1713 Fire and Ice

Swamps had a natural inclination to produce methane, which often remained trapped beneath the surface, forming voluminous bubbles of putrid gas. And those were only the swamps of the waking world, which were much safer than the marshes of the Dream Realm... well, at least they had been before the Dark Times.

In times of war, humanity had unleashed all kinds of weaponized horrors upon itself. So, today, there was no telling what kind of buried plagues could be released into the world if someone went around digging in the swamps of Europe or the Northern Quadrant.

The Dream Realm might have actually been safer, in that regard.

None of it mattered to Rain, though. What mattered for her was that methane was highly flammable.

And so, when the Huntsman shattered the liquor bottle, it ignited.

'Crap...'

Diving behind the tree, Rain pressed her body into the ground and covered her ears. In the next moment, she was momentarily blinded by a violent flash.

Then, she was assaulted by unbearable heat.

And then, the entire world shuddered.

‘Ah?’

Rain was tossed into the air as the tree she had been hiding behind was obliterated.

That... was not supposed to happen. Marsh gas could ignite and burn, but not explode, and especially not so fiercely - at least not under an open sky.

Perhaps the flames somehow reached a huge pocket of trapped methane, or perhaps it had something to do with the pockets of gas sticking to the surface of the ice. Perhaps the entire swamp was anomalous, and the gas she had set aflame itself was unnatural.

In any case, the result of tossing the liquor bottle surpassed Rain's expectations.

By a lot.

Crashing into the ground, she felt the wind being knocked out of her and let out a suffocated groan. Rolling in a mess of limbs, Rain fell into shallow water and came to a halt.

‘That... hurt.’

She was hurt and dazed.

But there was no time for such frivolous things as pain and disorientation.

Opening her eyes, Rain pushed air into her lungs, coughed on smoke, and slowly stood up.

The swamp around her had transformed, It had been a plain of pure white snow once. Then, It turned into a chaotic mess of broken ice and surging black water.

Now... It was a burning Inferno.

Ghostly flames danced on the surface of the glistening black water, and the air was full of smoke. The snow had melted, and the shards of ice were swiftly disappearing in the scorching heat. Everywhere Rain looked, darkness was intertwined with a fiery glow, and shadows undulated as they danced among the flames.

Rain was assaulted both by chilling cold and terrible heat. Her shirt was soaked in icy swamp water and sweat at the same time, which was a terrible combination. The ash she had smeared on herself to mask her scent had been washed away.

The cut on her side was pulsing with pain. That wound would have to be disinfected... a lot...

"Ah..."

She let out a long sigh.

At the same time, her sword hissed as it left the scabbard.

Gripping the black hilt with both hands, Rain took a step forward and left the shallow water behind, returning to the soil of the small island.

There was no fire where she had stood, and close to no flames where the twisted tree - nor a smoldering stump - had been. However, a fiery wall rose at the opposite edge of the island.

As Rain assumed a stance, the wall of flame parted, and a lumbering figure emerged from, stepping onto the island in the clangor of metal.

The Huntsman looked a little haggard. The moss covering his armor had turned to ash, and one of the deer antlers crowning his helmet was broken. There were cinders glowing in the cracks of his breastplate, and Rain's nose was assaulted by the stench of burned fur.

The abomination had lost his tattered cloak, but the dreadful battleaxe was still held firmly in his iron fist... even if its long shaft seemed charred.

Almost twice as tall as Rain was, the ancient demon towered above her like a grim reaper. The darkness nestled in the crack of his bestial visor was full of frenzied fury.

...But she couldn't help but notice that the Huntsman was hunching slightly, as if suffering from grievous wounds.

Her lips twisted into a dark smile against her will.

"What a pity. There's nowhere for me to retreat until the flames die... would you mind waiting patiently for a minute or two?"

Instead of answering, the Huntsman raised his harrowing axe,

Rain's dark eyes glistened.

"...Didn't think so. Well then, I'll just have to kill you bastard right here.”

A split second later, she was already moving.

Of course, the Huntsman was moving as well.

And a lot faster than her, despite weighing at least five times as much.

But Rain knew how he was going to act, and where he was going to move. It was not because she had a prophetic gift or could read the abomination's mind. It was simply because she understood his physical limits from doing her research and observing him in battle, as well as because of her knowledge of combat.

She knew how to wield a polearm and how one proficient in the use of a great axe would most likely attack. She knew all the elements that comprised such a suit of full-plate armor, how they were fastened to one's body and to each other, and what limitations to one's movements they would cause.

She knew that the demon would favor his right leg, because his right knee was not damaged, and that he would protect the left side of his chest more, since the breastplate there was cracked, and the flesh beneath had already been pierced by her javelin.

Most of all, she knew that the Hunstsman was boiling with demented wrath. That mad frenzy clouded his judgement, and made his actions more predictable,

So, she had a few advantages of her own.

As the flames danced and the small island quaked from the heavy burden of the demon's footsteps, she dashed forward and met him with a flash of her black sword.

The harrowing battleaxe would have split her in two if she had not sidestepped at the last moment. Rain had managed to evade the attack, albeit just barely... still, the length of the axe, and the Huntsman's arm length, were too great for her to strike at the towering abomination.

But she had not aimed at the demon's mighty body.

Instead, she aimed at the axe.

Just as the fearsome weapon flashed past her, the black sword fell in pursuit...

And severed the charred shaft cleanly.

It had avoided the metal bands reinforcing it and bit into the burned wood, slicing through it as if it was butter.

The axe blade sunk into the muddy soil, and the Huntsman's balance was suddenly disrupted without its weight.

Now holding only a severed shaft in his hands, the demon staggered and fell heavily to one knee.

The ground quaked.

In that moment... Rain could finally reach his body with her sword.