1520 Dreadful Soul

'What a sight...'

Mordret watched as Nightingale, picturesque despite being bloodied and covered in dust, drew his bow and let an arrow loose.

He had fled to the floating fortress after noticing the Denial Amulet fused into the Dread Lord's scales — and just in time. Something truly curious had happened in Twilight, destroying all the reflections he could have used to take a look. It was probably Changing Star's fault... or Soul Stealer's fault. In any case, Mordret would have been burned to a crisp if he had not left the city.

After traversing the still water and reaching the fortress, he hid in the reflections and observed what was happening inside. Sunless was fighting like a madman... more of a madman than he usually was... while the Dread Lord viciously mauled and battered him.

Truly, it was a miracle that Sunless had been able to battle the tyrant of Verge for so long, and even deliver countless wounds to the mighty dragon. What other Master could have done the same? That guy really boggled the mind.

Nevertheless, there was something strange about their fight. The Defiled Saint could have gone for the kill a long time ago, but he was restraining himself. Probably because he wanted to capture Sunless alive.

And make him a slave again.

That made sense. Although Mordret mostly knew about the Six Plagues from the records he had spied in the frozen reflection of Twilight, the Mad Prince seemed to have been the deterrence the tyrant of Verge used to keep the other five Defiled champions in check... especially Soul Stealer.

Now that Soul Stealer had finally turned on him, Sunless and his sinister soul were the best weapon the Dread Lord could use against the rebellious fiend.

Mordret studied Nightingale for a while, amused.

'...Have I really submitted to that naive fool?'

Well, he must not have remained naive for long after becoming Defiled.

Still... how had Soul Stealer missed the chance to become the master of the Mad Prince himself, after Changing Star was gone? The impostor... was really a disappointment.

Regardless, Mordret had spoken to the Nightingale — the original carrier of the Denial Amulet — just before Twilight went up in flames. The charming archer had a part to play...

And now, it seemed that he had played it brilliantly.

A red arrow whistled through the air and struck the small scale on the chest of the giant dragon, cracking it.

'What a shot.'

How hard would it be, to hit a target so small, and a moving one at that?

Mordret allowed himself to admire the precision of the Ascended archer for a split second.

And then dove into the Dread Lord's corrupted soul.

'Here we go...'

Smiling, Mordret found himself surrounded by darkness.

The darkness extended its revolting tendrils, trying to catch him. A forest of them rose from all sides, slithering like snakes. Trembling slightly, he evaded the grasp of Corruption and dashed forward.

'That's why I hate invading the souls of Nightmare Creatures...'

At least he possessed both of his hands here. Sadly, Mordret could only reflect the powers and weapons of the master of the invaded soul, not use his own. And since the Dread Lord had surrendered to Defilement and was thus banished from the Nightmare Spell, there were no Memories here for Mordret to summon.

The Memories were given by the Spell, and taken away by the Spell. There were other things he could steal, though...

Almost caught by the harrowing tendrils, he jumped and soared into the air. Flying was not something Mordret did often, but he had experienced it before — so, learning how to use this particular Ability only took him a moment.

His body rippled and swelled, becoming covered by impregnable scales Two mighty wings sprouted from his back, and his teeth turned into sharp porcelain fangs.

He became a dragon.

Mordret had not been a dragon before, but he had stolen bodies of Nightmare Creatures of a similar kind. So, he grew accustomed to this new shape quickly.

Finally, his eerie gaze pierced the vile darkness and found a figure standing in the heart of it, lonesome and lost.

The soul of the Dread Lord still maintained its human appearance... he must not have surrendered to Corruption entirely, yet.

A vicious smile twisted Mordret's reptilian lips.

'Time to die...'

He wasn't sure which one of them was going to die, but was eager to find out.

Mordret was merely an Ascended Monster right now, while the Dread Lord... there were five repugnant masses of Corruption hidden in the boundless darkness of his defiled soul, so he had to be a Corrupted Tyrant. The chances of victory were slim.

But then again, Mordret had killed numerous foes who were more powerful than him... more experienced than him, more knowledgeable about the nuances of their Aspects than him, more proficient in using their Memories than him.

However, none of them had been as resourceful as him, as resolute as him, or as ruthless as him.

Nightingale was a brave, but naive fool... so how much better could his Corrupted version be?

If there was one thing Mordret was afraid of, though, it was the knowledge of the Defilement the Dread Lord wielded.

That was why this battle was a gamble, even more so than every other soul battle Mordret had fought in the past.

'I'll just have to kill him before he has time to say anything, then...'

In the distance, the lonesome figure moved, finally noticing the invader. A mad light ignited in the Dread Lord's eyes.

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Far away, among the scorched ruins of Twilight, nothing living moved.

The buildings — those that were far enough from the epicenter of the blast to not be reduced to dust — had either collapsed or stood blackened and deformed. Ash fell from the dark sky like snow, covering the desolate landscape.

Most of the living beings that had witnessed the birth of the radiant star had been turned to ash, but piles of smoldering corpses still remained at the edges of the city. The walls surrounding Twilight had collapsed, and the giant carcasses beyond them were scorched.

A pale hand rose from the water among those carcasses.

Surfacing, Cassie climbed onto the carapace of a dead abomination and gulped for air. Then, she collapsed and lay motionlessly, ash falling on her face from the dark sky.

The iron locket was still with her, safe and sound.

A slender rapier hovered in the air above the blind girl, seemingly concerned. Cassie concentrated on it, feeling her consciousness begin to slip.

"Go..."

The Quiet Dancer hesitated for a few moments, then disappeared into the darkness.

Cassie sighed and allowed her battered body to relax.

Laying on the blackened carapace of a dead abomination, she turned her head to face the ruins of Twilight.

A cold, pale smile appeared on her lips.

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In the heart of the destroyed city, Nephis slowly opened her eyes. Soul Stealer was no more.

The bright radiance suffusing her skin slowly grew dim and disappeared. The white flames dancing in her eyes were extinguished. Her silver hair, which had been flowing in an ethereal wind, fell down.

Standing naked amidst the scene of utter devastation, she shivered and looked around.

Her mind was empty.

After a while, Nephis realized that her tunic had been destroyed, and summoned another Memory. The familiar weight of the Starlight Legion Armor — the only one she had left — settled on her shoulders, making her feel comforted.

That armor...

It felt as if she was forgetting something.

'Twilight... Soul Stealer... the Dread Lord...'

As she remained motionless, considering her thoughts, a slender rapier fell from the dark sky and hovered in front of her, trembling slightly. Nephis looked at it impassively.

The rapier turned, its tip pointing into the darkness.

"You want to lead me somewhere?"

Quiet Dancer... that was Cassie's Echo.

The rapier trembled again, and then flew forward. Frowning slightly, Nephis followed.