1519 Reverse Scale

The floor of the floating fortress was tilted, and Sunny could hear the sound of water rushing into the breaches. His sight was obstructed by the cloud of dust, so he closed his eyes and sensed a massive figure stirring in the darkness.

He grinned, forgetting about how torn and battered his body was.

Looking up, Sunny saw two cold silver stars burning in the darkness high above him — the eyes of the murderous dragon, gazing down upon him.

The dragon moved, and at the same time, the shadows moved, as well. The drowning fortress shuddered.

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Slumped near a puddle of water, Kai gasped for air. He was suffering from terrible pain and struggling to breathe... that blow Sunny had delivered him before was not a light one. He suspected that several of his ribs had been cracked or broken. His muscles were torn, as well, so drawing the bow was a torment.

'This... really is a Nightmare.'

More than anything, Kai felt lost and confused.

The battle the government forces were supposed to observe had already been a disaster. The terrible journey through the merciless white desert was like a feverish dream. Before he knew it, they were standing in front of a towering block of black stone, preparing to enter a Seed of Nightmare.

Kai had thought that he had prepared himself mentally for the dreadful trial of the Spell, but he had been wrong. Coming to his senses in the dim throne room of a mysterious palace was unlike anything he had ever expected... and much more terrible.

Sunny was there, pulling him away from the falling debris. He heard some outlandish things about an evil dragon, who was also his twin, and an army of alien warriors that were supposed to help the cohort. A few moments later, the dark dragon was in front of them, commanding them to kneel.

Kai knew that Sunny never lied, of course. But hearing that voice and feeling the irresistible authority contained within it, he fully realized that it was all true...

The abominable dragon was, indeed, a copy of him. A much more powerful, vile, and Corrupted version of Kai, who had betrayed his friends and was now trying to kill them.

How could he turn on Sunny, Effie, Cassie, Nephis, and Colonel Jet? Kai did not know, but the truth was undeniable.

Learning that truth hurt much more than having his ribs broken.

Things had moved very fast from that point, not giving him an opportunity to process the bitter revelations and make sense of what was happening. Sunny warned him to stay away and suddenly turned into a giant serpent, attacking the dragon furiously.

Had his friend somehow become a Saint, already? Kai did not know. Why did he have to stay away? He did not know that, either.

There were many things Kai did not understand, but then, there was no real need to. At the core of it, the situation was clear — the cohort was up against a dreadful foe, and the lives of his friends were hanging in balance.

That was why Kai tried to help Sunny fight the dragon, as best he could.

The three of them rose into the sky, and he saw a strange city built on a vast island, illuminated by the light of seven rising suns. The streets of the city were flooded with people. Those people were fighting against a legion of Nightmare Creatures, but somehow seemed more sinister than the abominations they fought.

Kai only caught a glimpse of them, though, engrossed by the battle against the vile dragon... against himself.

Sunny seemed to have lost his mind, for some reason, shifting between the forms of various harrowing creatures. Consumed by fury, he wasn't able to differentiate between friend and foe. That was how Kai ended up being battered and suffering grievous wounds from his own friend... he should have listened to Sunny's warning better.

But even if he had, he wouldn't have left Sunny to fight against the abominable dragon alone.

Eventually, the three of them ended up away from the city, across the vast expanse of water littered with dreadful corpses, in the ruins of a fallen fortress. There was a bright flash, and the deafening roar of a distant explosion. And now, Kai was surrounded by darkness.

Cold water was licking his skin.

'Ah...'

Using his Awakened Ability, Kai could see through the darkness. He could also see through the billowing dust, and even through the stone debris. All around him, the world had gone mad.

The shadows were surging, turning into numerous dark hands. Those hands, each possessing seven fingers, tore at the dreadful dragon with sharp claws. At the same time, Sunny was trying to build another giant around himself, his attempts failing time after time.

The dragon seemed wary of the enormous white sword that lay on the cold stones, partially buried in rubble, and so destroyed the giant ruthlessly, each time, before it could take shape.

Slowly but surely, Sunny's body became tattered and broken. Even though he did not bleed, Kai could see that his condition was deteriorating swiftly.

Sunny did not seem to care, consumed by the strange derangement, but Kai did.

'I have to do something...'

Even though Kai was not as powerful as his friends, he was not at all weak. He was an Ascended, too... he had led soldiers into battle and killed dreadful Nightmare Creatures, survived impossible odds, and triumphed where most other people would have perished.

He had burned alive in the dragon's flame, and lived to slay the dragon. The problem was that Kai could not really move.

His head was full of dreadful whispers, and the remnant will of the abominable dragon was forcing him to do things he never wanted to do. Simply resisting that call was taking all of his strength... and that was with the dragon not paying him any attention, as well.

His thoughts were not his own.

'Betrayed you... poisoned you... made you into an abomination... lured you... abandoned you... traitor... traitor... TRAITOR!'

Kai groaned and grabbed his head, but the whispers only grew louder.

The worst part about them was that, because of his Flaw, Kai knew that it was all true. He — the other he — had indeed been betrayed, corrupted, used, and abandoned. By none other than Sunny, the person he trusted the most... the other Sunny, perhaps. At least that was what the dragon believed.

'Hurt him... kill him... punish him... take his hope away... take his will away... TAKE HIS CROWN AWAY!'

Kai gritted his teeth, refusing to listen.

He knew himself very well. That... wasn't him. That wasn't them.

Luckily, Sunny was attacking the dragon so fiercely that it had no time to turn its gaze at Kai. And so, the insurmountable authority of its command was slowly growing weaker.

Groaning, Kai turned to the puddle of water and looked at the one who was hiding in the reflections. His lips moved:

"Be... ready."

With that, he slowly picked up his bow and raised it with trembling hands.

His bow was a Transcendent Memory of the Fifth Tier, and there were plenty of enchanted arrows in his soul arsenal. The problem was that, despite that, Kai had failed to deal substantial damage to the abominable dragon. Ironically, the most damage he had dealt was to the shadow giant Sunny created, just before the explosion.

However... with his supernatural sight, Kai had long noticed a special scale hidden on the dragon's chest. It was of a different color than all others, as if forged from iron, and had a peculiar shape.

Looking down, he looked at the iron amulet in the shape of an anvil hanging from a string on his neck. That amulet had been with him since the Second Nightmare, given to him by Sunny.

And so... his evil copy must have possessed it, as well.

Ignoring the pain, Kai gritted his teeth and rose, then strained his muscles, and drew his bow.

The string was heavy. One shot...

Sunny seemed to be moments away from death, so there would be no time for another. He couldn't miss.

He wouldn't miss.

Silencing the deafening whispers that drowned his mind, Kai did what he was best at — aimed his bow, held his breath, and allowed his fingers to slip from the string.

A sinister red arrow flashed through the darkness...

And hit the small iron scale hidden among countless others on the chest of the lunging dragon.

The dragon's claws tore through the forming shadow giant and struck Sunny, pressing him into the ground.

The arrow failed to pierce the creature's tough hide, and so Kai swayed, suddenly weak from blood loss.

...But it did break that single scale, cracking it in two.

In the next moment, the man hiding in the reflection was suddenly gone, and the dragon froze in place.

Something sinister reflected in the depths of his silver eyes.