1998. Old Friends

Sid knew the Handmaiden... the Blood Sister... quite well.

Her name was Felise. The two of them had been at the Academy together, and arrived at the Dark City at the same time.

There were many others that year, as well... although not everyone made it to the Bright Castle alive. Those who had either turned out to be lucky enough to become Guards or were left to rot in the outer settlement.

Sid and Felise were not lucky, but they happened to possess a few soul shards by then, so they paid the tribute and entered the Castle together. Naturally, they stuck close to each other once inside.

Their shards did not last long, though. Eventually, they had nothing left to pay tribute with... that day, Sid decided to leave for the outer settlement, while Felise decided to become a Handmaiden.

Sid did not blame her for that decision. Felise was... a soft girl. The harsh life in the outer settlement would be a death sentence for someone like her, most likely.

Hell, Sid was quite pessimistic about her own chances of survival.

But she did survive, somehow.

Their friendship did not end immediately, either. Felise used to sneak out food for her when she could, in those first few months on the Forgotten Shore. The two hid in a threadbare shack and shared their hopes, their fears, and their scars — both physical and mental.

But it was hard to maintain a connection when separated by the impenetrable walls of the Castle. Eventually, they grew apart. Felise became one of Seishan's people, while Sid became a hunter of the outer settlement.

And after the war for the Bright Castle and the siege of the Crimson Spire, well... Sid followed Nephis of the Immortal Flame, while Elly followed Seishan of Song. Their paths did not cross again in the many years since.

...Until today.

'Gods...'

Sid had been a passable fighter all the way back on the Forgotten Shore otherwise, she would not have survived the streets of the Dark City. And in the years since, she only grew more deadly.

The Chained Isles, the Southern Campaign, the Second Nightmare, and the countless battles fought side by side with Changing Star both across the Sword Domain and here in Godgrave - had tempered and sharpened her already outstanding skill, turning Sid into a unique existence among Ascended.

She had even fought the Lord of Shadows once!

That monster...

And yet, she was being pushed back by Felise.

Her former friend was just too swift, too strong, and too cunning. Her kris was shorter than the arming sword Sid wielded, and yet, it seemed to be everywhere all at once. Worse yet, the moment their blades clashed, Sid felt her hand trembling from the dire force of the impact.

It did not make any sense. Having long saturated her core and armed with Memories that no amount of money could buy, Sid was at the peak of what a Master could be, while Elly's Aspect — its Dormant Ability, at least — was tailored to Utility. How had she become so monstrously powerful?

Staggering back, Sid barely managed to activate her Awakened Ability in time. Her body became intangible for a split second, and the wavy blade of the beautiful kris passed through her forearm without cutting her tendons.

Sliding back on the bloodied surface of the sun-bleached bone, she regained her balance and raised her sword into a defensive stance, breathing heavily.

It did not make any sense at all...

"...When did you become so strong?"

Her voice came out hoarse and heavy.

Felise gritted her teeth, and then lunged forward with the speed of lightning.

"I... have always been strong..."

Sid used her Aspect to give herself a few moments of tremendous might, and battered the sharp kris aside. There was a deafening boom, and an explosion of fiery sparks.

Her free hand turned into a fist, flying toward the Handmaiden's beautiful face...

...Some distance away, Rain pushed an enemy aside, deflected a downward slash aimed at her head, and slammed the pommel of her tachi into the visor of another Awakened foe's helmet.

Gaining a moment to breathe, she swallowed a mouthful of searing air and looked around.

All around her, the warriors of the Seventh Legion were intertwined in a bloody struggle against the elite forces of the Sword Domain. The Feather Knights had turned out to be tough adversaries, even if they were no match for the true monsters of Valor.

Still, they possessed that eerie quality that all soldiers of the Sword Army possessed... they moved as one, seamlessly weaving a net of sharp steel to defend themselves and cut the enemies down. This strange ability was hard to explain with words, but very easy to become a victim of.

Many were already dead.

...Many dead were already rising from the ground, too.

That sight was both deeply horrifying and shamefully reassuring.

At least the Queen was with them.

Rain shuddered.

Not too far away, a vaguely familiar Blood Sister was fighting against a Knight of Valor, her crimson garments and his vermilion cloak turning into a red blur. The enemy Ascended was bleeding from a dozen hideous wounds, but it only seemed to make him stronger.

Apart from him, there was another dire problem on their section of the battlefield...

It was one of the Feather Knights — a young woman wearing light armor and a white cape, her pauldron and the plume of her helmet adorned with white feathers. Her youthful face was pretty and somber, and her hair seemed to be gold.

From the way she moved and her threatening presence on the battlefield, she gave Rain the same impression most Legacies did.

Sharp, grounded.

Deadly.

Among all the Awakened warriors they were facing, the young woman was the most dangerous, having already killed several of Rain's comrades.

That was why Tamar had fought her way in that direction, and was facing her personally.

‘Damn it…’

Their battle was both breathtaking and chilling, since both were at the very pinnacle of what ordinary Awakened strived to be... but mostly chilling, for Rain, because her heart skipped a beat every time the enemy's sharp blade whistled past Tamar, missing her vitals by a few centimeters at most.

Feeling an ominous premonition, Rain exhaled through gritted teeth and lunged back into the furious melee.

She was trying to make her way to where Tamar and the young Feather Knight were clashing, but it was taking her a long time…

There were too many people fighting, bleeding, and dying between her and the two Legacies. There was too much mayhem.

She could become one of those dying people at any moment, too, falling to the ground in a fountain of blood...

Even if her brother was a powerful Saint, he was not omnipotent. On a battlefield like this one, life and death could be decided in a split second.

And Rain... Rain was wasting too many seconds trying to reach Tamar.