1718 Sounds of Battle

The world quaked, and then, Rain was suddenly enveloped by absolute darkness.

It was as if an Impenetrable wall rose to surround her from all sides. The deafening cacophony of terrible sounds coming from the outside was muffled and dampened by that wall, and nothing but slight tremors reached her.

For the moment, at least, she was safe.

But those sounds...

Feeling a cold dread grasp her heart, she took a shaky breath and tried to comprehend them.

There was the sound of trees snapping. There were the screams of the air being torn. There was the roar of the ground being upturned.

These were the sounds that she could recognize.

But there were other sounds, as well.

Inhuman howls. Chilling groans that sounded like... like the world itself was weeping. Eerie and revoltingly organic rustling, as if a mountain of flesh was ripping as it expanded while consuming itself.

And many more that Rain simply could not describe, and was afraid to fathom,

The ground was shaking violently, and she was struggling to stay standing.

Her fingers turned white on the hilt of her sword.

"Teacher... be safe. Please...!'

But how could anyone stay safe when facing the Skinwalker? Countless people had fallen to its menace and were consumed, becoming vessels of the abomination's corruption. Mundane humans, Awakened, Masters... even Saints.

Not even the Sovereigns could eradicate this living curse.

Shrouded by darkness, Rain realized how painfully weak and helpless she was.

Just a few moments ago, she had been full of pride, praising herself for slaying an Awakened Demon.

But now, she remembered that in the world of the Nightmare Spell, she was nothing but an ant.

An ant who couldn't even do anything when her teacher was fighting to protect her.

'Strong... I want to be strong.’

She had not changed at all. She was still the same girl who had been powerless to protect herself, let alone anyone else, when the tide of Nightmare Creatures descended on her school.

...The world continued to scream and quake for several minutes,

Then, an eerie silence suddenly enveloped it. The tremors stopped, and the terrible sounds ceased.

Rain remained motionless, keeping her eyes closed,

She didn't dare to think about how the battle had ended. The thought of imagining her teacher... her teacher not being there anymore was too appalling. More appalling than what would happen to her if he was truly gone.

Suddenly, the wall surrounding her disappeared. She knew that it had because light suddenly shone through her eyelids, and cold wind scraped against her face.

The air was permeated by the smell of wet wood and soil.

'Please…’

A moment later, a familiar voice spoke from somewhere near:

"Brat, you can open your eyes now."

The relief Rain felt at that moment was strong enough to make her sway.

She slowly opened her eyes and looked around, then froze in shock.

'N-no way...'

The frozen forest... was gone.

It was obliterated entirely, and everywhere she looked, nothing but a barren expanse of flattened and upturned land could be seen. The trees had been reduced to mere splinters, and the ground itself was broken, with dark fissures covering it like bottomless scars.

Here and there, the splinters were wet with blood. Buried under them, broken corpses of the unfortunate Nightmare Creatures who had populated the forest lay, their macabre sight mercifully hidden by the debris.

That scene of devastation stretched as far as the eye could see.

The entire landscape had been drastically changed in a matter of minutes, redrawn by the fury of the harrowing battle.

The scale of the dreadful destruction... was simply unfathomable.

Rain took a trembling breath and finally looked at her teacher.

He was standing a few steps away, as nonchalant as ever.

His hair was ruffled, and there was a smudge of something dark on his check... but other than that, he was the same pale, roguish scoundrel she knew.

Of course, Rain struggled to perceive him in the same light.

She had known that her teacher was a powerful being, of course... but this was the first time she really witnessed his power.

Where were the vessels of the Skinwalker?

Rain tried to compose herself.

"The.., the Skinwalker?"

Her teacher remained silent for a few moments, then silently took a step back.

Behind him, three human corpses were piled on top of each other, each missing the head and with a deep wound where their hearts should have been.

'Three vessels of a Great Nightmare Creature...! Rain swallowed.

Her teacher had just killed three Great abominations. Just like that.

There was something else. Did she imagine it, or were there tiny shards of a broken mirror glistening on the ground in front of the corpses?

"W-what... how..."

Trying to comprehend the situation was too disturbing. So, Rain would rather think about its consequences... her teacher had revealed himself, and although they were far away from Ravenheart, such a drastic change of landscape would not escape notice.

Which meant that they had to get out of here as soon as possible.

Receiving the reward for the Huntsman was also not an option now. Rain would have to keep the fact that she was anywhere near this place a secret... It was a good thing that she had not shared her plans to hunt the demon with anyone.

