1999. Embrace of Shadow

As Rain was struggling to fight her way toward Tamar, Tamar was struggling to contend against her fearsome enemy.

Both she and the young Feather Knight seemed to have fully saturated cores, possessed exceptional combat skill, and were stellar at controlling their essence — at least to the degree Awakened could. As a result, their physical prowess was truly superhuman, and their clash seemed like a whirlwind of steel that rolled across the battlefield, colliding with other warriors to consume them from time to time.

However, Rain could still make out the details of the fight, and while the power of the two Legacies were roughly equal, Tamar was obviously at a disadvantage due to being younger and less experienced.

At first glance, it looked like she was actually pushing the Feather Knight back... however, Rain could not fail to notice that Tamar's adversary had not used her Aspect yet.

Either it had nothing to do with combat, or she was waiting for the right time to unleash her Abilities.

The battle promised to be long and exhausting, after all, and powerful Aspect Abilities consumed a lot of essence — any Awakened soldier knew to ration their essence in a fight.

Augmenting one's body, using one's Awakened Ability, and activating the enchantments of one's Memories - those were the things that they only resorted to when necessary during prolonged battles.

If given a choice.

...And while the young knight seemed to still have the luxury of the choice, Tamar did not, already exhibiting bursts of startling speed as often as she could. That was the only reason she was managing to keep, for now.

Rain had hoped that their clash would take the two Legacies closer to her, but they only seemed to moving further away.

'Damn it!'

She did not know what to do.

A small, cowardly part of her whispered... that she did not have to do anything, either. Trying to help Tamar was putting Rain herself at risk. Tamar was so very proud of herself and her family — their history, their martial excellence, their tradition. Surely, a proud Legacy like her could fend for herself. Why did Rain have to risk her own life for an entitled Legacy?

She had to concentrate on protecting herself, instead. Surviving on this battlefield was already difficult enough – doing so while rushing to reach a deadly enemy was no different from inviting her own demise.

Stuck in the mass of sharp steel and fighting Awakened, she gritted her teeth and looked down, at her shadow.

Then, she forced out a stifled plea:

"I... I need help!"

Rain rarely asked her teacher for help. Her teacher was a mysterious and lofty existence, after all.

But her brother...

If she couldn't ask her older brother for help in a moment of desperation, then whom else could she ask?

A moment later, his soothing voice reached her ears through the cacophony of battle:

"There is something I can do. But... it is a bit unusual."

Rain clashed with a warrior of the Sword Army, deflecting his blade aside and delivering a devastating downward slash to his shoulder.

His steel armor prevented the black tachi from cutting deep, but the force of the blow threw the man to the ground.

Rain kicked him for good measure and shouted, not caring if anyone heard her:

"Do it! Do it now!"

In the next moment...

Something strange happened.

Hidden by the havoc of battle and unnoticed by anyone except for her, a second shadow separated from her own for a split second.

Then, the second shadow flowed up her leather boot... and wrapped itself around her.

Rain's eyes widened.

'W-what the...'

Once the shadow embraced her, a wondrous change took place.

Her body, which was aching from strain and fatigue a moment ago, was suddenly flooded with enormous power. Every fiber of her being felt energized and revitalized, her muscles brimming with potency and might. Her strength, her speed, her endurance... it felt as if they had magically increased twofold, or even more.

Her perception sharpened, making it easier to discern the details of what was happening around her.

Even her black tachi felt more deadly in her hand.

At the same time, she inexplicably felt calmer. There was... a subtle, but vast presence in her mind unfamiliar, but not foreign. The opposite of foreign, really.

That faint, dark presence was deep and reassuring, making her feel… secure.

[Better?]

Rain heard her brother's voice again. Only this time, it did not come from her shadow – instead, it resounded directly in her mind.

She froze for a moment.

[...Quite.]

That was indeed better.

Much better.

'Who even needs an Aspect?'

Gripping the hilt of her tachi, Rain took a deep breath, and launched herself forward.

Suddenly, the sea of Awakened in front of her was not as impenetrable anymore. Armed with her skill and embraced by the shadow, Rain cut through it with violent speed. Her sword turned into a dark blur as it parried and pushed enemy blades away, and when it was not enough, she used her own nimble body to either slip past them or toss them aside.

Perhaps that was what being an Ascended felt like…

Throwing one glance at the harrowing battle between the Blood Sister and the Knight of Valor, Rain shuddered.

No... she was not ready to face Masters yet.

In fact, she was probably still much weaker than Awakened with powerful combat Aspects that augmented their bodies were... granted, the embrace of the shadow was much more versatile than most such Aspects, enhancing all her physical traits instead of one or two.

It was enough.

The distance between Rain and Tamar finally started to shrink, and the more she grew used to her newfound power, the quicker it shrank.

'Hold on, Tamar!'

Rain finally felt that her ominous premonition was nothing more than a false sense of anxiety.

She was almost there. She had almost made it.

...But in the end, she did not.

Rain was less than a dozen meters away from the two fighting Legacies when the cadence of their clash changed.

The young Feather Knight did something that made Tamar sway, and then swiftly disengaged.

Her eyes suddenly shone like two cold stars, and blue arcs of electricity danced across her steel armor.

Before Rain could even react, she pointed her sword forward.

Then, an incinerating bolt of lighting shot from its tip, reaching Tamar in an instant and swallowing her figure in a flash of blue radiance.