1996. Fodder

There had been countless skirmishes and several larger battles between the two armies before, but never anything of that scale.

There had never been a battle this great and this terrible in all of human history... at least not in the history of their world.

But then again, this wasn't their world.

The Seventh Legion was in the most dire section of the battlefield — the very middle of the center, serving as the spearhead of the entire Song Army. The enemies they faced were not young Awakened who had become carriers of the Spell in the aftermath of the Chain of Nightmares, either, but the hardened core of the Sword Army instead...

The seasoned veterans of the royal clan's own storied forces. The Knights of Valor.

They were like a steel bulwark that refused to be shaken or pushed back, repelling one fierce attack after another. The Ascended Knights commanded Awakened Squires, maintaining immaculate discipline and the indomitable will of the elite troops.

They were all clad in heavy steel armor and wielded potent Memories as weapons, their vermilion cloaks standing out vividly against the white backdrop of the sun-bleached bone. Powerful Echoes fought in front of the formation — some of them earned as rewards from the Spell, some crafted by the enchanters of Valor.

Rain was concentrating on destroying these Echoes while trying to ignore the terrible cacophony of battle and the screams of dying soldiers that washed over her like a heartbreaking song.

'Damn it, damn it, damn...'

But how could she ignore it?

The shaking ground was slick with blood, broken bodies laying here and there and staring at the blinding sky with empty eyes. Most of them were strangers, but some of them... some of them, she had come to know over the months spent fighting side by side in Godgrave.

That man there… she had seen him survive the deadly embrace of a monstrous tree in the Hollows. He had survived the abominable jungle only to die here, cut down by a human blade.

The woman there — she was quite infamous in the Seventh Legion for the habit of singing her heart out in the baths despite possessing absolutely no musical talent. Rain had never spoken to her, but she had heard the painful singing many times.

The woman would never sing again...

'Damn it!’

Gritting her teeth, terrified out of her mind and immensely angry at the same time, Rain tried to take aim through the tears veiling her eyes and let go of the string.

... Of course, there were not that many bodies littering the ground. Not because very few people had died, but simply because the dead did not stay still for long on this heinous battlefield.

Just as Rain's arrow pierced the neck of a rampaging Echo, the dead singer moved and slowly rose to her feet. Her Memories were gone, and her tunic was painted red by blood, revealing a harrowing wound. Nevertheless, the young woman did not seem bothered by the pain.

She turned her empty gaze to the steady line of heavily armored knights, and headed toward them with calm steps.

All around her, other pilgrims were marching toward the enemy, as well.

And inside the enemy formation, their own fallen were standing up to attack it from within.

…The Knights of Valor were a ruthless bunch, though. As soon as one of them perished, the body would be dragged back by the soldiers of the rear rows and either destroyed or debilitated before it could rise.

The Sword Army had been learning how to resist the authority of the Queen, as well.

Witnessing the dreadful scene, Rain remained motionless for a few moments, her breath ragged. Her muscles were aching from the strain of drawing the heavy bow, and she was suffering from the unbearable heat. Even with the [Pièce de Résistance] cooling her down, it was too intense and oppressive, sweat rolling down his skin and stinging her eyes.

She felt dirty.

The noise of the battle was deafening, and its sight was horrifying.

Rain was lost for a moment.

Then, her shadow moved, and a familiar voice whispered into her ear:

"Snap out of it!"

She flinched and tried to regain her composure.

"Summon your sword. Things are about..."

Before her teacher... Sunny... was done talking, a loud horn rolled across the stretch of the battlefield where the Seventh Legion was fighting. Rain failed to register what the unexpected sound meant, at first, but then shivered.

‘It's the Knights…’

The Knights of Valor were being called to advance.

She was currently standing on a toppled wagon, surrounded by fellow soldiers. Tamar's centuria had participated in an assault on the enemy formation not too long ago, and then retreated to rest and lick their wounds while other members of the legion continued the frantic attack.

But they weren't that far from the melee.

If the enemy threw all their power into an offensive push...

‘Ah…’

Rain dismissed her bow and manifested the Mark of Shadows into a black tachi.

Tamar had already risen from the ground by leaning on her enormous zweihander. Fleur had been treating one of the soldiers, so Ray grabbed her and pushed her back to safety.

The steel wall of fearsome knights suddenly surged forward, making the ground quake.

They suffered a few casualties while toppling the pilgrims, then crashed into the soldiers of the Seventh Legion a few moments later. Instantly, the carnage and mayhem of the battle turned ten times more intense, with all remaining order evaporating in one harrowing moment. A deafening clangor arose, drowning out the sound of human screams.

Before too long, the frontline of the legion was broken and pushed back, and the enemies were upon Tamar and her worn-down warriors.

Rain jumped off the wagon, thinking that they were lucky.

At least the enemies they faced were not the indomitable Knights of Valor, this time. Instead, they seemed to belong to one of the vassal clans... their cloaks were white instead of vermilion, at least, and many had decorated their armor with feathers.

The world shook as countless Aspects were unleashed and raged across the battlefield, and the merciless sky continued to batter the two great armies with radiance and heat.

Gripping her sword, Rain gritted her teeth and followed Tamar to fight the soldiers of the Sword Army.

...Her shadow followed too, of course.