1780 Moonriver Plain

The Eastern Road had been built incredibly fast. By now, it reached far from Ravenheart, entering a new region of the Dream Realm.

The mountains were out of sight, and there was no ash falling from the sky. There was no human presence, either the barren wasteland stretched as far as the eye could see, with rolling hills and deep canyons breaking the landscape here and there.

Sometimes, without any warning, the deep canyons would suddenly let out a low, weeping roar. Then, they would overflow with rushing water and turn into countless rivers. Those rivers eventually merged far to the south, forming the Great Waterfall.

Since the cliffs of the waterfall resembled a beautiful face from a certain angle, especially under moonlight, it was also often called the Weeping Goddess.

That was where the Citadel of Clan Sorrow stood.

Clan Sorrow was an old one, and held a special position in the Song Domain - that was because the lake below the waterfall, known as the Lake of Tears, gave birth to a great river, which was similarly called the River of Tears. That river flowed through several regions of the Dream Realm, serving as a waterway for the Song Domain, while its estuary was on the dusky shores of the Stormsea.

Its significance had always been great, but now that isolated Citadels were turning into thriving cities, the importance of the River of Tears as the connective tissue of the Song Domain was impossible to underestimate.

The Citadel of Clan Sorrow was perched on the cliffs of the Great Waterfall, while the city it now governed was below it, on the shores of the Lake of Tears. It was now an important logistical hub...

Well, at least that was what Rain had heard. She had never been there herself, of course.

In any case, the great waterfall and the homestead of young Lady Tamar were far to the south. What concerned Rain now were the deep canyons they had to cross.

The area they were traversing was an inhospitable place. The soil was rocky, and the sun was small and distant. There was little snow, but the air was frigid and cold. There were ancient ruins here and there, rising from the ground like forlorn obelisks to the meaninglessness of life. All in all, it was a bleak land.

It transformed at night, though, because there were three beautiful moons illuminating the starlit sky. That was the first time Rain had seen such an alien sight, so she was both awed and impressed.

There was little time to enjoy the view, though, because the Moonriver Plain was quite dangerous.

This far from Ravenheart, the wilderness was not thoroughly tamed. There were plenty of Nightmare Creatures stalking the deep canyons and nesting in the old ruins. The terrain itself was treacherous, as well, because one had to be careful not to plummet into the cavernous fissures or be swept away by the sudden appearance of the rushing rivers.

There had been stone bridges built over the canyons once, but most of them long collapsed. The road crew would have to build new ones to lay down the road, which was why the construction had slowed down as of late.

Still... there was nothing but Death Zones east of the Moonriver Plain, so it wasn't hard to guess that the road crew would finish its work soon. Rain was still unclear on why Queen Song wanted to build a road to a dead end, but she was not in a position to ask questions.

In short, the survey team was struggling to make progress.

It consisted of a dozen mundane porters, several survey specialists, three Awakened, one Ascended Echo, and one dead pilgrim.

Rain's job was to help push the carts with survey equipment during the day, and do camp chores at night. It could have been exhausting, but the constant need to cross the canyons gave her plenty of time to rest.

In fact, Rain might have been the most comfortable of the survey team members.

Everyone else was constantly suffering. Their boots were wet, their feet were blistered, they were either too cold or too hot, their bodies were tired from the strain of climbing over the canyons... but to her, it was like a relaxed walk. A vacation, really - doing construction work at the main camp had been much more exhausting.

Her clothes and equipment were perfectly suited for the journey due to her rich experience of hunting abominations in the wild. She was relaxed and comfortable, enjoying the forgiving pace and light responsibilities of a mundane porter.

There was no need to fight any Nightmare Creatures, even!

The few times the survey team was attacked, the three young Awakened had dealt with the danger confidently. Despite the small size of their cohort, they were well-matched to face the dangers of the Dream Realm.

The guy her teacher had warned her about, Ray, could hide his presence and even turn invisible. That alone allowed them to deal with most abominations safely.

Young Lady Tamar, meanwhile, possessed a powerful combat Aspect and served as the bulwark of the small cohort, Her Memories were also of a higher quality than most Awakened would have access to, which helped her excel in her role as a melee specialist.

The delicate girl, Fleur, was even a healer. Her Dormant Aspect Ability could alleviate fatigue, while her Awakened Ability could stem bleeding and speed up the healing process.

And when the three faced something out of their league, the Ascended Echo was there to level the playing field.

The Echo looked like a giant, monstrous wolf, and was a gift Tamar had received from her clan. Rain wasn't sure about the Class of the creature, but it seemed ferocious enough to deal with most threats they had faced so far.

So, Rain could just relax and enjoy her role as a helpless mundane girl.

Of course, she continued to work on her soul core at night.

By now, controlling her essence had become quite familiar to her. She was also constantly practicing to make her control more fine and precise... turning the flow of essence into a raging whirlpool was still hard and exhausting, both physically and mentally, but she wasn't as drained after each meditation as she had been before.

She could also feel her body slowly growing stronger, as if benefitting from the constant flow of essence, It was a tiny difference, but a rewarding one, since it indicated that she was making progress.

If there was one thing Rain felt worried about, it was her teacher.

Although he didn't really show it, she could tell that he was tense, for some reason. He hid deeply in her shadow and didn't talk much, especially when the dead pilgrim was close by, but more than that... when he did speak, he tried to hurry her more insistently than ever before.

It was as though her Awakening was suddenly an urgent matter.

'I'm already trying as hard as I can...'

Feeling sullen, Rain pushed one of the carts across the barren wasteland. The day was coming to an end, so they would stop soon.

And just as she thought about it, Awakened Fleur commanded the survey team to stop.

She looked ahead, where another canyon barred their way, and sighed.

"We will camp here tonight.”