1707 The Fine Nuances of Demon Hunting

The stars shone brightly in the cold black sky. Sitting on a wide tree branch, Rain studied them silently, surrounded by darkness.

'It's strange.’

Some of the stars looked familiar, but she couldn't recognize any constellations. The alien sky of the Dream Realm was different from that of Earth, but worse than that, it was both fickle and unreliable. The stars shining upon the Song Domain were different from those illuminating the Sword Domain, and even various regions of the two kingdoms did not share the same heaven.

Some places did not even have a sun, while others were bathed in the light of many moons.

Astronomers were probably going crazy...

"Why are you still awake? Sleep. You'll need all your strength tomorrow."

Her teacher's voice resounded softly from the darkness, making Rain sigh.

He was right. She had climbed the enormous tree and tied herself to the branch in order to rest, but now that there was nothing else left to do...

"I can't sleep."

Sleep was escaping her.

Her teacher chuckled.

"Nervous?”

Rain remained silent for a while. Was she nervous? She couldn't tell.

They had spent a lot of time preparing for this hunt. From searching for suitable prey and learning all that could be learned about it to coming up with plans and contingencies, studying the terrain, and preparing all the necessary equipment. The process was only different from all the previous hunts because it had been so extensive.

She was supposed to kill an Awakened Demon this time, after all.

So, Rain did feel a little nervous... frightened, even. But at the same time, she was a little excited. Not only because successfully slaying the demon would finally allow her to grasp the key of Awakening, which she had been trying to do for many years, but also because of the challenge itself.

She always felt a pleasant rush of adrenaline when facing appaling abominations in battle. To be strong, to be able to protect herself and other people - that was what she wanted, and why she had accepted the ominous shadow's offer to be her teacher.

Rain smiled.

"What is there to be nervous about? It's just an Awakened Demon."

Her teacher laughed in the darkness.

"Fair enough."

There was a bit of silence, and then Rain asked against her better Judgment:

"Teacher, what was the first Awakened Demon you fought like?"

The darkness spoke in a tone of nostalgia:

"Oh, that guy? Ah... as tall as a house, covered in a carapace of impregnable steel armor, with claws strong enough to crush diamonds and a pair of razor-sharp scythes in place of hands. A really charming fellow."

Rain raised an eyebrow. Was such a creature really worth feeling nostalgic about?

"So, how did you kill it?"

Her teacher laughed.

"Let's see... that was before my Awakening, when I was not much stronger than you. So I summoned a Corrupted Devil and pitted them against each other. At least I think it was a Corrupted Devil truth be told, I still have no idea what that thing was, even all these years later. It sure was unforgettably creepy, though."

He paused for a moment, and then added with a sigh:

"And then I acted as bait while my partner finished the wounded demon off."

Rain opened her eyes wide, stunned. She wasn't even sure what shocked her more the fact that her teacher had apparently been able to summon Corrupted Devils before Awakening, or that he used to have a partner.

Who would partner up with that insufferable bastard? Were they crazy?

She hesitated for a moment, then asked curiously:

"Where's your partner now, teacher?"

The darkness remained silent for a while, this time.

Then, he said in a carefree tone:

"Well, I imagine she's in a beautiful heavenly palace, looking down upon us mortals."

His tone was carefree, but for the first time, Rain could feel a hint of a strange emotion in it.

What did he mean?

If her teacher was a dark deity, then could his partner be a celestial deity? No - gods were dead, as were all the lesser divinities. Only Nightmare Creatures remained.

So, then... was his partner dead? Was that what he meant?

Right, it made sense. Her teacher had once admitted to being thousands of years old, so anyone who had fought by his side before his Awakening would have been dead for a very, very long time.

Rain sighed, suddenly feeling pity for her poor teacher. Wishing to distract him from unpleasant memories, she asked:

"But how did you manage to summon a Terror to fight that demon?”

He chuckled.

"By setting the demon's boss on fire. Now, enough talking. Go to sleep."

"The... the demon's boss? Do demons have bosses?”

Full of confusion, Rain let out a long sigh and closed her eyes.

The tree branch was swaying slightly under her, which was... a bit calming.

Just before she slipped into the embrace of sleep, a sudden thought surfaced in her drowsy mind.

‘Wait... if he killed that demon with a partner... then why the hell is he making me hunt this demon alone?!'

Her anxious dreams were cold and restless.

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In the morning, Rain untied the rope fastening her to the branch and carefully climbed down. Soon enough, she reached the ground, standing on the outskirts of a vast forest of dead trees.

Ravenheart was so far away that the mountain chain was merely a dark line on the horizon. There was no ash around, and although the frozen ground was covered in frost, there was no snow either.

This was the place where the Awakened Demon she was intedning to kill dwelled.

Humanity had conquered a vast area in the Dream Realm, but that did not mean that the two Domains were entirely safe. In fact, safety was a fleeting illusion here - apart from the Citadels and their immediate vicinity, the wilds were still ruled by the Nightmare Creatures. Humans had only really started to encroach on their reign after the advent of the Dream Gates four years ago, building roads and expanding their settlements.

In that regard, the current era was very much like the dawn of the legendary Age of Heroes, when mortal champions battled against countless abominations to help the nascent human civilization survive and spread.

Of course, modern humans had no gods to guide them. They only had Queen Song, the King of Swords... and the Nightmare Spell.

...Well, in Rain's case, she also had an oddball of a shadow showing her the way.

While she was checking her weapons in the dim twilight of the early dawn, her teacher asked calmly:

"What makes demons so dangerous? Their strength? Their speed? Their resilience?"

Rain shook her head.

"No. It's their intelligence. Beasts and monsters might be stronger, faster, and much more resilient than me, but they are also not too bright. A demon, however, is as intelligent as me... it might even outsmart me, if I'm not careful."

Her teacher emerged from her shadow and nodded.

"So, how do you kill a demon?”

She counted her arrows while answering:

"By being more prepared. By controlling the battlefield, knowing the terrain, and learning about the enemy in advance. By taking initiative and not making any mistakes. By having a clear mind and deadly resolve."

He smiled.

"No one is perfect. Mistakes happen whether you want to or not... so what are you going to do if you do make a mistake?"

Rain stared at him for a moment, then returned the smile defiantly.

"Curse you bitterly while I die?"

Her teacher laughed.

"Go on and try dying. See what happens..."

She stared at him for a bit, then shook her head.

"Fine, Since teacher insists, I won't die."

He nodded with a smile.

"Good. Now go and kill that demon.”