1512 Chaos and Mayhem

Somewhere far away, Mordret was in a similar situation. Of course, he did not possess the physical strength, speed, and resilience of Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan... however, he did possess his own arsenal of tricks.

'I wonder...'

He had escaped into a section of the city where the ground had been broken by some titanic blow. Shallow water covered the cracked cobblestones, with ruined buildings rising from it like islands. The twilight sky reflected in the water, turning it into a beautiful painting of soft colors.

Mordret was using the reflections to stay ahead of his pursuers.

Countless human figures were surrounding him, their weapons hungry for his blood.

'If I try to possess one of them, what would happen?'

Usually, he would have to bet his life against the soul of his victim, armed only with their reflected power. But these warriors had no souls — they had long been destroyed by Soul Stealer... that impostor. So, would Mordret have to battle against the soul of the Defiled Saint? Or the reflection of the dead victim's soul? Whose power would he be able to reflect?

He was both curious and reluctant to find out.

'Not just yet, at least.'

Dodging a swift sword, Mordret pierced the attacker's throat, dodged another strike, and jumped back. A subtle frown appeared on his face.

'Inconvenient...'

The worst part about slaughtering these hollow vessels was that they were just that — vessels. There were no souls inside the bodies of the taken warriors, and so, he was not growing stronger from killing them. Otherwise, Mordret would have been able to slowly restore his Monster Core... maybe even the Demon Core, if he was diligent and lucky.

With those, he could create a new Reflection or two. Without them, things were proving difficult.

He would have preferred slaughtering actual people, instead.

'What was it that Sunless likes to say?'

He emotionlessly cut down a young woman wearing an archaic garment and sighed.

'Damnation?'

The ring of enemies surrounding him was growing tighter. He couldn't do much against them with one hand... all Mordret could do was flee. Stepping into the reflected sky, he appeared a few hundred meters away, in the middle of a furious clash between the vessels of Soul Stealer and a swarm of Nightmare Creatures that were still loyal to the Dread Lord.

'So, the impostor has a limit, too...'

Why hadn't Soul Stealer taken these abominations, as well?

Mordret smiled as he finished off a lumbering monstrosity. Finally, he felt his soul growing stronger.

Was it because destroying the souls of those already taken by the Defilement was harder? No, it wouldn't be... Mordret had slain plenty of Nightmare Creatures that way himself. So, it had to be because it was easier to destroy the souls of those who were not Defiled.

Why?

He lingered suddenly.

'Don't tell me...'

Was it because those following the Path of Ascension could be infected by the Defilement during the soul battle, all but dooming them to lose?

Suddenly, he lost all curiosity about facing Soul Stealer. Becoming Defiled? Mordret wanted none of that. Because it ran contrary to his goals, of course, but mostly because the impostor... was rather pathetic.

Sure, Soul Stealer was mighty. Sure, he had reached the level of power that Mordret struggled to fathom. However, he was also a bit brainless.

None of the warriors Mordret had killed showed a tenth of his skill with the sword. Gone were his cunning, his foresight, his resolve... and those were much more valuable than control over a million clumsy flesh puppets.

It seemed that Corruption — or perhaps splitting his soul between countless beings, both humans and abominations alike — had rotted Soul Stealer's mind, turning him into a madman. And not even a brilliant madman, at that, just a dull monster.

Mordret would have loved to continue pondering the undeniable inferiority of his monstrous twin, but at that moment, his sword failed to penetrate the carapace of another Nightmare Creature. He had killed a few already, using the rest to stall the Soul Stealer's vessels, but this one had turned out to be more powerful than he thought.

'Ah...'

As a sharp claw tore his chest open, Mordret grimaced and thrust his hand into the water. Then, he pulled a human body out of it — that of an Awakened warrior wearing the colors of Clan Valor.

The next moment, Mordret's eyes grew empty, while the warrior's eyes ignited with sinister intelligence. A moment after that, Mordret's own body plunged into the shallow water, disappearing from sight.

Wearing the familiar body of Squire Warren, and wielding his Aspect, he dove under the abomination's body and cut open its unprotected belly.

'A few more... a few dozen more... and I'll become a Monster again.'

Mordret dashed away, escaping before the dying Nightmare Creature crushed him with its weight. It was okay if Warren's body was destroyed — he had plenty more to choose from, some of which he had hidden from Changing Star and her cohort. He could take the bodies of these abominations, as well...

But what was the point?

As Mordret continued to coldly kill the Defiled, his expression grew dim. So what if he killed them? So what if he regained a few soul cores?

The situation was still... inescapable. For once, he saw no way to survive, let alone win. Even his usual path of escape was cut off, since Soul Stealer was perfectly capable of haunting the reflections, as well.

'Are we all going to die here, in this godforsaken city?'

Wasn't it a bit too ironic? Poetic, even. To die by his own hand...

One thing kept Mordret's spirit up, though. It was that girl, Cassia... Song of the Fallen.

She might have had others fooled, but he knew that the blind witch was

not as simple as she looked. Someone like her had to have something planned, without a doubt... she wouldn't have led her companions here otherwise.

But then again, Soul Stealer had gone through the same ritual as Mordret. Neither of them was easy to perceive through divination... how else would that monster have escaped Torment's gaze and rebelled against the Dread Lord?

'Ah... I don't know.'

Mordret pushed an old man in weathered leather armor into the maw of a hideous Nightmare Creature, then pierced the creature's eye while it was busy devouring the poor fool.

His expression was somber.

'At this point, we'll need a miracle to pull through.'

But when had the world been generous with miracles? If something truly astonishing happened... it was always a curse, instead.

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Some distance away, Cassie had fled toward the breached walls of Twilight. Here, there were more Nightmare Creatures fighting against the vessels of Soul Stealer, and therefore, more mayhem and chaos.

Using that chaos, Cassie was still struggling to keep herself alive. Blood was pouring from a deep wound on her neck. Pressing her hand against it, she moved through the terrible jumble of human and monstrous bodies, somehow avoiding all the swords, claws, and fangs.

Sometimes, she was only a split second away from death, but each time, that split second was somehow enough to save her.

Her face was pale and bleak.

An iron locket rested on her chest, wet with blood.

'How much time do I have left?'

She didn't know exactly.

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Far away, the Serpent King's palace shuddered, coming undone. There, in the ruins of the throne room...

Sunny coiled his giant serpentine body around the Dread Lord, trying to crush his bones. His fangs were scratching the impenetrable midnight scales, leaving deep grooves on them.

'Die! Die, you worm!'

Losing all reason, he could only think about tearing the odious dragon apart.

...However, killing a Defiled Saint was not an easy task.