1628 Weary Pilgrim

Rain made a point of using light equipment, and yet, she carried considerable weight. There were her clothes and armor, her bow, a quiver of arrows, the javelin she used, her sword, the hunting knife attached to her belt, and another knife hidden in her boot. There was also plenty of stuff in her pack and attached to her pack - everything she needed to hunt and survive in the wilderness.

It would have been nice to simply summon and dismiss all these things when she needed them, but alas, Rain couldn't use Memories. She couldn't even really use the Memories that someone else had summoned and handed to her, because her soul did not have a core, and she was not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell.

Weighed down by the additional burden of the Stone Worm's hide and fangs, Rain felt miserable.

It didn't help at all that Ravenheart was situated in the mountains. She was currently at the bottom of a deep gorge, not too far from the relatively flat area at the foot of the mountain chain where the farms feeding the city were located. There was a long and tough climb ahead of her,

Using the javelin as a staff, Rain slowly made her way out of the gorge, Luckily, she was in good shape... amazing shape, really, Her lithe and resilient body had been tempered by years of relentless training, and was pretty much at the very limit of what mundane humans could achieve.

In the past, Rain had trained extensively with private tutors. She had thought that her physical condition was stellar back then... she had known nothing. Under her teacher's harsh and prudent guidance, her physical state entered an entirely new territory. Her youthful body was strong, tenacious, and as nimble as that of a cat.

Even the most elite athletes would have been rattled and green with envy if they witnessed what she was capable of... not that it mattered. Any Awakened could still blow her away with one half-hearted slap.

'Ah... whatever!’

Sometimes, Rain was angry at her teacher for prohibiting her from challenging the First Nightmare. But, at the same time, she was thankful to him. Not for her own sake, but on behalf of her parents.

They had already lost one child to the Nightmare Spell. If she was alone, Rain would have gladly risked her life for the chance of becoming an Awakened... but she could not bear the thought of putting her mom and dad through that suffering again.

So, her teacher's promise to help her Awaken without having to challenge a Nightmare was like a glimmer of light in a sea of darkness,

In any case.., even though climbing mountains in terrible weather while carrying a heavy load was hard and miserable, she had long grown accustomed to it.

As Rain ascended higher and higher, her teacher walked side by side with her, going over the events of the hunt. She had performed well and managed to kill the Stone Worm without sustaining any injuries, but there were still things that could have been done better, and things that could have been done differently.

"Maybe I shouldn't sell the blades we harvested from the Stone Worm. Next time, I can place them at the bottom of the pit like spikes."

"That's a good idea, but don't rely on traps too much. This time, the bastard ran straight, but next time, you might not get so lucky. What were you going to do if the worm bypassed your pit?"

"Retreat to lure him into the second pit, of course. And anyway, was it really luck? I investigated the slope and found the wormholes, chose an ambush spot, and dug pits between the former and the latter. Beasts are stupid, so the enemy would have gone after me using the shortest path. Sure, it turned out to be a Monster... a bit smarter, but still pretty dumb."

"What do you think luck is, brat? Luck is not something that just happens to you, it's something that you make happen. Believe me, I would know! I used to be the luckiest person in the world. Unluckiest, too....”

Soon, Rain climbed high enough to escape the raining ash. The scorching heat was replaced by merciless cold, and the black soot was replaced by pristine snow. A strong wind rose, chilling her to the bone and almost tossing her off the slope.

Cursing, Rain shivered and hurriedly took her coat out of the pack, wrapping herself in its warmth and pulling the fur hood down. The coat, too, was fashioned from the hide of the Awakened Beast she had hunted, so it was enough to protect her from the fatal cold of the mountains.

Buttoning up the tall collar to shield her face, she lifted the pack and turned to look at her teacher.

He was standing a few meters away, wearing nothing but his light armor. Nevertheless, he was not showing any sign of being bothered by the cold, which only went further to solidify Rain's conviction that her teacher was some kind of unholy wraith.

His gazed was strangely solemn.

Turning to look in the same direction, she suddenly noticed a dark silhouette slowly moving through the snowstorm. Rain tensed for a moment, but then relaxed, noticing that it was a human.

A moment later, the strong wind died down, and the blizzard ended just as suddenly as it had begun.

She waved a hand and headed toward the stranger.

"Hey! Are you lost?"

However, her hand froze in the air. Something was wrong…

Why hadn't her teacher disappeared into the shadows? He never showed himself when other people were around.

Her javelin was already rising when she finally got a good look at the approaching stranger.

...It was a young woman three or four years younger than herself. A teenager, really. Just like her teacher, she was only wearing a suit of light armor, which was torn and turned dark with frozen blood. Her skin was so pale that it looked blue, like that of a corpse, and her steps were slow and clumsy.

Her eyes were like frosty glass, devoid of any light, and her face was like a mask carved out of ice.

She was dead.

"Don't disturb her."

Her teacher's voice was glum. Rain grew quiet, lowering her javelin, and then took a step back to let the dead girl pass. A tiny sigh escaped from her lips.

The closer the walking corpse drew, the better she could see the terrible wounds covering her frigid body. Eventually, unable to look, Rain turned away and furtively rubbed her eyes.

The dead girl walked past them without showing any reaction, her bruised pale face motionless, and slowly disappeared into the swirling snow. A few moments later, the wind erased her footprints, as if she had never existed.

Rain and her teacher were left alone on the snowy slope.

She sighed.

The winter solstice had just passed recently...

"Is she... is she one of this year's Sleepers?"

He nodded.

"She must have died on the way to a Citadel. So, the Queen took her."

Rain remained silent for a while, then sighed again.

Queen Song held authority over death, so anything that died in her Domain was taken by her. It wasn't rare to see the dead pilgrims walking through the snow. For some, the journey was long... for some, the journey was short. After reaching Ravenheart, they entered the ice caves under the palace and became the Queen's servants.

Queen Song was the queen of the living, but she was also the queen of the dead. That was why people in the Sword Domain derisively called her the Queen of Worms.

That nickname was preposterous, of course. There were no worms in the Ice Halls, where the cold was so terrible that only the dead could survive.

...Rain stared in the direction where the taken girl had disappeared, considering if she should follow her. Following a pilgrim was safer, because Nightmare Creatures tended to avoid them.

But in the end, she decided to continue on her way. Seeing the dead girl was just too unnerving.

Because the perished Sleeper reminded Rain of her own insolent aspirations to become a carrier of the Nightmare Spell against her teacher's wishes. If she had...

Would she have ended up walking frozen through the snow, too?