No one could know that a being who could slay three vessels of the Skinwalker lived in her shadow, She would have to return to Ravenheart and lay low for a few months... luckily, that was what she had wanted to do, anyway…

Her teacher sighed.

"I know what you are thinking about. But, Rain... sadly, you are wrong."

She tilted her head a little.

"What? Why? Because you defeated the Skinwalker?"

He lingered for a moment, then shook his head and pointed to the three corpses.

"No. Drawing attention to myself is not a good thing, sure. But actually, we have a bigger problem. This guy, Master Sean... I recognize him. He was an Ascended from the House of Night."

Rain failed to understand what he was trying to say.

"...So?"

Her teacher sighed and rubbed his temples in frustration.

"Right. You don't know. Well... let's just say that members of the House of Night should not be anywhere near the territory of Queen Song right now. And they must have been fairly close to Ravenheart, moving in secret, when the Skinwalker got them. So... I am afraid that you and I have seen something that we were not supposed to see."

She hesitated for a few moments, remembering everything that her father had mentioned about the House of Night and its relationship with the Song Domain, Was there some problem between the two? It didn't seem that way…

If anything, the Song Domain seemed to be moving toward having a problem with the Sword Domain, while trying hard to maintain a friendly relationship with the weaker House of Night.

All of it was very mysterious.

But, at the same time, Rain understood the underlying meaning of what her teacher had said.

"Something that we were not supposed to see. Got it. Promising that I won't tell anyone is not going to work, I guess? So... just how big of a secret is it?"

Her teacher's face was a little somber.

"Big enough for Clan Song to erase any witness from existence. Well... not any witness. But a mundane girl with no backing? They won't hesitate to silence you even for a split second."

Rain felt a cold chill run down her spine.

'Damn... the royal clan?’

Why would Clan Song pay attention to someone as small and insignificant as her?

She gritted her teeth and looked at him stubbornly.

"I do have backing, though. My father works for the government... his rank is pretty high now, too. Surely, Clan Song won't want to spoil their relationship with the government because of something like that?"

Her teacher smiled wistfully.

"Ah, the naïveté of youth... first of all, you are overestimating the significance of your father's position. Second of all, you are overestimating the significance of the government. And lastly, you are underestimating Clan Song. Who says that anyone would be able to prove anything after they make you disappear?"

His smile turned colder.

"In fact, they won't even have to make you disappear. Technically. There's a guy among them who is much worse than the Skinwalker. He can destroy your soul and wear your body like a suft, coming to family dinners and gossiping about boys with your mother. No one will suspect a thing"

Rain shuddered.

Slowly, the magnitude of the trouble she had gotten herself into was starting to dawn on her.

'Crap... crap. Crap!’

Who had made her think all those stupid things earlier? Spend months in absolute safety? Rest and relax while working on Awakening at a leisurely pace? Be pampered at home?

She had been such a fool!

Rain cursed quietly, stared at the three corpses for a while, and then asked her teacher in a hopeful tone:

"So what do we do?"

Her teacher was... whatever it was that he was. He had to have a solution, without a doubt,

Suddenly, she felt a lot calmer.

Her teacher remained silent for a while, then smiled.

"Who to do, Indeed. Well... I am sorry to tell you this, Rain, but you can't show your face in Ravenheart for a while. You'll have to disappear before they can make you disappear. We need to go somewhere where they won't be able to find you quickly, and spent some time there."

She closed her eyes and asked, her tone turning a little grim:

"Where can I even go? Even if I can survive a solo journey to another Citadel, there is no city in the Song Domain where the royal clan doesn't have eyes. Crossing into the Sword Domain is not an option, not that I would want to leave my family behind. I can't return to the waking world without the help of a Saint, and even if I could, locating me there would be even easier."

Her teacher scratched the back of his head with a thoughtful expression.

He lingered for a while, then glanced at her with a strange expression.

"What about one of those road crews? They are safe enough for you to survive, with more than enough mundane humans for one more to not draw attention, and best of all, far removed from all Citadels, They're lacking manpower, too, so no one would ask any questions. If I were you, I'd get myself hired as a laborer there and hide in the crowd.”

A sly smile appeared on his face.

Her teacher remained silent for a moment, then added with a chuckle:

"In fact, wasn't there a huge crew being assembled to construct a road east? You know, to Godgrave. Why don't you join that one?"

Rain sighed.

‘Why not, indeed?’