hearing her tone, Mordret smiled.

"Ah... it seems like you have experienced more than your fair share of strangeness here in the Tomb of Ariel. But, answering your question —yes, it froze time. The moment the defensive array was activated, time inside Twilight completely stopped. And so, the battle raging on its streets stopped, as well."

He shook his head.

"The citizens and warriors of Twilight are standing there like statues, frozen in strange poses. The Nightmare Creatures are the same. Even the Dread Lord, despite all his power and authority, was caught in the trap. Now, he's more of a monument to the ruler of Verge, as opposed to an actual tyrant."

Mordret's face grew somber.

"Of course, none of them are truly dead. Just... caught between two moments, forever. If one day the defensive array is deactivated, the battle will resume, and the Dread Lord will awaken. Don't think that you can kill him while he's vulnerable, too — the moment you step inside Twilight, the time will stop for you, as well. Even inanimate objects will be frozen in time. It's a perfect trap."

He chuckled.

"If a little desperate. Why would the people of Twilight activate the array before evacuating the city? I don't know... what I do know, though, is that the Spell played a cruel prank on me. And Nightingale."

Sunny had yet to recover from the news that the Dread Lord, someone who was supposed to be their ultimate enemy in this Nightmare, turned out to have already been removed from the board... by someone.

He did not need to guess the identity of that someone, really. Who could have manipulated the events of the siege of Twilight? It had to have been the Mad Prince... himself... who had stabbed his master in the back.

And while Sunny was reeling from the news, the meaning of the last words spoken by Mordret finally reached his mind.

His eyes narrowed.

'Wait...'

Nephis was the first one to speak:

"What do you mean? What did the Spell do?"

Mordret looked at them with a dark expression.

"Isn't it obvious? The roles it assigned to me and Nightingale were warriors of Twilight. Therefore... the moment we entered the Nightmare, we were already caught in frozen time. Stuck in an inescapable trap."

He chuckled wryly.

"My physical body is also there, standing like a statue in the middle of a frozen battle. So is Nightingale's. It's just that my reflection had escaped into the mirror realm... but for him, not a single moment has passed since the start of the Nightmare. He doesn't even know what fate has befallen him."

The Prince of Nothing shook his head with resentment.

"Oh, and there's another creature in Twilight who is in a similar situation to mine. Soul Stealer... that monster. While my realm is modest in size, his encompasses all reflections in the city. I don't know where his physical body is hidden, but his reflection is prowling the mirrored Twilight. And it is dreadful enough to give me fright."

He grew silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"There. I think I explained the important parts. I'm sure you have questions..."

Nephis gave him a long look, then nodded.

"I have a question. If I understood it correctly... are you trying to say..."

White sparks ignited in her eyes.

"That there is an army of Awakened warriors, countless thousands of them, inside Twilight? All waiting for the defensive array to be deactivated, so that they could resume the battle against the Defilement?"