1995. Grim Reality

Rain had been experiencing this strange feeling as of late...

It was as though she was walking through life while asleep, stuck in a long and lurid nightmare.

The first months of the war had been a dreadful and appalling ordeal, but she had always felt wide awake back then. Ascending the titanic arm of the dead deity, crossing over to the collarbone, establishing a camp in the middle of the abominable jungle, and marching into its depths to claim the Citadel for the Song Domain... those were the horrors she knew and accepted.

What had happened next, however, was not.

Rain was a bit lucky, perhaps, to be a part of the Seventh Legion. After playing an important role in the conquest of the Collarbone Citadel, they had been allowed to rest and recover for quite some time. Even later, the Song Army had held the Seventh Legion back as much as possible, letting other divisions spearhead the offensive on the Breastbone Reach.

It had taken a long time before Rain saw people killing other people, and was forced to spill human blood herself.

She had been dreading that moment for a long time, but when it happened, it happened quickly. It was kill or be killed - the other person would not hesitate to end her life if given the chance...

Only they would, if they were like her. And that was precisely the point - they were like her. The soldiers of the Sword Army were fellow humans, no different from Rain, and the thought of killing another human for no good reason was just as appalling to most of them as it was to her.

They were all Awakened, and therefore no strangers to bloodshed. In fact, they were all natural killers, having experienced the visceral rush of fighting and slaying living beings many times. However, there was a stark difference between killing Nightmare Creatures and killing humans — real humans, not nameless phantoms conjured by the Spell in the illusory Nightmares.

If anything, their experience only made the act of killing harder. Those who routinely faced Nightmare Creatures knew how precious human lives were, after all, because they knew that humanity was surrounded by the enemy - by the abominable other from all sides.

The soldiers of the two great armies might have been enemies, but they weren't... the other. They were the same.

Still, war... was war.

The first time Rain had to aim at a human, she felt nauseated and afraid. She froze for a moment, unable to let go of the string, and then lowered her bow a little - an action that was somehow both involuntary and completely conscious. As a result, her arrow struck the enemy archer in the thigh instead of piercing his heart.

It had never become easier. There were a few of these moments later on sometimes, Rain was sure that while her arrows seriously wounded many, they did not kill anyone...

Sometimes, she was not.

But it was all happening so quickly. There was no time to think. Before she could even fathom the implications of her actions, there was a new enemy rushing at their position, and after one battle was over, another would be starting too soon.

Strangely enough or maybe quite predictably - the aim of the enemy archers was often just as terrible as hers.

Melee fighters like Tamar and Ray did not enjoy the same privilege. And yet, they too did not seem burning with a feverish desire to see the enemy die. In the bloody havoc of battles, they often aimed to incapacitate their opponents instead of killing them... as often as they could, at least.

But how often could that be?

People were still dying.

The skirmishes in Godgrave were swift and brutal. One army attacked, and the other one defended. Usually, it quickly became apparent which side held the advantage - the other side retreated, unwilling to suffer heavy casualties for an empty cause.

Sometimes, the Ascended officers would try to implement a more ruthless strategy and held the wavering soldiers back... but the officers themselves were human, too.

They were just as appalled by the senseless bloodshed, and just as dismayed by the hideous reality of war.

The more people died, the more discontent the soldiers and the officers became, and the more elusive the initial reason for the war seemed.

In the end, the soldiers on both sides were shaken and disturbed. The army camps, which had been lively once, were now subdued and full of silence. Rain often saw people sitting on the ground and staring into the distance with empty eyes, some still covered in blood from the recent battle.

As an archer, she was usually cleaner than them... but otherwise, she was very much the same.

All of it seemed too ugly and wrong to be real.

And so, she couldn't shake the feeling that reality was merely a nightmare.

It would be quite fitting, actually. Rain had cheated the world by Awakening without undergoing the First Nightmare... so, there was perverse justice in the fact that her life had become a kind of nightmare in turn.

But, of course, she knew that what was happening around her, and to her, was no nightmare.

The war was very real, and the horrors of the war were very real, as well.

There was no escaping that fact, and all she could do was blame herself for coming to this godforsaken hell instead of burying her head in the sand and cowardly running away to hide in Ravenheart.

Rain found some solace in the company of her cohort... Tamar, Ray, and Fleur. The four of them were going through this terrible ordeal together, and searched for ways to survive it in sound mind together. Even in the depths of her dejection, she couldn't imagine abandoning them.

But most of all, what helped her stay sane... was the company and support of her brother.

Her... brother.

It had taken Rain a while to come to terms with the fact that her mysterious and often sinister teacher was not, in fact, some dark deity or errant spirit, but instead her older brother.

And entirely human, on top of that!

A completely improbable, astonishing, and absurd human. How did his existence even make sense? How could he be one of the most powerful Saints in the world, her brother, and Changing Star's boyfriend to boot?

Still... although confounding, his presence by her side was not unwelcome.

It was a source of warmth and strength for her, instead.

And Rain desperately needed both of those things.

Especially today.

Because today, the two great armies had gathered on a vast bone plain, and the Seventh Legion was thrown into the jaws of a calamitous battle.