2001. Winding Paths

The battle between Sid and Felise was like a small calamity... one taking place within the terror of a much vaster cataclysm.

The battlefield where hundreds of thousands of Awakened sought to destroy each other stretched from one horizon to another, strained by the great and violent forces they summoned into the world. Above them was the shroud of radiant clouds; beneath them were the bones of a dead deity.

Sid and Felise had come a long way since the Forgotten Shore. Today, however, their winding paths crossed once again... only for one path to put an end to the other.

Sid tasted blood in her mouth as Felise pushed her back. They moved with enough speed to make their furious clash appear like a blur – from time to time, groups of fighting Awakened soldiers got in their way, only to be violently tossed aside.

Some survived... some were less fortunate.

'Curse it!’

She drew on all her combat experience – few in the world had more of that than her – and all her skill. Her sword moved as if it was a living thing, deflecting blow after blow after blow. There was no holding back in this battle, so Sid abandoned all restraint, alternating between short bursts of incredible power, incredible resilience, and incredible speed – her Dormant, Awakened, and Ascended Abilities.

Still, all of it was not enough to resist Felise, who was like a crimson wraith.

Her former friend was viciously strong and shockingly fast. Her kris was like a curse, seemingly existing in several places at the same time. Her technique was insidious and flawless, and her killing intent was absolute.

Sid managed to block a blow that would have blinded her by calling upon her strength. She avoided another by leaping back with lightning speed. The third penetrated a crack in her armor, but merely scraped against her adamantine skin, failing to pierce it.

A moment later, Felise delivered a crushing kick to her abdomen, making Sid groan in pain.

She staggered back.

"Elly... if you don't stop... I'm going to get serious..."

The Handmaiden sneered.

"We are not children anymore, Sid. Stop pretending."

Sid grinned, her teeth painted red by blood.

It was true... they weren't children anymore.

Felise had grown incredibly powerful. The soft girl she had known once was gone. Instead, a proud and deadly warrior now stood in front of her – someone who had reached the very pinnacle of what mortals strived for.

A Blood Sister of the Song Domain.

But...

Sid gritted her teeth and straightened, grasping the hilt of her sword with both hands.

Back there on the Forgotten Shore, life had not been easy for the Handmaidens. Most people of the outer settlement imagined the Bright Castle as some kind of heaven, but Sid knew better – in reality, people living there had to contend with their own nightmares.

Felise would not have survived there if she had been weak.

But still…

She had not been a huntress of the outer settlement.

Lunging forward, Sid activated her Ascended Ability and flashed across the blood-soaked bone.

So what if Felise was stronger? So what if she was faster? So what if she was more powerful in all regards?

Sid had made a living from slaying creatures that were much more powerful than her.

Battering the swift kris aside, she collided with the Handmaiden violently and grappled her, letting go of the sword.

If one had no space to move, speed did not matter much.

She pushed Felise back, placing one foot behind hers and tripping her.

If one had no steady footing, it was hard to exert strength. Every action had an equal and opposite reaction, after all, and with no ground to push against, the mightiest of creatures would be limited at what it could do.

For every power, there was a weakness.

There was a flaw.

As they both toppled and fell, Felise clawed at Sid's face, leaving deep cuts on it. Sid tilted her head and bit down on the Handmaiden's hand, feeling brittle bones break under her teeth.

Hunters were people who killed beasts. However...

Before that, hunters themselves were beasts.

They were just more cunning, ferocious, and lethal beasts than their prey.

Felise let out a stifled shriek, failing to thrust her kris into Sid's side.

A moment later, they hit the ground, and Sid smashed her forehead into the bridge of the Handmaiden's nose with all her might.

Felise was blinded by the pain, and a split second later, the back of her head slammed into the tough surface of the ancient bone with terrible force.

Her beautiful ebony hair became soaked with blood.

Wrestling the kris from her momentary weak hand, Sid grasped its hilt, prepared to drive its tip into the enemy's flesh.

However, then... she hesitated.

Even knowing that Felise could dismiss the enchanted dagger at any moment, she still couldn't bring herself to deliver a fatal blow.

'How stupid…’

Her hand wouldn't move.

So, instead, she plunged the kris into the Handmaidens side, delivering her a debilitating wound... but not a deadly one.

Felise let out a pained yelp and struggled desperately, trying to shake Sid off.

She dismissed the kris... but by then, Sid's own dagger had already manifested in her free hand.

It wasn't easy to hold the terrifyingly powerful Handmaiden down. Blood was streaming down Sid's torn face, and her former friend's hands were exploring it, searching for her eyes to gouge them out.

Their desperate struggle was both violent and strangely intimate, as if they were transported back to the Forgotten Shore.

Sitting side by side in a cold ramshackle hut, sharing their warmth, and telling each other stories.

Pressing the tip of her dagger against the enemy's abdomen, Sid growled hoarsely:

"Stay down!"

But Felise only struggled more desperately, unwilling to admit defeat. There were sparks of light swirling around her, soon to manifest into another Memory.

Sid's eyes were burning.

It was either sweat that had gotten into them, or blood.

Or tears.

She allowed her dagger to move down a few centimeters, drawing blood, and said in a stifled, almost pleading tone:

"Stay down, Elly... just stay down. Or I'll kill you..."

'Please, gods...'

But Felise still struggled.

The sparks of light danced, slowly manifesting into a weapon.

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Author's Thoughts

I made a small alteration to Sid's Awakened Ability due to how similar it is to Belle's. Instead of becoming intangible for a split second, she is capable of becoming hardened, thus deflecting a blow. That suits the theme of her Aspect better, as well:]

I'll edit its previous mention to fit the change in a few days.