1717 Rustle

Rain collected her things and holsted the backpack onto her shoulders. The axe blade was terribly heavy, which messed with her balance a little... but she could handle it. The frightful black sword her teacher had given her was already gone, and her tachi regained its shadow. She studied the familiar sword for a few moments, then sighed and sheathed it smoothly.

Rain was ready to leave.

...But she didn't.

"Uh, teacher. We might have a problem." He turned to her and raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"A problem? What's the matter?"

She hesitated for a moment, then awkwardly scratched the tip of her nose.

"Well, you see. That explosion was much more powerful than I had expected. So... all the ice is broken. How am I supposed to get back to shore?"

He stared at her for a bit, then glanced at the ravaged landscape of the vast swamp.

Indeed, the little island was surrounded by nothing except mud and black water, with not a single Intact plece of ice in sight. The deadly expanse of treacherous sludge stretched all the way to the distant shore.

Her teacher lingered for a bit, then sighed and approached her.

Crouching, he pointed to his back:

"Climb on, brat."

Rain didn't make him ask twice. There were ways to traverse a swamp, but none that were both safe and timely. Not to mention that she had just disinfected her wound and didn't want to get it wet and dirty again.

Plus, her battered body was exhausted. Why would she refuse a piggyback ride offered by a powerful deity?

Climbing onto her teacher's back, Rain wrapped her arms around his neck and smiled.

He lifted her like a feather, not showing any strain at all despite how thin his body looked, and headed for the swamp.

"Ah... how humiliating... a divine shadow like me being reduced to carrying ungrateful mundane girls... gods are truly dead..."

Ignoring his grumbling, Rain rested her head on his shoulder and allowed her consciousness to drift into a relaxed state. The familiar sound of her teacher's voice was almost like a lullaby.

Walking to the edge of the island, he didn't even try to slow down and stepped directly into the muddy water. However, his foot never plunged into the murky sludge - instead, the shadows moved and coalesced into a glossy black plate under it. Then, another plate appeared as he took a step.

Like that, her teacher walked across the swamp as if he was walking on a paved road, the black plates dissipating behind him after a few moments. The water sloshed and surged, but never managed to touch his leather boots.

"Huh, that reminds me of that time we fought the Drowned in the lost temple of Fallen Grace... back when I was still wearing the Serpent King's crown... who knew that I would end up becoming a swamp rickshaw one day? Damn, life is sure full of irony..."

Rain did not know what the words Drowned, Fallen Grace, and Serpent King meant, but they sounded exciting. Was her teacher a king once, in ancient times?

...No, knowing him, it was more likely that he had stolen a king's crown and wore it to gloat and boast about his nefarious deeds.

The walk to the shore was both comfortable and uneventful. Rain could have climbed off her teacher's back once they reached solid ground, but he simply continued to carry her without saying anything, and so, she didn't say anything either.

Perhaps he saw through her bravado and realized that her condition was worse than she was letting on, and that she was too exhausted to hike through the forest while suffering the pain of her wound.

Still…

After a while, Rain spoke:

"We should take down the corpses of the fallen Awakened and give them a burial."

Usually, the Queen would have taken the dead. But the Huntsman must have prevented them from leaving on a pilgrimage to her palace, and as a result, their bones had been left unattended.

Her teacher stopped.

Rain couldn't see his face, but she felt a subtle change in his mood. Suddenly, the shadows populating the frozen forest seemed much deeper, and the world felt much darker.

Her breath escaped as a cloud of cold vapor.

'Does he not want to bother with burying them?"

"Climb off."

He bent his knees, allowing Rain to stand firmly on the ground. She was a little confused.

"What..."

But then, she heard it. A branch snapping somewhere behind her.

Placing her hand on the hilt of her sword, Rain turned around and looked back.

There, she saw several human figures walking in their direction. They seemed like a cohort of Awakened.., no. A Master and his retinue, perhaps? One, two, three people... one of them was waving his hand in a friendly gesture...

Before Rain could discern any details, though, something strange happened.

Her teacher's hand appeared from behind and covered her eyes.

