1508 Unleashed

"Sunny? What is it?"

Kai must have read something from his expression. But Sunny did not know how to answer — he was suddenly in a state of mild panic, feeling like there had been a mistake in their plan. They must have misunderstood the situation, somehow.

But what was there to misunderstand? Twilight was besieged by the forces of the Defilement. In the middle of the battle, the Mad Prince had activated the defensive array, trapping Soul Stealer and the Dread Lord in frozen time... and, therefore, escaping from the clutches of his master.

The madman had also manipulated the events of this cycle to make sure that Sunny arrived at Twilight wearing the Serpent King's crown. He must have wanted the battle to resume... so that his future self, free of being enslaved to the Dread Lord, could turn its tide and destroy the tyrant of Verge.

...Right?

"I... don't know. Something is wrong."

Sunny gritted his teeth and pulled Kai to follow him, aiming to leave the throne room as soon as possible. They had to traverse the battlefield and find the other members of the cohort, first. Together, they would stand a much better chance of surviving the clash with the Defiled legion.

But before he could take another step, the palace shuddered, throwing both of them to the ground. There was a deafening rumble behind them, and the great hall was suddenly much brighter than it had been before.

A whole section of the dome shattered and collapsed, revealing the beautiful twilight sky above...

And the giant head of the harrowing dragon that had broken it.

Enormous chunks of stone fell down, burying the black throne beneath debris. Luckily, Sunny and Kai had already distanced themselves from the dais — otherwise, they would have been buried with it.

'Damnation...'

The Dread Lord's head passed through the breach, hovering in the air on his long neck. His eyes shone with starlight, full of sinister madness and malevolence. Then, the harrowing dragon pushed his enormous body inside, causing more of the dome to collapse.

A moment later, he landed in the throne room with a loud thud, and the palace shook once more.

...Strangely enough, though, it did not look as if the Dread Lord was chasing them. Instead, it almost looked as if he was escaping something.

Towering above Sunny and Kai, the dragon gazed at them and opened its maw, his porcelain fangs glistening in the dim twilight.

Sunny cursed inwardly and called upon his Shadows, at the same time summoning the Sin of Solace.

However, before he could...

A thunderous voice suddenly resounded in his mind, causing him enormous pain.

[STOP.]

And, following the Dread Lord's command...

Sunny halted, frozen in place. It was as if the dragon's words were the law, and he was unable to disobey.

'What... but, but the Shadow Bond...'

By his side, Kai was frozen still, as well. It was only then that Sunny realized that the Dread Lord had not used the Shadow Bond against him.

It was simply the authority of his voice. It was Kai's Ascended Ability, amplified and made more terrible by the dragon's Corrupted Rank.

Kai's power had always been more than a little bit sinister. The charming archer was a good and honest person by nature, so he only ever used it to inspire his allies and influence Nightmare Creatures. However, in the hands of someone less decent, it had the potential to produce truly terrifying results.

Being able to make anyone do anything — at least those of lesser Ranks than you — was very much like wielding absolute power over them. And power, as everyone knew, corrupted.

Sunny had always known that his friend's Aspect had a scary side to it. That was why he was not too surprised to learn that it was the gentle and caring Kai who had become the dreadful lord of Verge... with Kai's upright character destroyed by the curse of the Defilement, the insidious side of his Aspect would have had nothing to keep it in check anymore.

However, knowing and experiencing it himself were two different things.

'Curse it!'

Paralyzed by the dreadful command, Sunny kneeled in front of the towering dragon.

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Somewhere else, on the devastated streets of Twilight, Nephis was released from the inescapable trap of frozen time. Disoriented, she fell and rolled, jumping to her feet a moment later.

All around her, the time shackles binding the warriors of Twilight were slowly coming undone. Their cold eyes were regaining the spark of life. Their chests were beginning to rise and fall as they breathed for the first time in countless years. Their weapons glistened as they reflected the light of dawn.

Sunny was gone. Considering that the defensive array had been deactivated, he must have reached the palace already. Mordret of Valor was nowhere to be seen — he had returned to his physical body, which was lost somewhere in Twilight. Cassie, Effie, and Soul Reaper Jet had to be somewhere nearby, but she couldn't see them.

'We... we can still win this battle.'

Although the cohort had been separated when escaping Soul Stealer's mirror realm, their primary goal was achieved. Time had been unfrozen, and the warriors of Twilight were released.

Now, they just had to regroup, join forces with the defenders of the city, and overcome the invading legion of abominations. The battle would not be easy... it would be cruel and harrowing. Maybe even lethal.

But when had it ever been different?

Nephis took a step forward and hesitated for a moment, looking at the warriors around her.

Suddenly, she had an ominous premonition. Something felt wrong about the scene...

'I need to convince them.'

She was a stranger to these people. They did not know that countless years had passed since the start of the battle... that their king was dead, and that their world had long been destroyed. That challengers from an alien realm had entered the Nightmare, hoping to prevail where their predecessors failed.

But still, the Spell had a way of simplifying things. In its terrible world, there were humans, and there were Nightmare Creatures. Nephis might have been from a different world, but she was also a human... therefore, she was a natural ally simply by virtue of not being a Nightmare Creature.

Looking at the defenders of the city, Nephis pushed down the familiar, debilitating discomfort of talking to strangers and said, her voice bright and clear:

"Warriors of Twilight! I am..."

And then, something odd happened, forcing her to fall silent and grip the hilt of her sword.

...Countless people crowding the street all turned to look at her.

They did so with perfect synchronicity, their hollow eyes devoid of any emotion. Their eerie faces were calm and motionless. None of them said anything, simply staring at her in ominous silence.

Seeing herself reflecting in thousands of emotionless eyes, Nephis realized that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

She might have been a human... but these people were not. Not anymore. A harrowing realization struck her like a bolt of lightning.

'They are... they are...'

They were Soul Stealer.

All of them.