1517 Supernova

On the crumbling streets of Twilight, a grotesque Nightmare Creature was mauling another with its fangs, while a rain of swords and spears fell on its tough hide. Each strike caused streams of fetid blood to pour out of ghastly wounds, but the abominations paid it no attention.

'Ah... it hurts.'

Mordret, who had taken the body of the Nightmare Creature, was not having a great time. Not only was he being cut and mangled by the vessels of the impostor, but it was also getting hard to breathe. The air was full of smoke, and the buildings around him had caught fire, at some point.

But he was so close...

Finally, the abominations he had been brutalizing shuddered and died. An ethereal stream of power flowed into his soul, and he fled into the reflections, escaping the cruel blades of the hollow vessels.

Appearing a few hundred meters away from the pursuing mob, he left the dying body of the battered Nightmare Creature and returned to his own. Before too long, a familiar pain tore apart his soul, forcing Mordret to groan.

'Why... does it have... to be so unpleasant?'

A new core was being born in the depths of his soul. He was becoming a Monster once again.

'This will give me some breathing room.'

The human flood was already surrounding him, seemingly endless. Mordret had only a few seconds of reprieve before the puppets of Soul Stealer would assault him again.

His perception spread far and wide, jumping between countless reflections to observe the world.

He saw Song of the Fallen, the blind witch.

He also saw a giant made of shadows wield a jade sword against a harrowing dragon... Sunless, the madman, was fighting against the Dread Lord.

Nightingale was there, as well, kneeling near a puddle of water.

At that moment, Mordret's eyes glistened, and a sinister thought entered his mind.

'Can I?'

He hesitated for a moment, unsure. But then, a dark smile twisted his lips.

'Well, even if I fail, it will at least be entertaining.'

Mordret moved, contemplating how much essence he had left. Reaching the distant fortress would be a challenge...

But then, he was distracted from these calculations.

That was because he saw something else.

Turning toward the heart of the city, Mordret froze for a moment.

His eyes widened slightly.

\*\*\*

Cassie leaned against a broken wall, clutching her mangled neck. Her armor was slick with blood, and she felt weak. Her beautiful face was pale and tired.

"Go."

The Echo of the slain Sybil floated away, the hem of her red dress hovering above the cobblestones. She was going to buy her master some time to escape, and then drown in the flood of hollow-eyed warriors.

Sighing, Cassie pushed herself off the wall and continued to flee. She dodged and evaded the Nightmare Creatures that lunged at her from the ruins, not bothering to retaliate. There was no time for it.

The lives of Effie and Jet were hanging in a fragile balance... they were literally hanging from her neck, hidden in an iron locket. That locket pressed her down with the weight of a mountain.

She couldn't allow herself to make mistakes.

'I must escape.'

Making another turn, she came to a halt in front of a devastated space.

Behind her was the tide of pursuing warriors, all staring at her with those eerie empty eyes of theirs.

In front of her... were the broken gates of Twilight. Beyond them, there was nothing but still water.

There was nowhere else to run.

Cassie let out a quiet sigh.

Turning around, she lowered her bloodied hand and unsheathed the Quiet Dancer. The slender rapier glistened in the light of dawn, pointing at the approaching puppets of Soul Stealer.

She gritted her teeth.

"Come, then."

'It's time.'

\*\*\*

...In the heart of Twilight, Nephis finally reached the Serpent King's palace.

The palace was no more. It had collapsed, at some point, turning into a vast ruin. Blood flowed between the shattered stones.

The Dread Lord was not here. Sunny was nowhere to be seen, either. She was late.

A heavy sigh escaped from her lips.

Behind Nephis, Twilight was wreathed in white flames. In front of her, a dozen warriors stood motionlessly, surrounding a monstrous figure in a tattered vermilion cloak.

If not for his mirror-like eyes, she would not have recognized Mordret of Valor... Soul Stealer. His original body.

Nephis stared at the monster silently, an incandescent void shining through her eyes.

Then, she took a step forward.

Her armor had long crumbled. Her white tunic was torn and cut, revealing the soft radiance of her skin. Even her sword was covered by a net of cracks, ready to shatter into a whirlwind of sparks.

She was tired.

"Found you."

Nephis walked toward Soul Stealer, and the figures surrounding him moved to meet her. At the same time, thousands upon thousands of

human vessels were pouring from the burning streets, surrounding her. There was no end to them.

She had killed so many... but no matter how many she killed, the flood of bodies never ceased. It only grew.

The first figure reached her, summoning a long spear.

Nephis raised her sword and met its strike. The second figure was already lunging from the side... the third, the fourth... she tried to block, evade, and deflect them all.

A few moments later, her sword broke.

Even then, Nephis continued to move forward. Step after step, wound after wound, she slowly, torturously made her way toward Soul Stealer.

She almost made it.

There were only a few meters left between her and the monstrous creature now... but those several meters were like an insurmountable abyss.

Pushed down, Nephis fell to her knees. Seven spears were piercing her radiant body, nailing it to the ground. She couldn't heal these wounds until the spears were gone, but those holding them had no intention of retrieving their weapons.

Impaled on them and held down, Nephis couldn't move.

Sensing a movement ahead, she raised her head and looked at the approaching monster. Her radiant image was reflected in his mirror-like eyes.

Soul Stealer stopped a couple steps away, looking down at her with an empty gaze. His pale lips twisted into a strange smile.

"Sis... ter..."

His inhuman voice sounded like shards of broken glass. Nephis looked down.

The radiance suffusing her skin dimmed a little. A tormented sigh escaped from her lips.

Kneeling... just like she had at the end of the Second Nightmare... Nephis said:

"I came into this world... as a sharp blade..."

She raised her head slightly and looked at the monstrous creature with a tired gaze.

"But with every step I took, my edge was dulled."

Her face slowly became impassive, devoid of all emotion. Her voice was like a whisper.

"I've made compromises, learned how to act reasonably, and forced myself to move with restraint."

Nephis took a deep breath and remained silent for a moment.

When she spoke again, her voice had grown steady and loud. A hint of an indescribable emotion appeared in her radiant eyes.

Glaring at the monstrous creature, she said:

"...I am tired of compromises. I am tired of being reasonable. I am tired of being restrained."

Nephis looked into the eyes of Soul Stealer, furious flames igniting in the depths of her own.

"I... am Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan."

Her gaze was suddenly full of cold contempt. Her even tone trembled with incinerating passion.

"Who dares to stop me?"

And when she spoke those words, the soft radiance suffusing her skin exploded with brilliant light.

A hurricane wind rose, stirring the fire devouring the streets of Twilight. The seven spears impaling Nephis to the ground caught aflame, melting in its scorching white heat.

Although it seemed impossible, the blinding light emanating from her incandescent figure grew even more intense, unbearable to look at.

If Sunny was there to see Nephis, he would have witnessed her six radiant soul cores swelling with furious light.

He would have also seen one of them becoming covered by a net of fiery cracks.

...Soul Stealer moved, reaching forward, but he was too late.

In the next moment, all the flames burning across the ruins of Twilight were suddenly absorbed by the incandescent figure kneeling in front of him.

For a split second, the world was still and silent. There was a whisper.

And then, everything dissolved in white radiance.