1725 Silent Clash

A wide street was shrouded in darkness, framed by the burning buildings and billowing smoke. The ground was littered with rubble and broken vehicles. Here and there, human bodies lay in the pools of blood, covered with dust.

A woman with raven-black hair and icy blue eyes was standing in the middle of the ruined road, holding a black sickle sword.

In front of her, a towering figure was moving slowly across the rubble, each of its steps exerting an invisible pressure on the world. The creature was surrounded by a haze of swirling sand, with only a vague silhouette of a gaunt human visible behind its veil.

A thousand screaming souls shrouded the ancient devil like a mantle.

Jet looked at him coldly.

"I hear that you are called the Heart of Kanakht... nice to meet you. I am called Soul Reaper Jet."

A dark smile appeared on her pale face.

"This is my city. So, prepare to die."

The Great Devil halted, looking down at her through the veil of sand. The whirlwind of souls surrounding it parted, revealing two gaping pools of darkness, Ghostly flames ignited in their depths, piercing her with a gaze of indescribable malice.

And hunger.

Then, a rustle of a myriad of whispers rose like a tide, enveloping her in a cold embrace.

Jet did not know the words of the ancient language the fiend spoke, but understood them regardless with the help of the Spell:

...broken... thing... bow, submit, surrender. Succumb..."

She felt a powerful compulsion press her into the ground, as if a thousand invisible hands were pulling her soul down.

However...

The weight of her shattered soul was too great for them to move it even by a millimeter.

Jet's smile widened.

She raised her sword and took a step forward.

"...In your dreams."

A split second later, her ghostly figure dashed toward the Devil.

Jet possessed an unusual soul. Her core was like a vast sphere of shattered crystal, countless shards pressed messily together to form a jagged sun. Her radiant essence constantly leaked through the gaps between the shards... but, in return, the more living beings she killed, the more her broken soul core grew.

And Jet had slaughtered countless beings over the years, since that was the only way for her to survive.

By now, her core was massive like a giant star, burning furiously in the cold darkness of her desolate soul. Not only that, but her dead flesh could absorb much more essence than that of someone who was truly alive, which granted her tremendous physical strength.

Strangely enough, that physical might also translated to the dire power of her wraith form.

Moving like a ghost, Jet appeared in front of the Great Devil and lashed out with her sword. All of it happened in an instant, too fast to be discerned by mundane eyes.

Of course, the eyes of the Great Devil were not at all mundane. The figure hidden in the sand shifted, raising a hand to swat away her strike. At the same time, the sand rose like a giant palm, repeating its movements.

However, the mist blade was not swept away.

Instead, it passed through the sand and cut deeply into the ancient fiend's soul.

A moment later, a building to their left exploded into a cloud of dust, obliterated by the giant hand of sand.

And one of the myriads of souls subjugated by the Heart of Kanakht dissolved into nothingness, receiving the cut on his behalf. The abomination sustained no damage at all.

It was only affected a little by the lethargic power of the black khopesh, shrugging it off a split second later.

A thousand spears of sand shot from his towering figure, moving too fast to be dodged at such a close distance.

They passed through Jet's ghostly figure without doing any damage, as well. She jumped back, knowing that this advantage of hers would not last for too long.

And indeed, the silhouette hiding inside the sand tilted its head slightly. Then, the sand settled back onto it, forming the shape of a gaunt giant.

Instead, the haze of screaming souls flowed forward like a raging river, threatening to tear her own apart.

'Soul attack'

Jet gritted her teeth.

This... was going to be unpleasant.

She pushed off the ground, weaving between the falling pieces of the toppled building to evade the torrent of souls. In her perception, the jagged pieces of torn alloy and shattered concrete were floating down slowly, nearly static. The Great Devil's attack, however, was almost too fast to react.

In the next several seconds, the burning street turned into a furious battlefield. Two wraiths- one made of mist, the other of sand - clashed in eerie silence, no sound produced by their ghostly steps.

