1521 Sharpest Arrow

In the courtyard of the drowning fortress, a harrowing dragon growled and took a step back, its massive body shuddering. His silver eyes had lost their sinister light, turning glossy and unfocused.

A vicious battle must have been taking place in the dragon's corrupted soul.

The maddening whispers thundering in Kai's head finally grew silent. He swayed, then took a labored breath and limped toward Sunny.

His friend was laying on the cold stones, barely alive. His body was a terrible painting of torn flesh, white bones visible through its mangled mess. Eerily, he was still not bleeding at all... usually, Kai would have been reassured by that fact, but right now, it looked like Sunny was already a cold corpse.

But he wasn't a corpse. Sunny was still moving, struggling to stand up. Even after battling a Defiled Saint tooth and nail, he was still unbroken, trying to continue to fight.

As Kai approached, he heard his furious whispers:

"Kill you... I'll kill you... shut up! I'll tear you apart!"

Strangely enough, his hateful gaze was not directed at the archer. Instead, Sunny was glaring past him, seemingly at an empty spot.

Kai felt his heart tighten.

'What is happening to him?'

Sunny had always had a wild personality, and there was that time he had turned a little feral in the Dark City... but he was never truly mad. Now, however, it seemed as though his friend had entirely lost his mind.

'There must be a reason.'

He had warned Kai to stay away before, had he not? That meant that this strange condition Sunny was in had a purpose. To resist the authority of the Dread Lord, most likely... somehow. It had to be a part of some cunning scheme.

He would deal with it later.

For now, Kai had a more serious problem to solve.

The abominable dragon was still alive. And while that man, Mordret, seemed confident in himself, there was no telling who would prevail in their dire fight.

The result would be clear in seconds.

But...

Kai looked at the dragon with a lost expression.

The Dread Lord, Mordret... both of them were monsters. He still remembered what the scion of the Great Clan Valor had done in the Second Nightmare. The harrowing massacre he had perpetrated in the Kingdom of Hope was not something a sane person would ever commit.

Even if he did win, was it really fine to let the dreadful authority of Kai's voice fall into the hands of someone so depraved?

"...Wait a little more, Sunny. I'll come back for you, soon."

Turning away from his friend, Kai gritted his teeth and pushed himself off the ground. Soaring into the air, he strained his core muscles to draw the string of his bow, and at the same time, summoned the sharpest arrow he had in store.

That one was not capable of producing devastating blasts, or robbing Nightmare Creatures of their strength. Its enchantment was rather simple — it burrowed much deeper than other arrows would, piercing flesh and bone like butter.

The drawback was that the arrow was flimsy and fragile. It was disobedient and slow, too, so hitting anything with it was a tough task. More than that, its tip would shatter against any kind of armor... therefore, it wasn't easy to make use of the insidious enchantment.

But now that the abominable dragon was nearly paralyzed by the battle happening within its soul, Kai had a chance. Of course, the battle could end at any moment...

It could even end right now, leaving him defenseless in front of the terrifying dragon.

Nevertheless, he brought himself right to the dragon's maw, and looked into the dragon's silver eyes.

Then, Kai activated his Ascended Ability and uttered a command... He wasn't addressing the Dread Lord, however. He was addressing himself.

"KILL HIM!"

Suddenly, a fierce strength filled his broken body, and a cold, frightening will flooded his mind.

Raising his bow, Kai aimed carefully... and sent an arrow flying straight through the Dread Lord's radiant eye.

The distance was too short for it to stray off course, and there was no armor in the way to make the tip break.

The insidious arrow slid into the dragon's eye, pierced through it, and burrowed deep into the creature's brain. It had been shot from a Transcendent bow of the Fifth Tier by the hand of a Master, and so the havoc it wreaked inside the Dread Lord's head was truly gruesome.

His body had been battered in the battle against Sunny, and his soul had been weakened by the battle against Mordret of Valor.

The dragon shuddered and let out a terrible groan.

...Blasted by that groan, Kai was thrown back and crashed into the pile of stone rubble far below.

Above him, the Dread Lord convulsed, a fountain of silver blood shooting from his open maw. His head drew an arc in the air...

And then, the mighty dragon toppled and fell heavily to the ground, his silver eyes growing dim.

This time, forever.

Barely conscious, Kai heard the Spell whisper into his ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Tyrant, Hideous Ruler of the Empty Sky].

[You have...]

Consumed by pain, he didn't hear the rest.

He did, however, hear a terrible scream.

Turning his head, Kai saw a human figure rolling on the ground in agony. It was Mordret, the scion of Valor... missing a hand and covered in blood. There was something terribly wrong with that lunatic, though. His face, which had seemed to be incapable of showing earnest emotions, was now twisted by a terrible grimace, an eerie darkness devouring his eyes.

Letting out a stifled groan, Mordret clutched at the stones and crawled to the nearby puddle. Reaching it, he thrust his hand into the water... no, into his own reflection... and tore something from within his chest, then threw it away.

The thing looked like a soul shard... no, a piece of a mirror.

Hitting the ground, the mirror shard suddenly rippled and turned into a vague figure. That figure then turned into a perfect copy of Mordret.

A Reflection, created by ripping one of his cores out of his soul. There was something terribly wrong with that Reflection, though.

As Kai watched, stunned, the visage of Mordret was twisted and deformed, tendrils of vile darkness sprouting from within it. The ghastly creature suddenly looked incredibly threatening and sinister, a frenzied smile blooming on its bloodied lips.

It was as though he was watching a seed of Corruption bloom, turning the human into a Nightmare Creature right in front of his eyes.

Still on the ground, Mordret whispered a quiet curse.

"Ah... that... was truly unpleasant."

He did not look capable of fighting the Defiled Reflection, though, in that wretched state.

Kai was laying in the rubble, his body broken and mangled, so he was not much better. Sunny was still wreathing on the ground, trying to stand up, but he was the most corpse-like of them three.

'I must protect him...'

Kai tried to move, but a surge of pain sent him crushing back down on the sharp stones. A short yelp escaped from his lips.

With unwanted tears in his eyes, he looked up and saw the vile Reflection walking toward his friend. Its missing hand had sprouted terrible glass claws, and its jaw was unhinged, twisted fangs growing through the mangled flesh.

'No!'

Before the creature could reach Sunny, though...

A slender rapier pierced its chest, and a radiant hand grasped its head.

In the next moment, the Reflection was illuminated from inside by a pure white light. Smoke rose from its open mouth and charred holes where its eyes had been just a moment ago, filling the air with the revolting stench of burned flesh.

Then, a net of cracks covered the creature's body, and it shattered like a glass sculpture.

Behind it, the figure of Changing Star was revealed, looking down with an emotionless expression.

Sparks of pure white flame danced in her cold grey eyes, and she somehow seemed both the same and different from the last time Kai had seen her, back in the Nightmare Desert.

Turning her head slightly, Nephis looked at the corpse of the harrowing dragon and remained motionless for a few moments.

Then, she said, her voice strangely devoid of feeling:

"We won."