1784 Stairway to Heaven

As they ventured further east, the Moonriver Plain started to change. There were fewer and fewer canyons in their way, and the air grew a little warmer. At night, the three beautiful moons seemed more distant.

The wind carried with it swirling black flakes. Raín did not need to touch them to know what they were... ash. It was as if they had returned to Ravenheart, but also different.

Back in the stronghold of Clan Song, the ash fell from the frigid sky because of the raging volcanoes. But here, it was somehow different, making Rain feel uncomfortable.

Eventually, the members of the survey team stopped. No one had given the command, but they simply froze in place, looking at the horizon in stunned silence.

‘...Wow.’

Out there in front of them, far away... it seemed as if a snowy mountain chain was rising from the ashen haze. But as Rain studied the towering mountains closer, she couldn't help but feel a sense of incongruity. Because the shape was wrong.

Then, something clicked in her mind, and she opened her mouth in shock... or horror. Or awe.

The mountains weren't mountains at all. Instead, they were bones.

An inconceivably large skeleton lay on the ground in the distance, too large to be seen whole. What Rain had thought to be the slopes of a mountain chain were several titanic ribs, each rising into the sky like ivory pillars that supported its weight.

The skull of the unfathomable corpse was mercifully out of view. The closest group of bone mountains, however, extended far into the Moonriver Plain. It was also shaped strangely, consisting of five lower peaks. Beyond them, a wide ridge rose gradually to a great height, like an eerie stairway to heaven.

The five mountains were the phalanxes of the colossal skeleton's fingers, and the rising ridge were the bones of its arm.

One of the porters whispered quietly:

"G-gods..."

Rain remained silent, but she felt like uttering something like that herself. There were simply no words to describe her emotions.

Awakened Ray glanced at them and smiled faintly.

"Gods? A god, maybe. That is Godgrave ahead of us."

The porters, who weren't very well-acquainted with the topography of the Dream Realm, looked at him in confusion.

He sighed.

"Godgrave is a Death Zone that serves as the north-eastern boundary of the Song Domain. It is a region of the Dream Realm where Great, Cursed, and maybe even Unholy abominations dwell. As for why it is called that... I think you can see for yourself. Nobody really knows what that terrible skeleton is, but it's easy to imagine that these are the remains of a god. Therefore... Godgrave.”

The porters shivered.

"Awakened Ray, sir... are we going there?"

Ray smiled, but it was Tamar, the leader of the survey team, who answered:

"No. Of course not. A Death Zone is not a place for humans. Even if we aren't devoured by some abominable horror, the land itself will kill us. Or the sky. More importantly than that..."

She glanced at the porters and the survey specialists.

"This is where the Song Domain ends. Queen Song's authority does not reach Godgrave, so you can't go there. As soon as you do, your souls won't be protected by the Queen's grace anymore, and you'll be summoned into the First Nightmare."

She sighed.

"In short, our mission is complete. We will camp here and turn back tomorrow... returning to the main camp should not take us nearly as long as it took to come here, since we'll be going in a straight line, The marching will be more intense, so prepare yourselves!”

With that, she turned her back to the Incredible sight of the colossal bones, as if not at all impressed by It.

Rain suppressed the desire to scoff.

‘That's a Legacy for you…’

Would it kill Tamar to act like a normal girl? No one could remain calm when witnessing something that unimaginable. Why did she feel the need to put on airs?

Lady Tamar wasn't exactly unpleasant... but she was definitely more than a little stuck-up. Rain, who was used to rolling in the dirt, couldn't help but be entertained by how laboriously the younger girl tried to maintain an austere facade.

She often felt a compulsion to mock the Legacy heiress mercilessly... well, or at least tease her a bit. Of course, she never did - Rain wasn't stupid enough to mock a Legacy.

Only a complete idiot would do something like that. Even the best outcome would be receiving a challenge to a duel...

The survey team made camp. Since it was the last day of their official duties, they made a larger fire than usual and roasted all their remaining monster meat. Even the three Awakened joined the rest of the team members, leaving the Echo to guard the camp.

Of course, the pilgrim did not join them, either. The dead man remained standing at the edge of the camp, emotionless and unfeeling, staring into the darkness with his glassy eyes.