She froze.

‘W-what... what...'

Something was very wrong.

His voice sounded very calm... too calm, even, which only made Rain feel more nervous.

"Hey, brat. Listen to me very carefully. From now on and until I tell you otherwise, no matter what happens, don't open your eyes. Alright?"

She nodded slowly.

"Yes, teacher."

He remained silent for a moment.

"Alright. Stand here and don't move."

With that, her teacher removed his hand. Rain's eyes were tightly shut, so she couldn't see anything, but she felt him walking past to stand between her and the approaching people.

Their steps were drawing closer.

"Wrong, wrong! This is very wrong!'

Rain was not stunned by the fact that he had covered her eyes. What truly disturbed her... was the fact that her teacher had not retreated into the shadows,

In all the years that she had known him, he had never, ever shown himself to other people, It was to the point that Rain had considered him a hallucination at first.

But now, her teacher remained in the open in front of absolute strangers.

Why?

Her silent panic was Interrupted by his bright, carefree voice:

"Greetings! Who might you be?"

The sound of steps halted, and a deep baritone answered in a friendly tone:

"Greetings, greetings! I am Master Sean, and these are my companions, Master Skif and Awakened Ardon. We were on our way back to Ravenheart... are you headed that way, as well?"

Rain frowned.

'Master Sean? Master Skif?'

She had not heard of these Ascended before. Granted, there were thousands of Ascended in the world, but still. Each of the Song Domain's Masters was like a minor celebrity, especially those in Ravenheart.

There was something else that seemed strange about these people, too. She was standing there, frozen, with her eyes closed... but they did not seem to care enough to react in any way, Wouldn't it be natural to ask what she was doing?

Her teacher lingered for a few moments.

"Yeah, we were on our way back to Ravenheart too."

Then, there was a long stretch of silence. Eventually, Master Sean asked, his voice sending a chill running down Rain's spine, for some reason:

"You look a little familiar, young man. Say, have we met before?"

The tone of his voice was perfectly friendly, and so were his words. But she suddenly felt suffocated, as if there was something eerily, maddeningly wrong with it all.

Her teacher's answer was a little somber:

"As a matter of fact, we have indeed met before. Although I doubt that you'll remember. In any case, why don't you and your friends continue onward? Let's part on friendly terms and go our separate ways. How about it?"

There was another lengthy silence.

Shivering, Rain heard a strange rustle come from the direction of the three strangers. Their surroundings were slowly turning colder.

'What was that rustle?'

"How about it... how about it. How how how about It"

Master Sean's voice still sounded human, but his speech had turned strangely incoherent.

Another voice joined, its mannerisms and Intonations too similar to the first:

"We are on our way back to Ravenheart. These are my companions... Master... we are on our way. How about it?"

Rain was still stuck on her previous thought, unable to throw it out of her head.

‘What... what was that rustle?'

She had never heard a sound like that before.

Just at that moment, the disturbing rustle grew louder, and a third voice added amicably:

"These are my companions."

"My companions..."

"My companions."

"That rustle...

"How about..."

"...How about you become my companions, too?"

Her teacher took a deep breath. Rain could hear his voice turning dangerously cold:

"Listen here, bastard..."

She had never heard such coldness in his voice before, and the unfamiliarity scared her.

"You might have managed to claw your way out of Dread's Tomb, but so did I. You might have survived in the depths of a thousand hells, but so did J. So save me the theatrics and be on your way Otherwise, I'll stop being gracious and skin you alive!"

Rain shuddered.

'Skin... skin him...

Suddenly, a thought flashed in her mind.

The Skinwalker!'

The Great abomination that had been the nightmare of humanity for the past four years!

A Great... A Great abomination...

Three of the indescribable horror's vessels, no less!

Her terror was so vast that she couldn't even move. All Rain could do was keep her eyes closed and tremble.

T'm dead, I'm so dead...'

No, death would be a mercy.

At that moment, Master Sean - Skinwalker's vessel - spoke with a hint of curiosity in his voice:

"You... whose companion are you?"

Her teacher scoffed.

And then, the world quaked.