1783 Peaceful Days

The survey team moved east at a steady pace. Of course, they weren't going in a straight line - instead, they explored the Moonriver Plain, making frequent stops to let the specialists ascertain the terrain and compare the landscape with the rough map provided by the Song clan.

The specialists took some time to unload their equipment from the carts, leaving the heavy lifting to the porters. The Awakened stood guard and summoned several specially provided Memories to divine a few details that mundane equipment wasn't able to pick up.

The team left colorful flags in its wake, which would serve as a guideline for the road crew later.

At times, the entire group made camp to let Awakened Ray scout out those areas that could pose special danger, like the ruins of ancient cities. His Aspect was uniquely suited for this kind of task - although the young man was not especially lethal in direct combat, his abilities allowed the survey team to only consist of three Awakened instead of a dozen or more.

Awakened Fleur was similarly indispensable. Her Aspect was responsible for the startling speed with which the team was covering distance - not only could she help everyone recover their stamina, but the scrapes and wounds received in the rare skirmishes with the Nightmare Creatures were quickly healed.

If anything, it was Tamar of Sorrow that seemed to bring the least to the table. However, that was merely an illusion - because it was the young Legacy who took point when things did not go according to plan.

Ray's Aspect was mostly useful for avoiding trouble, while Fleur could resolve the dire consequences. However, it was the unexpected and the inevitable that was not only the most common, but also the deadliest threat in the Dream Realm. Whenever the survey team faced unexpected danger, it was Tamar's sword that dealt with it.

...But, all in all, there weren't that many unfortunate accidents. Rain had expected that she would have to string her bow sooner or later, but it stayed safely attached to her pack - at least for now.

She continued to work on forming her soul core in peace.

In fact... strangely enough, her life as Rani was much more peaceful than her life as Rain. It was not only because she didn't have to hunt Nightmare Creatures anymore, but also because of the circumstances.

The wilderness was vast and tranquil, much different from the bustling liveliness of Ravenheart and the overcrowded sterility of NQSC, There was no everpresent noise, no familiar anxiety... no light pollution to dull the beautiful stars. The weather was harsh, but not nearly as oppressive as the murderous cold and searing heat of the ashen mountains.

Rain was enjoying herself. She quite liked walking across the desolate plain and feeling the cool wind play with her hair, watching the three moons travel across the velvet sky at night, and not having to worry about anything except for performing her work well and controlling the flow of essence.

The company wasn't bad, either. She was on friendly terms with most of the porters, who were all warm and nice people - the tough and prickly Elga, the somber and taciturn Pill, the former PTV magnate, "old goat" Carel...

The standoffish survey specialists lost most of their aloof attitude after a few days, and often joined them around the fire in the evening. Even the three Awakened became easier to talk to after everyone had grown a bit familiar with each other.

Despite the grim danger of exploring the wilderness, the mood of the survey team was strangely peaceful.

Sometimes, Rain felt like she was observing their small group from the side. In those moments, she was suddenly struck by the eerie dissonance between the peacefulness of their days... and the dark shadow of the approaching war.

She wondered who else knew that humanity would soon be embroiled in a mad, fratricidal conflict. The porters were completely oblivious to the darkness of the future, The survey specialists did not seem to know, either…

Tamar of Sorrow must have had some idea, though. As a Legacy, she would be aware of the growing tension between the two Domains - especially so because her clan oversaw the source of the Tear River. Clan Song must have been shifting resources closer to the future frontline for a while now, and much of that cargo had to have been transported over water.

It was unclear if she had shared her worries with Ray and Fleur, but the three seemed to be quite close. So, they must have known something.

And Rain knew most of all, thanks to her teacher.

‘What am I going to do?’

She could not quite conceive the scale of the calamity, as well as the toll that the war would take on humans... everywhere. Humanity was too big, but more than that, Rain was even struggling to imagine what would happen to her personally.

Logically, she was one of the few people in the Dream Realm who did not need to worry about the conflict between Song and Valor too much - she was from a government family, after all, and the government had always maintained its neutrality. Even if Ravenheart was besieged and occupied by the Knights of Valor, her family's situation would most likely remain the same.

But then again... if the two Sovereigns clashed and one of them won, would there even be a government after that? If the war escalated, would anyone be able to afford remaining neutral? Would the newly established cities in the Dream Realm stay safe from the constant threat of Nightmare Creatures while most Awakened were busy fighting each other?

All these questions gnawed at her at night, when she was alone in her tent.

Well... Rain was never truly alone, and her teacher did not seem concerned with the war at all.

‘Of course he wouldn't be!'

The sinister shadow must have lived through thousands of wars... maybe even caused a good chunk of them personally!

One night, Rain couldn't keep quiet anymore and asked in a whisper:

"Teacher... aren't you worried about the war at all?"

He remained silent for longer than usual.

Eventually, she heard him sigh.

"Worried? Ah... not really. Life is war, you know. When you live long enough, you get used to such things."

Rain frowned in the darkness.

"But you are so powerful. You destroyed the vessels of the Skinwalker easily, Don't you feel... even a little bit responsible? Aren't you going to do something?"

The darkness chuckled.

"Responsible? Well, I guess I do feel a little bit responsible, And who says that I'm not going to do something?"

Rain held her breath for a few moments,

"Teacher.. what are you going to do?"

He let out a contemplative sigh, and then laughed quietly.

"Ah, I'm not sure. Maybe I'll kill both Sovereigns and put someone dependable in charge of humanity. Or go bird hunting... or make waffles. Something like that."

She stared into the darkness for a while, then scoffed.

"Well, good luck! I must say, though... for someone who hides from everyone in a young girl's shadow, teacher, you sure talk a big game..."

The darkness responded with appalled silence.

After a while, he hissed:

"Go to sleep, you ingrate! And for your information, I'm not hiding in your shadow! I'm just... taking temporary residence here! For convenience..."

Rain smiled and closed her eyes, hoping to fall asleep quickly.

The next day, they reached the boundary of the survey area.