1509 Stolen Bodies

The frozen battle they had witnessed was not a battle between the Defiled legion of Verge and the defenders of Twilight.

Instead, it was a battle between the Dread Lord and Soul Stealer.

The two Defiled Saints must have clashed as soon as the last true bastion of humanity in the Tomb of Ariel had fallen. Perhaps it was because they had needed each other's power before that. Perhaps it was because Soul Stealer had finally become capable of resisting the authority of the Dread Lord after devouring the souls and stealing the bodies of millions of humans in Twilight.

'Can it be his Transformation Ability?'

To split his soul into countless shards, all beholden to one sinister will. That would be a terrifying power in the hands of someone as devious as the forsaken Prince of War. He had already been insidiously dangerous due to his ability to slither into human souls and wear their bodies like costumes... what if Mordret of Valor could possess not one, but several stolen bodies at the same time?

Or millions of them, after becoming the Soul Stealer?

...Surrounded from all sides, with countless hollow eyes looking at her with an eerie lack of human emotions, Nephis took an involuntary step back. However, there were countless taken warriors standing behind her, as well.

There was nowhere to retreat. No path to salvation.

Except for the impossible one she could try and cut for herself.

She gritted her teeth.

'At least... Sunny... is not here.'

As numerous humans moved toward her, Nephis looked at them with cold resentment and unsheathed her sword.

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Not too far away, Effie, Jet, and Cassie found themselves inside a half-collapsed building. The blind girl was the first one to regain her senses, catching the tall huntress before she could fall.

Pieces of rubble rolled on the cracked floor, the noise of their fall sounding thunderous in the eerie silence of the frozen city.

Although, by then, the city was not frozen anymore.

Out there, all around them, Twilight was beginning to stir.

Jet summoned her scythe, looking over the collapsed wall of the building. Beyond the rubble, on a narrow street, the figures of the stalwart defenders of Twilight were slowly coming back to life. There were no Nightmare Creatures nearby, only people.

But her expression was troubled, for some reason.

"...They're moving."

Effie regained her balance and followed Soul Reaper's gaze. A small smile appeared on her lips.

"Doofus must have reached the throne room, then."

She looked at the human figures outside.

"Those guys seem a bit weird though, huh? I guess it's only natural for people from a different world. Well, at least they're tough. Soft people don't survive... the Spell..."

Her voice gradually faded away, replaced by a tense silence for a moment.

"Why... are they staring at us like that?"

Before Effie could finish the sentence, a delicate hand appeared in front of her eyes, covering them. Cassie was standing on tiptoes, preventing her from looking at the warriors of Twilight.

Jet was slowly backing away.

Before the huntress could react, Cassie spoke in a grave and urgent tone:

"Effie. Take Soul Reaper and yourself into the locket. Now!"

Effie hesitated for a moment, but did not ask any questions. A moment later, her figure disappeared. So did Jet's. They were gone, safely transported to the idyllic meadow.

All that remained was an iron locket on a black cord, which fell to the ground. Before it touched the cracked floor, however, the cord was caught on the blade of a slender rapier.

Raising the Quiet Dancer, Cassie caught the locket and cautiously put it around her neck. Then, she turned to face the approaching figures.

Behind the silver half-mask, her beautiful blue eyes were cold and somber.

The tip of her rapier shook slightly, then moved, pointing at the emotionless humans.

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Somewhere else, Mordret fell to the ground and gasped when his bloody stump hit the rubble. A pained groan escaped from his lips, then a stifled chuckle. Looking up, he observed the ruined street.

All around him, humans and Nightmare Creature were being slowly released from the shackles of frozen time. Their weapons moved, their maws opened hungrily.

Blood flowed onto the cold stones once more.

Mordret remained motionless for a moment, looking upon the world through countless reflections.

Then, his eyes widened slightly.

"So that's how it is..."

An amused smile twisted his cracked lips.

Leaning on his sword, Mordret struggled to stand up and grinned when he felt countless eyes — and yet, only a single gaze — landing on him.

"Ah, how unfortunate."

All his Reflections had been destroyed. He only had a single soul core left, reducing his power to that of a mere Beast. His own Ascended body was missing a hand, while his best spare was nothing more than an Awakened squire with a modestly useless Aspect.

Truly, the circumstances couldn't have been worse.

Well... at least things wouldn't be boring. He had spent so many months... or was it years, already?... hiding from his Defiled self in complete solitude. Any kind of excitement was better than that dull existence, no matter how fatal it would turn out to be.

"Such wonderful odds. I feel refreshed!"

Smiling, he raised his sword and pointed it at the nearest warrior.

Then, his smile disappeared, replaced by an expression of cold contempt. His mirror-like eyes calmly reflected countless approaching figures, full of dark killing intent.

"I haven't had the pleasure of putting down repugnant things like you in a long, long time. Come, if you dare... let's see which one of us will be the last one standing."

Mordret took a step forward, as well.

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Back in the Serpent King's palace, Sunny was kneeling on the marble floor, paralyzed by the dragon's command. The Dread Lord towered above him and Kai, full of sinister malevolence.

Looking at the terrifying porcelain fangs of the Defiled Saint, Sunny felt a dark sense of foreboding.

'Curse it...'

Where were the warriors of Twilight? Why had they not stalled the damned Herald of the Estuary at all?

The battle had not even properly started, and he was already in such a desperate situation. Sunny could almost feel the shadow of death pulling him into its cold embrace.

He looked at the Dread Lord bitterly.

'At least Nephis is not here.'

Sunny was in a desperate situation... but not a hopeless situation, yet. There were still things he could do to try and get himself and Kai out of this predicament alive.

He just had to gamble with their lives and hope for the best.

Before he could, though...

A human figure suddenly appeared at the edge of the broken dome of the palace. And then another, and another.

The warriors of Twilight had finally caught up with the Dread Lord.