1885 Fortune Favors the Bold

The arrow was aimed at Neph's head, but despite how fast it flew, she still managed to dodge it. The arrowhead left a long cut on her cheek, then pierced the chest of a Saint who stood behind her.

'Shot from elevation.‘

That was the first thought that crossed Sunny's mind, who had subconsciously traced the arrow's trajectory.

Then, for a few moments, everything moved too fast for him to think.

The wounded Saint let out a stifled yelp and started to fall, blood splattering on the wooden floor. His armor should have been robust enough to if not deflect, then at least dissipate the force of the arrow, so that it did not pierce too deeply. However, somehow, the moonlight arrow seemed to ignore the durability of the enchanted metal and the resilience of Transcendent flesh, killing him on the spot.

Just like that, a Saint died.

"Ambush!"

Before anyone else could react, Sunny called upon the shadows and summoned an impenetrable wall in front of them. Almost instantly, two more ethereal arrows struck it, the impacts producing thunderous bangs. That wall of shadows quaked and cracked.

Nephis was already moving.

Strangely enough, she wasn't lunging into the darkness to shorten the distance between her and the hidden archer. Instead, she was spinning around, searching for something beyond the gates of the castle.

The thin cut on her cheek was yet to fill with blood, glowing softly with ethereal, pale light.

"Shield Wall! "

Her sword was pointing to the outside.

A split second after Sunny's wall materialized, Sir Rivalen had already answered her call. The air behind them shimmered, and an invisible force field manifested itself in the gateway of the Citadel. Its faint contours resembled a grid of ghostly, interlocked shields...

But before the shields closed, two more arrows — these ones made out of wood and steel, not moonlight — slid into the swiftly narrowing gaps, striking two more Saints in the back.

One struck the thin gap between the edge of a man's breastplate and his helmet, piercing his neck. The other hit the crack between the front half of a cuirass and the back half, slithering its way through the victim's ribs.

The level of accuracy needed to perform such shots was unimaginable.

The first Saint was killed instantly, but the second survived despite the heavy injury. Still, he was temporarily rendered powerless — unless a potent healer spent time treating his wound, he would not be participating in the battle. Finally, the two bodies fell to the floor. The moonlight arrow dimmed and dissolved into nothingness, leaving a haunting afterglow in its wake. The cut on Neph's cheek swelled with blood... the conquest team, reduced to twelve members in an instant, was now protected from all sides by the barrier of shadows and Saint Rivalen's invisible aegis.

For a moment, nothing happened.

They possessed a devastating amount of power, but surrounded and not knowing where to aim it, the champions of the Sword Domain found themselves in an awkward position.

Sunny was holding the serpentine odachi, ready to act. Nephis was standing still, a deep scowl on her face... there was something off about her, but he could not immediately tell what.

Saint IIelie, the stern woman who had chastised Iest of Dagonet for his jokes, had nocked an arrow on the string of her bow. The old man himself had twisted the handle of his cane, revealing it to be a hidden sword. Golden arcs of electricity were dancing around Roan's ironclad figure, illuminating his handsome, somber face.

Rivalen of Aegis Rose was kneeling near the wounded Saint, protecting the man with his shield.

'...Why can't I sense anything?‘

Sunny felt grim apprehension at his failure to detect the enemies in advance. By now, it was clear that what had attacked them was no Nightmare Creature... No. They were humans.

Transcendent champions of Song.

His eyes widened slightly, and a crooked smile twisted his lips behind the mask. 'How daring...‘

Everyone expected the leaders of the Song Army, which had been losing the war at first, to concentrate all their forces on conquering the Citadel on the western edge of the dead god's collarbone — after all, it was quite close to their camp. And they had. However, it seemed that they had gone after the Citadel in the northern reach of the titanic skeleton's breastbone as well, sending a small team to infiltrate it in secret and ambush the Sword Army's conquest force.

A bold strategy, especially considering how hard it would have been for a handful of Saints to reach this far into the Hollows without the support of an army.

But...

Did they really hope to survive a battle against Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan and the Lord of Shadows?

Boldness did not always pay off.

Sunny would have expected Nephis to heal the wounded Saint, but instead, she raised her sword and said evenly:

"Reveal yourself."

For a moment, he was stunned by the childishness of her demand. Why would the enemy laying in the ambush reveal their well—hidden position and give up the advantage?

He would certainly never respond to her call.

However... perhaps, he did not understand something about the world.

Because in the next moment, he finally sensed the shadows moving again as something massive flew at them from the darkness of the ancient temple.

An enormous creature soared above the wooden floor and then plummeted down, crashing into the wall of shadows with a deafening boom. The barrier finally crumbled, and Sunny saw the shape of the dead thing as it sprawled motionlessly on the floor.

It was a towering, vaguely humanoid abomination wrapped in a billowing dark robe. Elements of intricate silver armor covered its long arms and slender torso, and six pairs of beautiful grey wings extended from its back, laying on the floor in a broken, bloodied mess.

It must have been great and harrowing once. But now...

It was dead.

The winged giant had not leaped at the barrier of shadows. It was simply tossed at it by someone's powerful hand, discarded like a sack of dead flesh.

Sunny's expression darkened.

'This... is the guardian of the Citadel.‘

There were no moonlight arrows flying at them from somewhere above. Instead, there was the sound of steps.

Then, a slender silhouette walked out of the darkness, piercing the twelve Saints with a cold and arrogant look.

She was a breathtaking woman with raven—black hair and eyes that seemed to be cut from pure obsidian. Her slender body was encased in a suit of dark leather armor, and she wielded a curved sword akin to a tachi, its pommel mapped in a black silk cord.

With her alabaster skin, exquisite beauty, and cold expression, she was undeniably stunning... but, more than that, her presence was vast and oppressive, like the lightless expanse of a boundless, dark ocean.

The woman met Neph's gaze and spoke loudly:

"I am Revel, the Lightslayer."

Then, her alluring lips twisted slightly into a semblance of a dark, joyless smile. She pointed her sword forward and said, her voice full of aloof coldness:

"...Welcome to the Song Domain."

And as the words left her mouth, the corpse of the Great Terror suddenly stirred.

The bodies of the two slain Saints stirred, as well, reaching toward their former comrades with murderous, dead hands.