It was a bit creepy to be in his presence, but the members of the survey team had long learned to ignore the dead man.

This time, it was Awakened Fleur who cooked for everyone. Her easy smile and friendly demeanor put everyone at ease, so the conversation flowed freely.

"Oh... Lady Tamar... if you don't mind me asking..."

Carel, the old goat, was uncharacteristically shy in front of the young Legacy. He mumbled something quietly, and asked in a cautious tone:

"I couldn't help but notice that you weren't very impressed by that huge skeleton. Have you seen Godgrave before?"

Tamar glanced at him coldly, lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I did see it before. Actually, all three of us are familiar with Godgrave. That is where the Spell sent us on the winter solstice."

The eyes of the porters widened. Even Rain was stunned.

‘What the hell? It sent these kids to a Death Zone?" How were they alive?’

At the same time as she felt surprised, she was also feeling a little guilty. As it turned out, Tamar had not been acting haughty... she was just familiar with the titanic skeleton. More than that, whatever had happened to them there must have been quite traumatic. So, she was probably hiding her unease under the facade of indifference.

‘...Talk about being prejudiced.’

Rain sighed, ashamed of herself.

The porters, meanwhile, were staring at the three Awakened in awe. Eventually, old Carel asked:

"On the winter solstice? I... ah... I would have thought that Lady Tamar would use the Dream Gate..."

It used to be that every Sleeper was sent to the Dream Realm on the winter solstice, where they had to find a Gateway, anchor themselves to it, and thus Awaken. These days, however, the situation had changed.

It was possible to pass through a Dream Gate before the solstice and anchor oneself in advance. That way, there was no risk of being sent to some unforgiving land, away from human Citadels.

Tamar's gaze darkened, prompting Fleur to laugh nervously.

"Oh, that... we completed our First Nightmare in late autumn, so there was not a lot of time before the solstice. There is a lot of paperwork involved in getting access to the Dream Gate, as you know. We just went to the Academy and tried to prepare ourselves instead."

She glanced at Tamar and smiled.

"Well, Ray and I did. Tamar's father is a Saint, so he could have brought her to the Lake of Tears personally, without the need of using the Dream Gate. Still, we met at the Academy."

The porters looked at the young Legacy with confusion. After a bit of awkward silence, one of them asked:

"That... lady's father must have been terribly busy..."

She furrowed her brow.

"He wasn't."

Then, Tamar blinked.

"...I mean, he was. He is. But that is not why."

Actually, Rain knew what she meant.

There might have been a safer way to Awaken for most Sleepers, but not for Legacies. That was because the Legacies had always had such an option - they just never used it. For them, the trial of the Nightmare Spell was like a sacred rite.

Legacies were fundamentally a warrior caste - the martial aristocracy of the new world. Their culture was uniquely harsh and unforgiving, forging them into people capable of facing the senseless terror of the Nightmare Spell. They took their valiance seriously.

Being sent into the Dream Realm on the winter solstice was a rite of passage. Some would say that it was an unnecessary risk... maybe even point to the Forgotten Shore as an example.

Thousands of young men and women had perished there before Changing Star finally conquered the Gateway.

But, at the same time, those who had survived were among the strongest champions of humanity now. Most were Masters, and some were Saints. Changing Star herself, Song of the Fallen, Nightingale, Raised by Wolves... those were legendary names.

So, even if Tamar's father had been afraid of sending his daughter to her death, he would have still done it. Because that was how Legacies were.

Rain sighed.

‘That is so messed up.’

How had the leader of Clan Sorrow felt, willingly putting his daughter's life at risk?

How had Tamar felt, knowing that her parents would rather see her dead than weak?

Things like that would mess one's head for life.

Suddenly, Rain didn't want to mock the young Legacy anymore.

She lingered for a few moments, the asked curiously:

"But how did you survive? As Lady Tamar said, a Death Zone is no place for humans. To make it out alive.,,, it's like a miracle."

The three Awakened looked at each other somberly.

Eventually, Ray answered with a pale smile:

"We... received help."

Fleur shivered.

"Yeah. No human can live in a Death Zone... but actually, one human does. Well, at least he... he seems like a human? Nobody is really sure."

Tamar nodded with a dark expression.

"He was the one who saved us. The Lord of Shadows…”