1714 Apex Predator

The enemy was in front of her, kneeling, and momentarily vulnerable.

Who knew how long that vulnerability would last? The demon would most likely regain his bearing a heartbeat later.

Everything inside Rain screamed for her to attack, to throw her body forward and slay the abomination before that happened. After all, she could not be sure that there would be another chance later.

Adrenalin flooded her bloodstream, and her heart thundered feverishly. Her pupils widened, her mind drowning in excitement, fear, and frenetic urgency.

But, at the same time, the memory of the teacher's arrogant voice rang in her ears:

"Bruise? What do you mean, it will leave a bruise? Listen, disciple... you should be grateful to your kind and gentle teacher for educating you so tenderly! The last time I made such a mistake, I was stepped on by a mountain. Not that left a bruise!"

It was the mark of a skilled warrior to keep a cool head in the middle of the fiercest of battles, And so, she suppressed her excitement, ignored her fear, and cast away her sense of urgency,

'Don't be greedy.., greed will get you killed. It is a sin, and only those strong enough to bear the consequences have the right to be sinful...! Rain did not abandon her caution and attacked calmly.

The tip of her black sword slid into the seam of the Huntsman's breastplate, plunging deep into his side.

This time, there was very little resistance. Unlike her javelin, the dark tachi pierced the demon's flesh almost effortlessly.

But instead of leaning into the thrust or twisting the blade to wreak more damage, Rain immediately pulled it back and jumped away.

And just in time.

Although the Huntsman seemed momentarily dazed, and his weapon had been destroyed, his fist was already tearing the air with stunning speed. If Rain had been a split second too slow to disengage, her head would have been turned into bloody pulp. As it was, she had enough time to block with the dark tachi, and received the harrowing blow on its blade.

She was thrown backward like a rag doll. Which was the intended outcome. If Rain had been stubborn and tried to stand her ground, her body would have received the bulk of the impact. But by allowing her to be carried away, she dissipated the force greatly.

...It still hurt like hell.

It felt like every bone in her body was about to burst.

But they didn't.

Rain was tossed back into the shallow water once again and skidded in the mud. The ley water washed away her sweat and numbed the pulsing pain in her side, which felt almost pleasant.

‘Ah... I need to stand up...'

This time, it took her a little longer to gather herself.

Feeling the mud starting to pull her down, Rain groaned and rolled onto her stomach, then staggered to her feet.

The black tachi rose into a high stance, sending drops of dirty water flying.

'How badly did I wound him?’

It had to be a pretty terrible wound... the black sword created by her teacher was even sharper, deadlier, and much more frightening than she had imagined. If the Huntsman had been a human, he would have been dead by now, his heart pierced by the dark blade.

But he wasn't... he was a Chalice Knight, a demon from the retinue of an ancient titan that had haunted these lands for thousands of years.

So, even though the wound Rain had delivered him was ghastly, it was definitely not enough to bring the abomination down.

She had done something equally important, though.

She had destroyed his axe, effectively disarming the horrid demon.

Looking up, Rain stared at the Huntsman

The abomination was still kneeling, his hands resting in the mud. Fetid blood was spilling from the seams of his scorched armor. The bestial snout of his snarling helmet seemed even more terrifying now, and there was dark liquid flowing from between the green fangs.

‘Come on...'

Disarming the Huntsman was not that important, in and of itself. Sure, without the great battleaxe, his reach would shrink, allowing her to engage the abomination in melee. But he was more than strong and ferocious enough to tear her apart with his bare hands. Rain could hold out for a few seconds and survive a handful of exchanges, but attempting to fight the demon up close would inevitably result in her death.

However...

Chalice Knights were not simple abominations. These towering, armored warriors of the bygone era harbored a ghastly secret.

Rain had not learned that secret from talking to the Awakened who had ventured into the forest and faced its fearsome overlord. Instead, it was something that everyone in Ravenheart knew... that she had known from the day Seishan, Queen Song's daughter, killed the terrifying leader of the Chalice Knights.

The tales of that battle had spread far and wide in the Song Domain. More than that, detailed Information about the surviving abominations was provided by the town hall when it issued the extermination missions.

The bestial helmet of the Huntsman was no mere decoration. It hinted at his true nature... because all Chalice Knights were shapeshifters.

There was a rabid beast living in each of them, and when the ancient warriors faced a powerful enemy or was in danger, that beast came out.

The dreadful demon that she had been fighting so desperately did not even show the true extent of his harrowing power, yet.

But now... now that his axe was destroyed and his blood was pouring into the mud, he would.

And that was Rain's best chance to kill him.

Out of there, in front of her, the kneeling Huntsman let out a husky growl. His limbs flinched, as if struck by a painful convulsion.

Then, his growl grew into a deafening roar.

The demon's armor cracked... no, it was his bones cracking underneath it. His spine bent, and dark fur suddenly burst from the seams of the rusted armor,

Long claws tore through the metal of his gauntlets,

The transformation had started.

It seemed gruesome, and gruesomely painful. It was also deeply frightening - not only because Rain knew that the unleashed beast would easily rip her to shreds and devour her, but simply because watching something human-like suddenly change into something Inhuman was terrifyingly appalling.

None of that mattered to her, though.

What mattered to Rain was that, from what she knew, the transformation of the Chalice Knights took some time to happen. Even if it was just a couple of seconds... in a battle, those seconds were like an eternity.

She had been waiting to stake her life on that eternity the whole time.

As the Huntsman's bestial roar reverberated across the burning swamp, Rain dashed forward.

Her steps were light and swift.

Before the demon could assume his true form, before the echo of the roar was swallowed by the shadows...

She reached the kneeling abomination and brandished her black sword,

The dark blade hissed coldly as it cut apart the world.

And also the Huntsman's neck.

The darkness nestling in the crack of his visor gazed at her silently as his grow! abruptly stopped, and the bestial helmet flew into the air, a fountain of dark blood spilling from it in a spiral as it spun.

It was a clean cut. The horizontal slash was performed with perfect form, thanks to the countless thousands of practice swings she had performed under the watchful guidance of her tutors.

The Huntsman's severed head fell into the water and sank into the swamp with a ripple.

His towering body swayed slowly, and then collapsed.

...Rain swayed, as well, and sprawled in the mud next to it. The tension drained from her body, but so did all her strength.

She breathed hoarsely, staring at the distant sky.

The flames were dying down, but she was still surrounded by terrible heat.

'Well... it's good. I won't freeze to death yet, at least...'

In the smoky silence that followed, a sudden noise resounded, sounding indescribably misplaced in this hellish scene.

It was the sound of applause.

Rain tiredly turned her head and stared at her teacher, who had finally deemed it necessary to crawl out of her shadow.

His voice was unnecessarily loud.

"Congratulations! You have slain an Awakened Demon, Chalice Knight!"

He smiled and added quieter, his tone turning warm:

"...Well done.”