2002. Kill or Be Killed

Rain tried to batter the Feather Knight into submission, but the young woman turned out to be much more stubborn and resilient than she had expected. Despite the barrage of crushing blows, her enemy continued to resist, not losing even a little bit of determination.

Well... Rain couldn't blame her.

The blond-haired girl was fighting for her life, after all.

Giving up meant death.

'Damn it…’

Her enemy was quite proficient in hand-to-hand combat, as well... more so than Rain was, sadly. After all, Rain had spent the past four years hunting down Nightmare Creatures, not wrestling humans.

Her training was thorough, but mostly theoretical.

The Feather Knight, on the other hand, seemed to possess a wealth of practical experience. She protected herself from being hurt too badly while delivering terrible punishment to Rain.

And there were the stinging arcs of electricity, as well...

Pain. Rain was in so much pain.

She was also afraid, frantic, and desperate...

After all, she was fighting for her life, too.

The Feather Knight managed to roll, pressing Rain into the ground. She swatted away Rain's arms and delivered a crushing blow, bruising – or maybe cracking – her ribs with an armored fist.

There was more agony.

Rain tried to use her legs to throw the blond-haired menace off, but her enemy simply went with the motion, spinning around her and catching her neck in an iron chokehold.

Suddenly, Rain couldn't breathe.

She struggled desperately, trying to pull the Feather Knight's arm off her throat. But it was useless. The enemy just groaned and pulled even harder, trying to crush her windpipe.

Even though Rain was stronger, she couldn't get a good grip. She was caught and immobilized.

All her strength was useless.

'Ι...'

Her vision started to blur.

'I can't die here…’

Shaken and dazed, she had forgotten all about the battle, the war, and the fact that her brother would not let her die.

All she knew was the desperate need to inhale... to survive.

She wanted to stab her killer with one of her enchanted arrows, but summoning a Memory would take too long... wouldn't it?

Luckily, Rain's weapon was not a Memory.

A few steps away, her black tachi was laying on the bloody surface of the ancient bone. As she called for it, the tachi stirred, and then dissolved, turning into a small shadow.

The shadow slithered across the ground like a little snake, and then climbed onto her outstretched hand.

A moment later, it turned into a black dagger with a long, narrow blade.

Twisting her body, Rain mustered all her remaining strength and drove the stiletto into the Feather Knight's thigh.

The young woman screamed as blood flowed onto the ancient bone.

Her hold grew weaker for a split second, and Rain used that short moment to free herself.

Spinning around, she tore the dagger from her enemy's flesh, and raised it to plunge the dark blade into the Feather Knight's throat.

And then, at the last second... Rain hesitated.

It was because she saw her enemy's face clearly.

The Feather Knight was young – older than her, but not by that much. Under the grime of the battlefield, her face was pale and pretty. Her beautiful golden hair was now mottled, soaked in sweat and blood.

Her eyes were opened wide, full of pain, fear, and despair.

Just like Rain's own.

Was that whom she was supposed to kill?

Of course, it was.

It was war, after all.

It was kill or be killed.

Rain was a hunter, a warrior, and a soldier. She was a soldier of the great Song Army, and the nameless Feather Knight was a soldier of the Sword Domain. She was Rain's enemy, and she would kill Rain immediately if their roles were reversed.

...Would she not?

This moment of hesitation could cost Rain her life if it went on any longer. The enemy was strong, determined, and deadly. She had to die.

So why...

Why did Rain feel so much disgust at the thought of killing this pale, frightened young woman?

Why did she feel reluctant to thrust the dagger forward and take the Feather's Knight's life?

Why...

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"Stay down, Elly!”

Sid pressed Felise into the ground, knowing that she was being foolish.

She should have finished the Handmaiden down ages ago.

She was being reckless and risking her life, allowing emotions to cloud her mind.

And yet, and yet...

"Stop struggling, you stupid girl!"

Sid growled.

Felise looked up at her from the ground. Her eyes were full of a strange emotion... was it resentment? Defiance? Challenge?

Maybe all of those.

But there was something else there, as well, hidden deep within.

Fear... panic. And despair.

However, despite it all, Felise did not stop struggling.

The sparks swirling around her hand finally dimmed, manifesting into an intricately crafted, razor-sharp knife.

A deadly blade.

Sid froze for a split second, staring down at her former friend numbly.

There was no time to hesitate anymore, and no choice.

'No...'

...And then, she pushed her dagger down.

It cut through the fabric of the Handmaiden's crimson garment, and plunged into her flesh.

Sneaking under her ribs, and cutting deep.

Hot blood washed over Sid's hand, and she felt Elly's body shudder under her.

The knife fell from the Handmaiden's weakened grip.

The defiance in her eyes was replaced by disbelief... and pain.

And sorrow.

The same emotions Sid felt, lost in the middle of this calamitous, appalling battle.

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Rain looked into the eyes of the Feather Knight, knowing that her time was running out.

The enemy was already recovering from shock... which meant that a moment later, her chance of killing the enemy would disappear like a ghost.

It would be so easy, to thrust the dagger forward and steal the young woman's life.

There was no reason not to.

Because Rain was a soldier.

And she had been taught well.

The essence of combat...

But was that what Rain wanted to be?

A murderer?

Before the war... she had wanted to build things, not destroy them. To add to the world, not take away from it.

It seemed so distant, as if it had happened a lifetime ago.

Still, one had to be alive to build anything. And she had to kill to stay alive.

There was no time to hesitate, and no choice.

That was just basic logic.

...And yet, Rain found herself unwilling.

She was dazed, hurting, and only starting to recover from almost being strangled to death. She could barely think, let alone think straight, which wasn't the best state to make profound decisions.

But then again, maybe it was the best state.

Stripped of all reason, Rain was left face-to-face with her deepest, most fundamental instincts.

With the things that made her... her.

And what Rain found was that she didn't want to be a murderer, a killer, and a destroyer.

She only felt disgust at the prospect.

Even if it meant not getting to become anything else.

'I'm sorry...'

She had chosen to join the war herself. But in the end...

It seemed that Rain wasn't cut out to be a soldier.

Letting out a quiet sigh, she slowly lowered her dagger.

And as she did, Rain felt something deep and profound change inside of her.

Forever.

A moment later, the Feather Knight lunged to the side, grasping the hilt of her sword.

Before she could raise it, though... Both of them looked up.

There, above them... a blinding star seemed to be falling from the sky.

The incandescent mass of white radiance plummeted toward the blood-soaked battlefield and crushed into it with a deafening thunderclap. A violent shockwave was raised by its arrival, throwing the warriors of the two great armies away from each other.

When the winds settled a few moments later, Rain gasped.

...A beautiful goddess was standing amidst the dirt and blood of the appalling battlefield, her pure white radiance seemingly unblemished... incapable of being blemished... by the crimson dust of the mortal world.

Two breathtaking wings shone in the air behind her, and a band of lustrous metal rested on her head like a crown.

Her eyes were like a sea of white flame.

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame had descended onto the battlefield.