Only the sand rustled as it brushed against the rubble.

Despite the devastating power unleashed by them, not even a single particle of dust was disturbed by their battle. The pillars of smoke were not torn apart by the hurricane wind, the scorching flames were not extinguished. The ground did not quake, and the sky did not shatter.

That was because Jet was intangible, and so were her attacks. The harrowing storm of phantoms pursuing her was similarly aimed at her soul.

If their battle had been happening on the material plane, though...

The entire district might have already been flattened, turning into a smoldering ruin... like many other districts of the city already had.

'Damn it...'

Jet reeled back, pierced by excruciating pain. She had delivered a rain of blows to the ancient fiend... but what was the point? Her insidious power, which had served her splendidly across countless battlefields, was almost entirely useless against the vile power of the Heart of Kanakht.

Instead of cutting his soul, she was simply destroying the phantoms he had consumed. And they were indeed legion... there must have been millions of people living in the outskirts, where the Great Devil had been wandering before her arrival, and very few had escaped his bloodlust.

Even if less than one percent of the victims had Joined the whirlpool of souls, Jet would have to land thousands of strikes to destroy them all.

Each of the attacks she failed to evade, however, dealt direct damage to her own soul. It was vast and tenacious, true, but in this war of attrition, Jet was still doomed to lose.

"Why did this bastard have to wield power over souls?'

Jet dodged a rustling torrent of haze and slashed at it with her sword, obliterating another unfortunate specter. Sadly, these specters were not actual beings, but instead parts of the Great Devil - therefore, destroying them did not replenish her essence.

Essence exhaustion was one of Jet's fears... perhaps even her only true fear. For all other Awakened, losing all of their essence simply meant enduring a period of powerlessness and not feeling well. But to her, it meant death - true death, the final and irreversible obliteration of her being.

What was worse, Jet wasn't sure that she would be able to control herself when facing this slow and excruciating dissolution. The few times she had come close to exhausting all her essence... well, she didn't really want to remember them. She had done a few shameful things.

Unsurprisingly, pushing her the limits to battle a Great Devil consumed an ocean of soul essence.

Jet wasn't panicked yet, because her reserves were many times deeper than those of most other Saints. More than that, five powerful souls were bound to her mist blade - if push came to shove, she would consume them one after another, postponing the Inevitable.

Still, even if she miraculously won today, the sea of soul essence she had accumulated would be all but spent. Jet would have to collect it again, drop by drop.

'Such a chore...'

Killing had become a chore a long time ago, for her. Sometimes, she dreamt of being free of her Flaw and living a peaceful life somewhere where there was no need to ever spill the blood of living beings.

Not that there was such a place anywhere in the two worlds, for someone like her.

Those dreams were rare and silly, though. Most of the time, Jet was quite content with her life. ...Not at the moment, though.

She evaded another attack nimbly and delivered a ruthless strike to the abomination, then jumped back, phasing through a melting wall. The sand followed.

Despite the harrowing might and vile powers of the Great Devil...

She was still holding her own.

She was still fighting, full of resolve to see the fiend die.

Why wouldn't she kill him? She had killed countless bastards who thought that they were stronger than her, and were stronger than her, already.

Strength didn't decide who lived and who died.

Jet did.

'Come, come. Follow me more... hurt me more... waste time on me more…’

If there was one blessing about this excruciating fight, it was that the curse of lethargy affecting the Heart of Kanakht was slowly accumulating. Its effects were not significant yet, and yet Jet could feel that the devil was struggling a little to maintain his unceasing assault.

Ignoring the pain, Jet felt a dark grin twist her lips.

She retreated, one step at a time.

Perhaps she was not powerful enough, yet, to slay the Heart of Kanakht...

But luckily, she wasn't alone.

Just like the devil had a legion of souls to protect him, she had an army, too.

She had Effie and Kai.

So, she just had to preoccupy the bastard until they arrived.

Surrounded by smoke and flame, suffering the assault of a Great Devil, Jet smiled viciously and laughed.