1709 Hunter's Prey

The Huntsman was so dangerous because he ruled the forest like a stealthy predator. He moved unseen and attacked from the mist and darkness, picking off his victims one by one. He also seemed to know the value of intimidation and mental pressure, displaying the mutilated corpses of his victims on the branches of the ancient trees for everyone to see.

Or maybe skinning corpses simply spoke to the abomination's aesthetic sensibility. In any case, his human enemies often faced him already shaken and rattled, which was a deadly poison for anyone going into battle.

Rain knew that he was approaching the creature's lair because she saw a human skeleton hanging in the trees, its bones cluttering against each other in the wind. Her expression darkened.

However, she wasn't shaken. She wasn't rattled, either. Her mind was much too strong to be poisoned by fear — instead, fear only sharpened it.

'...I'll need to bury them properly after everything is over.'

She shivered — not because of the morbid scene, but simply because she was cold. The battle would warm her up, though, so it was alright.

Every time an Awakened cohort ventured into the forest, the Huntsman was in no hurry to attack. Sensing the threat presented by a group of experienced Awakened warriors, he stalked them silently or retreated into his lair, waiting for the night to come. Then, when impenetrable darkness shrouded the world, his own hunt would begin.

Rain was not a cohort of Awakened warriors, so she was pretty sure that the demon would not wait to attack her. It was for the best — she knew that if she failed to slay the enemy before nightfall, her chances of survival would drop to zero.

And yet, the Huntsman had not shown himself yet.

What was he waiting for?

She frowned, then glanced at her shadow.

"Could it be that the demon is afraid of you, teacher?"

A calm voice resounded from the darkness:

"It is highly unlikely. I am very hard to notice when I'm hiding in the shadows. There is a much simpler explanation, don't you think?"

Rain nodded.

Indeed, there was. The Huntsman was not omniscient, after all. He simply had not noticed her yet.

Which was what she had been hoping for. Rain knew that she wasn't strong enough to face an Awakened Demon in a direct confrontation, which meant that she had to rely on traps to even the odds. The problem was that even luring such a creature into a trap was problematic, because he was much faster than her.

'Well, if he doesn't want to welcome me...'

She was going to have to announce her arrival.

Soon, the smell of blood and smoke permeated the forest.

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There was no sound. Not even a single branch trembled. And yet, there was a presence — a dangerous presence moving through the forest, somehow remaining unseen.

Rain could feel it. Her intuition, which she had honed through dozens of hunts, was telling her that a deadly foe was approaching.

Sitting on a branch downwind of where the smell of smoke was coming from, her skin smeared in ash to mask her scent, she was watching the forest intently. Even then, she was only using her peripheral vision to observe it — many Nightmare Creatures could sense when a gaze was directed at them, so she knew better than to stare.

It was for that reason that she managed to notice a small anomaly in the surrounding area.

'The frost...'

The patterns of frost on the ground were broken. It was as though someone heavy had walked past, leaving footprints on the frozen soil, and yet avoided her sight completely.

'He's... like a chameleon.'

Once she knew what to look for, Rain quickly managed to notice a subtle anomaly. There was a patch of air that seemed to be a little hazy, but still transparent, as if distorted by heat. But how could there be heat in this frigid cold? No, the almost unnoticeable distortion was the masked figure of the Huntsman, moving noiselessly in the direction of the smoke.

The demon was cautious and prudent, but not as prudent and cautious as she was.

That was because Rain was weak, and had no other choice but to remain humble.

'No wonder so many Awakened were defeated by this demon.'

This Chalice Knight was a bit special, indeed.

Luckily, Rain had known about that strange ability of his in advance. She had talked to the members of the cohorts who had ventured into the forest to slay the Huntsman in the past, and learned quite a bit about this abomination.

That was why she had come prepared.

She held her breath, feeling the world grow stark and clear.

Her battle-ready mind entered the state of clarity.

That state...

She had been quite angry at her teacher for how vague and confounding his explanations about the meaning of clarity were. But after finally mastering it, Rain finally understood every word.

Master the body, master the mind... the essence of combat was murder, and every action she took in combat only served one of two purposes — to kill the enemy or to prevent the enemy from killing her.

Something like that could not be explained with words, only learned in battle. However, once Rain truly understood that unfathomably deep, but simple truth, every battle she had fought after that was easier.

Time seemed to slow down as her perception expanded. Her thoughts accelerated, and at the same time, the scope of the world grew narrower, eliminating all unnecessary distractions. She could feel every minute detail of her environment with striking sharpness, from the direction of the wind to the slowly dancing snowflakes.

Down below, the almost invisible menace slowly approached the bonfire she had made with wet branches, and the butchered corpse of a Dormant beast she had laid as bait.

It was time to strike.

There was no way back anymore.

Drawing her bow, she finally allowed her gaze to fall directly on the empty space where the Huntsman was supposed to be, and let the arrow fly.

Rain had thought that her shot was immaculate, and almost impossibly swift. From the moment she nocked the arrow to the moment she let go of the string, less than a heartbeat passed.

And yet, frighteningly, that single heartbeat was enough for the demon to react. She couldn't see his movements, but the vague patch of subtly hazy air shifted at an impossible speed.

The arrow flashed past.

...But that was alright.

Rain had not been aiming at the invisible abomination, anyway.

Instead, she aimed at a burlap sack hanging above the bonfire. The arrow split it open, and fine powder poured into the air.

It was not gunpowder, nor was it some expensive alchemical concoction. It was simple flour.

However, when the cloud of flour ignited, it still produced a fiery flash. That flash couldn't be called a proper explosion, really, since there was no closed vessel to contain it, but it still served its purpose...

That was, to cover the Huntsman in soot.

Suddenly, his invisible form was not that invisible anymore.

In fact, whatever camouflage the creature had been using was broken by the rain of burning flour, and Rain finally saw the Huntsman in all his vile glory.