1887 Never Before

A terrible battle was raging on the grounds of the mystical castle, making the Citadel groan and quake. Its ancient walls were cracking, and crimson tails were raining from the sloped roofs, falling into the surging waters of the deep lake. The dim twilight of the Hollows was torn apart by flashes of blinding light.

On the edge of the foaming water, a taciturn woman in a black hunting attire was calmly drawing her bow as an enormous rhino was barrelling at her down the stone stairs, shattering the weathered steps into dust as he charged. Unshaken, the woman silently released the wet string. It shot forward, leaving a string-shaped cloud of water droplets behind — the twisting arrow pierced the humid air and unerringly struck the rhino's right eye just moments before the giant beast rammed its horn through her chest.

The beast was cunning, though. It shut one of his eyes just before the arrow hit — the arrowhead spent most of its destructive force to penetrate the heavy eyelid, damaging the rhino‘s eye, but failing to kill him on the spot.

His furious bellow shook the world as blood flowed down its snout.

However, before the rhino could impale the huntress on his horn, she finally moved.

In the next moment, a giant black panther leaped on the charging giant, tore the tough hide on his neck and back with her claws, and soared into the air. Landing on the wall of the castle, the panther ran up its surface, then spun and pushed herself into another jump in a blink of an eye. Splinters of wood flew in all directions, and a black blur shot toward the ground, where two more Saints had just emerged from the broken gates...

A powerful tremor shook the entire Citadel, and a devastating shockwave rolled from the darkness inside, pulverizing the debris of the gates into fine dust.

The clash between Shield Wall and Silent Stalker would have been a harrowing sight for many — after all, it wasn't often that two Saints fought each other... or at least it had not been before the Domain War.

But today, it was just a minor spectacle happening on the fringes of the true battle.

Inside the castle, a hell that humanity had never witnessed before was blossoming in all its dreadful, murderous glory.

Eight Transcendent champions of the Sword Domain had clashed with Lonesome Howl of the Song Clan and the Saint of Sorrow, aided by two Reflections sent by Mordret, the Prince of Nothing. These many human Transcendents had never fought before.

The violent forces released by the clash of the Saints had wrecked the interior of the ancient Citadel, turning it into a scene of utter destruction — it might have withstood the fall of the civilization that had built it, the ruthless reality of the Hollows, and thousands of years of desolation, but it was slowly coming undone under the obliterating carnage of the bloody battle.

The wooden walls were cracking. The floor was on the verge of collapsing. The ceiling of the grand hall was crumbling, supported only by the vines and the roots of the trees that had permeated the sacred castle over the countless years. Lonesome. Howl's Transcendent form was that of a giant, monstrous wolf. Her fur was black like the night sky, and her bestial eyes were burning with frenzied red flame. Terrifying fangs were glistening in her enormous maw, each taller than an adult man.

They were already painted scarlet by fresh blood.

The princess of Song herself had clashed with a noble lion, the two of them entangled into a devastating hurricane of white and black. Bolts of lightning were dancing in the air, and steaming blood was spilling on the shattered floor, flowing into the bowels of the ancient Citadel.

The two Reflections had assumed the forms of terrifying black wolves, as well. Only... unlike Lonesome Howl, who was a Transcendent Beast, both of them were Supreme ones.

They lacked the will and ingenuity of humans, but were much stronger. More than that, both of them possessed the divine lineage of Beast God, just like the princess of Song did, and therefore, the Saints of Swords could not overpower the Reflections despite their numerical advantage.

And worst of all...

The corpse of the Great Terror slain by the Song sisters was moving, as well, risen by malevolent will, indifferent to pain, and nearly indestructible.

The bodies of two Saints that had been killed in the ambush were moving too. The one dismembered by Jest of Dagonet was struggling weakly on the ground, unable to rise... the one beheaded by Changing Star's sword, however, stood up slowly, blood flowing down his lustrous breastplate from his severed neck. A moment later, he lunged at the nearest human, sinking his fingers into their flesh.

Startled and momentarily immobilized, the grabbed Saint activated one of his Aspect Abilities to sever the dead man's arms. However, he did not receive a chance to — because of the delay, he failed to evade in time, and the paw of a frenzied wolf crashed into him, ripping open his armor, chest, and throat.

The bloodied corpse fell to the ground...

...A few moments later, though, it moved, slowly rising backup.

Saint Jest observer] the harrowing scene with a wry expression.

Turning back to the towering gargoyle he had been fighting, the old man smiled.

"How vexing. Not only is my Aspect useless against you, but you are even protecting the she—wolf pup against me. And that stone body of yours refuses to be cut. Ha! If that is not. irony, then I don't know what is..."

Then, his smile slowly turned dark, sinister, and eerily chilling.

"But you know, Sorrow's son..."

Something moved beneath Jest's clothes, and his form suddenly started to change, ripping them apart.

His voice had changed, as well, growing deep and inhuman:

"The funny thing is, that only makes me want to cut you open more..."

There was a deafening crash somewhere above them, and the Citadel shook once again — this time much more violently than before. A section of its outer walls collapsed, revealing the interior of several overgrown floors.

A tide of darkness spilled from one of them, followed by two falling figures.