1708 The Huntsman

Rain had taken off her winter coat, her light armor, and even her military jacket, leaving only the henley and the wool vest on. No amount of armor was going to protect her from the Awakened Demon, so she wanted her movements to be as agile and unobstructed as possible. It seemed a little poetic, as if she was proclaiming that there would be no retreat, only victory... or death.

It was also a bit funny. Awakened warriors were often shown preparing mentally for battle while donning their armor, but she was doing the same while taking it off. Such was the pitiful life of a mundane hunter.

The preparations had long been complete, the traps were laid. All Rain had to do was venture into the depths of the forest and face the demon.

Taking a deep breath, she went through a series of stretching exercises. She had always been nimble, but after years of training under the sinister shadow, her flexible body was like that of a snake... no, a gymnast. A very graceful, limber gymnast! That was a much better mental image.

Still, she had to be careful when going all out. Her mundane flesh was lagging behind her skill and training, so it was easy to damage,

"What are you, a ballerina?"

Rain glared at her teacher silently.

"Didn't you once tell me that you're the best dancer in the world... two worlds, even? So who's the ballerina?"

He coughed.

"Well, uh... if your teacher said it, then it's true! There was this one time I danced with a princess at a ball, and immediately after, she dragged me into a private room. No, wait... or was it me who dragged her into a private room? In any case, the two of us ended up in a private room!"

Her teacher smiled wistfully.

"And let me tell you, what happened in that room... ah, it was nothing short of life-changing..."

Rain stared at him for a moment, then pretended to be sick.

"Old pervert..."

He was offended.

"Who are you calling old?! No, wait, who are you calling a pervert?!"

She did not deign to answer, shaking her head silently. At the same time, though... Rain noticed that her previous nervousness was almost entirely gone. She felt calm and ready, as if her teacher's familiar nonsense could magically make any situation, no matter how dire, seem mundane and ordinary as well.

Rain took a deep breath and checked her weapons one last time,

She had already stringed her bow, Her quiver was full of arrows - she had made the arrows herself, tashioning the arrowheads from the bones of Awakened abominations. Her Javelin was ready to be used, while her dagger was freshly sharpened.

Finally, there was her sword. She drew the tachi from the scabbard and studied its blade.

At that moment, her teacher suddenly spoke:

"Wait a moment. For this hunt... I'll lend you something better."

He walked closer, and then bent down, reaching for the shadow of her sword.

In the next moment, something strange happened. Her teacher's hand seemed to reach into the ground and pull the shadow off it. Suddenly, her tachi didn't have a shadow anymore... however, there was an identical tachi in his hand, only made entirely of lusterless black steel.

Rain looked at it, suddenly feeling a cold chill run down her spine.

The black tachi... seemed sharp enough to cut the world in half, like a blade made of pure killing intent. It was as if she was looking at death itself.

And that eerie sword was tossed at her carelessly a moment later.

"Ah!"

Rain scrambled to catch it and grasped the black hilt, It was strange... despite the overwhelming feeling of cold and dark power the black sword emanated, it felt exactly like her own in the hand. The weight, the balance, even the tactile feeling of the leather ito.

She looked at her teacher silently.

It was easy to forget because of how easygoing and immature he was... but her teacher was immensely powerful. Actually, she didn't even know how powerful he was, exactly. It was only in moments like this one that Rain was reminded of the fact.

Pulling out a sword worthy of being wielded by a Saint out of nowhere? No matter how shocking, that was exactly the kind of thing her teacher would do.

She carefully sheathed the black tachi, making sure that it didn't slice the scabbard apart.

"This sword seems too powerful to be wielded by a mundane human. You didn't forget that I can't control my essence, did you?"

Her teacher shrugged.

"That's alright. It's infused with mine."

Rain nodded, then collected the things she was going to leave behind and placed them in a nook between the roots of the old tree, to be retreated later. Her original sword went atop the neat pile.

She stood up, looked into the depth of the forest, and started walking.

As she did, her teacher spoke:

"That sword should be able to cut the flesh of an Awakened Demon even in your hands, Still, don't rely on it too much, Remember... the sword is just a tool, You are the weapon, You are the one who has to kill the enemy, not your sword.”

Rain nodded calmly.

"I remember."

She cleared her mind of all distractions, focusing solely on the hunt.

The demon she was going to kill... was called the Huntsman, quite Ironically. That was what the people in Ravenheart called him, but actually, the creature's proper name was Chalice Knight.

The reason why Rain and her teacher had chosen hìm was precisely because there was a lot of information to be learned about the Chalice Knights. These abominations were not independent Nightmare Creatures, after all rather, they had been mid-rank minions of a Fallen Titan.

The Titan's territory used to be about a hundred kilometers away from this forest. Coincidentally, it lay between Ravenheart and one of the other large cities of the Song Domain, preventing the construction of a convenient road. A year or so ago, Song Seishan had battled the Titan and destroyed it, obliterating most of its minions in the process and scattering the rest.

Rain remembered that event well because there had been a series of missions issued by the town hall in the aftermath of the battle, all having to do with hunting down the remnant abominations. She wasn't quite strong enough to challenge them, but many Awakened cohorts were. So, the surviving minions of the slain Titan had been swiftly eradicated.

All except for one Chalice Knight who had found his way into this forest. Despite the fact that the abomination had lost its monstrous steed, thus becoming much weaker, he still managed to decimate several cohorts that ventured into the forest to kill him.

Perhaps there was something special about this particular demon, or perhaps the Awakened warriors had come unprepared. In any case, they were forced to retreat, and the oddly fearsome Chalice Knight earned a foreboding nickname, the Huntsman.

Rain did not consider herself to be stronger than the Awakened fighters who had tried to slay the creature in the past. However, she was definitely much more cautious and prepared than they had been.

So, she was going to hunt the Huntsman.

Once she did, her essence would Awaken, and she would be able to start forming a soul core.

And once her soul core was formed... then, finally, she would be stronger.