1504 Frozen City

The walls of Twilight were tall and imposing, built from stone and reinforced with the scales of powerful Nightmare Creatures. In the dim twilight of the early dawn, they looked like towering black cliffs. However, now, these cliffs were shattered and ruined. Many sections of the wall had collapsed, others had been breached or severely damaged. The corpses of dead abominations piled high, reaching the ramparts in several places.

The siege of Twilight had truly been terrible.

But what caught Sunny's attention the most was not the devastated state of the city wall, but the eerie nature of the devastation.

Time was indeed frozen in 'l‘wilight.

Shards of broken stone hung in the air, unmoving. Rivers of blood were like abstract sculptures carved from ruby. Dancing flames had turned into motionless, searing blossoms.

It was as though some deity had frozen the world in the middle of a fierce battle.

"We will have to be more careful now."

Mordret's voice was strangely somber. His usual amused smile was nowhere to be seen — instead, the Prince of Nothing seemed full of grim apprehension. Looking at the breached walls of Twilight, he sighed.

"Soul Stealer is most likely inside the city. We will move stealthily through the backstreets and reach the palace. Once we are there... the Memory of yours better work, Sunless." Sunny suppressed the desire to grimace.

If even that bastard was nervous... the rest of them had to be ready for anything.

Without having to say much, they entered the city through one of the breaches in its wall. Finally, Twilight lay in front of them in all its glory.

It was entirely unlike the other cities Sunny had seen in the Dream Realm. There were a few similarities, of course — like the extensive use of materials scavenged from the Nightmare Creatures in construction. for example. But the architectural style of the Twilight Sea was very unique. It was both robust and aery, paying more attention to practically than aesthetics, but at the same time expressing the latter in a myriad of subtle ways.

Fitting for a culture that had come from a world of water and frequent storms.

Sunny did not pay a lot of attention to how the city looked, however, taken by what was happening on its streets.

There, countless humans were frozen in the midst of a terrible battle against vile Nightmare Creatures. Hundreds of thousands... no, millions of them.

Some had been frozen in the middle of swinging a sword...

Some had been frozen in the middle of being torn apart by the swarming abominations. The gruesome sight of the frozen battle was both strange and disturbing. But what shaken Sunny the most was not the eeriness of the motionless slaughter, but the faces of the people of Twilight.

Not a single one of them seemed frightened or desperate. Even those who were dying maintained calm expressions, their eyes full of cold resolve. They (lid not show anger or fury, either — only chillingly dark killing intent.

'Just what kind of army did the Serpent King create? '

Sure, humans from the Twilight Sea had come to the Tomb of Ariel after witnessing the destruction of their world, which had to have changed them. But they were still people. Sunny had spent plenty of time with seasoned soldiers, and none of them was immune to human emotions.

Not all of these people were soldiers, either. Some were Awakened, while most were mundane. Some were old, while some were young. And yet, he did not see a single person trying to flee or cowering in fear.

'Strange...‘

Sunny suddenly felt uneasy about their chances of becoming allies with these alien people. However, he did not have time to ponder these matters — Mordret was already walking ahead, carefully maneuvering between the frozen warriors.

They entered a narrow street and stealthily advanced toward the center of the city.

As they did, Sunny found himself near their guide. He hesitated for a while, then asked quietly:

"You've been here for a long time. Don't these people seem a bit strange?"

The Prince of Nothing glanced at him with surprise.

"How so?"

Sunny frowned.

"They are too stalwart, I guess."

Mordret thought for a few moments and shrugged.

"I'm not sure. All people seem a bit strange to me."

'Figures.‘

Sunny scoffed internally. But since he was already talking to Mordret, he decided to ask another question:

"You must have been really surprised to learn that there's another you walking around, huh? I know I was. It's a really weird feeling."

The Prince of Nothing raised an eyebrow, then grinned.

"Is it weird? Ah, it must be. If you say so."

Sunny stared at him impassively.

'What a curious answer.‘

He did not speak after that, preferring to keep quiet. Who knew how good Soul Stealer's hearing was?

Eventually, they crossed the outskirts of the city and entered its middle part. The battle seemed much more intense here, as if all participants — both the Nightmare Creatures and the humans — were rushing toward the heart of Twilight.

Strangely enough, there were not that many abominations here. Sure, each of them was immensely powerful, but the defenders of the city still seemed to have an upper hand. The forces of the Defilement were being suppressed by them.

It made sense. A normal battle would progress in a similar fashion — the invaders would have to fight their way into the city, so their forces would gradually diminish the further away one traveled from the walls.

There was just one odd detail. Somehow, it seemed that the epicenter of the battle was not behind them, at the outskirts of the city, but instead ahead of them, near the palace of the Serpent King.

Sunny extended his shadow sense outward and frowned, feeling the row of buildings coming to an end not too far away. And indeed, they soon reached a wide open space. Mordret fingered just before entering the square, seemingly tense.

Nephis studied the wide square, as well, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword.

"Is there another way?"

The Prime of Nothing slowly shook his head.

"Not really. The whole city is built like a fortress. The inner districts are separated from the rest, so we won't be able to reach them without exposing ourselves at least a little. Still... as you can see, the skirmish happening on this square is especially fierce. With so many humans and abominations frozen on it, we can at least hide among them."

She frowned.

"Let's go, then."

They entered the square and walked between the motionless warriors. The battle was indeed especially furious in this area — there were so many people and Nightmare Creatures here that their bodies formed a bizarre labyrinth. Sometimes, Sunny found it hard to squeeze between their frozen figures.

Crouching, he crawled beneath a sword that was being plunged into the neck of a repulsive abomination. Standing up, he had to twist his body to avoid touching a frozen fountain of ruby blood. Then, he came face-to-face with a warrior whose arm was being severed by the fangs of a towering Nightmare Creature.

Sunny shivered.

The humans and the abominations were not statues or life—like mannequins. They were entirely real. He could see every hair, every head of sweat, every drop of blood on the fangs of the frenzied monsters that surrounded him. All of them were simply frozen in time... and although Sunny knew that it could not happen, he found it hard not to feel as if these warriors would start moving any moment now.

The swords would come down, the frozen blood would flow, and the hungry maws would snap shut, turning the silent square into an inescapable hell of bloodshed and violence.

'Just keep moving.‘

He forced himself to ignore the ominous feeling and advanced forward, step by step. Very soon, however, Sunny collided with Mordret‘s back. The Prince of Nothing had chosen that moment to stop walking, for some reason.

"What's the matter?"

Annoyed, Sunny looked up... and frozeI noticing how grim Mordret was.

His mirror—like eyes were reflecting the frozen world, full of blood and darkness. A moment later, the Prince of Nothing looked back at them and smiled.

Then, he said in a perfectly calm tone:

"Stay... absolutely... still.”