1716 Grain of Sand

After a while, Rain felt rested enough to move. She rose from the ground with a grimace and went about taking care of her wounds.

Her teacher had made a fire from the splintered remains of the twisted tree, so neither of them had to freeze in the cold. Rain disinfected the cut on her side, then wrapped it tightly in a clean bandage. That would have to do until she returned to Ravenheart and found a healer.

Usually, she would have been lamenting the need

to pay one, but there was a sizable reward promised to anyone who managed to slay the Huntsman. Not only could Rain afford a decent Awakened healer, but there would be enough coins left for her to replace the broken javelin, and maybe even upgrade a few pieces of her equipment.

'No, wait... actually, I don't need to worry about that anymore?’

Rain still had hope of Awakening swiftly. Even if she failed to do it before returning to Ravenheart, there would be no more hunts in the next few months - she already had everything she needed to form a soul core, so the best course of action would be to hole up in a safe place and patiently work on becoming an Awakened.

Once she was an Awakened, her mundane equipment would not be of much use. She would be able to draw a much more powerful bow, wear armor crafted from much heavier mystical materials, and even wield Memories.

Her entire arsenal would need to be changed. She would have to purchase a lot of things.

...Suddenly, Rain did not feel rich anymore.

She was so poor!

Full of sorrow, Rain put on her winter coat and approached the remains of the Huntsman. She stared at it for a while, then glanced at her teacher.

"Should we harvest his armor? It should sell for a lot of coins."

He scratched the back of his head.

"Who's going to carry it all the way back to Ravenheart, though?"

Rain sighed.

'How can a deity be so useless?!'

"...Yeah. Still, we should take the axe blade, at least. To prove the kill at the town hall."

That axe blade alone would sell for a hefty amount of coins.

She fished the giant blade from the ground and attached it to her backpack. Her teacher, meanwhile, looked at the remains of the dreadful Chalice Knight and clicked his fingers.

Several shadows suddenly rose from the ground and sliced the carcass apart, cutting the rusted armor like paper.

Raid didn't look at the bestial features of the corpse as she harvested the soul shards and sat down, staring at them solemnly.

There were three of them... the glimmering crystals were not too large, but to her, they meant the world.

‘This is it, then'

She had been striving desperately to reach this moment for four long years. Those years had been full of pain and hardship... but also joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment. And now, the final stretch of the road was right in front of her.

Her teacher sat on the ground across from her and smiled with encouragement.

"Go on. You worked hard to be here."

Rain looked at him, remained silent for a moment, and smiled back.

"I did."

With that, she unsheathed her knife and crushed the soul shards one after another with its pommel.

She felt a stream of power flowing into her soul. And then..., her soul suddenly surged.

Rain struggled to describe the way she felt with words, It was as though her entire body was suddenly permeated by a cool, vibrant, nurturing flame, However, that flame simply passed through her flesh, unable to touch it.

"W-what... what is happening?”

Her teacher was looking at her with keen interest. The gaze of his onyx eyes was strangely intense.

"I can see it. Your essence is Awakening. It is as though your soul, which had been dim and drowsy, is suddenly coming to life. A soft radiance is spreading, and it is lively."

He remained silent for a moment, and then spoke in a calming tone:

"Try to control it. Guide it throughout your body, following the roadmap of your major blood vessels. Your blood is circulating because of your heart... but you don't have a soul core, which is like a heart for soul essence. So, for now, you'll have to substitute it with your will."

Rain took a deep breath and closed her eyes, imagining the map of her body. She could feel her essence flowing freely, chaotically, with no shape or form. So, she slowly extended her will and tried to guide it.

She had never been able to control her essence before. It had always felt like trying to push a boulder to the top of a mountain... the boulder was dead weight, it was cold and reluctant to move. The moment she lost concentration, even a little, it rolled back to where it had come from.

But this time, her essence felt alive and responsive. It followed her guidance, flowing slowly in a complicated cycle, At first, there was a lot of chaos and colliding currents in its flow, but as Rain deepened her concentration, the torrent of her soul essence grew increasingly stable and orderly.

Her teacher chuckled in amazement.

"Wow. On the first try? You're doing great!"

Rain did not open her eyes.

"So... how do I form the core?"

His voice was calm and confident, like an anchor that she could use to keep steady:

"The method is simple. Once you can make the essence circulate freely, increase the speed. Make it rush like a mountain river. Then, increase the speed even more, until it's spinning inside your body like a raging whirlpool. Make it condense under the pressure of its own weight and the pull of the rotation. You don't need to form the entire soul core all at once... one grain of sand is enough. Next time, you will create one more. And then one more. Sooner or later, the density of your essence will reach a critical point, and a soul core will be formed."

Rain smiled.

She could imagine it vividly... it was a beautiful process. Like stars and planets forming from incandescent stardust.

She concentrated fully, making the essence circulate faster, and faster, and faster. The greater its speed, the more willpower she needed to keep the raging force of the whirlpool under control.

'Come on.., a little more...'

She could feel a condensed mass of energy slowly forming in the place where her heart would have been. It was not solid yet, but also not as ethereal as the usual state of soul essence. More like... a shimmering liquid.

And at the very heart of that mass, where the pressure was most crushing, something solid was slowly being born.

A tiny crystalline gemstone... so small that it could only be called a grain of sand.

"Ah!"

Rain opened her eyes and shuddered, her entire body drenched in sweat. The whirlpool of essence dissipated, and she sprawled on the ground in utter exhaustion. Her chest rose and fell heavily, as if she had just run a marathon.

The mental fatigue was even worse.

Her teacher raised a fist.

"Success! You did great!"

But Rain was full of bitter disappointment.

'A single grain of sand... did I really boast that I'll form the soul core in one try? Ah, so embarrassing! Thank the gods I didn't say it out loud!’

How long would it take her to create enough of these tiny gemstones for them to merge into a core? A month? A year?

Rain wanted to groan,

...But doing that would undoubtedly make her teacher way too happy, She couldn't let the enemy win!

She sighed, and then slowly sat up.

‘I'll stay home for an entire month, let mom pamper me, and work on Awakening slowly!’

Disappointed? Who was disappointed? A whole month... or even several months... of doing nothing and being spoiled rotten. No biting cold, no blood and sweat, no hideous abominations and revolting corpses. Just eating well and meditating in peace. It was a dream come true!

Wouldn't it be great, to rest for a few months while being absolutely safe, with nothing terrible happening?

'It sure would!'

Her teacher suddenly looked at her with suspicion.

His onyx eyes narrowed.

"What is this... I sense a familiar disturbance. Hey, you didn't just think something stupid in your head, like 'finally, the worst of it is over' or 'that demon is definitely dead, nothing bad will happen... did you?"

Rain raised an eyebrow and put on an innocent expression.

"No? Why would I? Only a complete fool would think something like that in the middle of the Dream Realm.."

He studied her dubiously for a moment, then exhaled slowly,

"Well... good, And, you know, don't use such harsh words. Some people - very smart people! - were known to make small mistakes like that in the past. Anyway... time to head back to Ravenheart, then…”