1788 Weeping Canyon

Life was like that.

You could train your body tirelessly to turn it into a tenacious, resilient tool. You could practice swordsmanship and archery until your hands bled, temper your observation skills and analytical thinking, and test yourself against countless opponents in real combat to turn shallow knowledge into deeply rooted experience.

And then, you can still die because of nothing but bad luck.

Rain felt resentful as she plummeted into a bottomless abyss, surrounded by an avalanche of shattered stone.

But no, that was not true... her current predicament was not due to misfortune. She was at fault. It was her who had not been cautious enough, perceptive enough, and smart enough. All the signs had been there — the cracks in the stone, the weathered state of the canyon walls, the devastating power of the Tyrant's blows. She should have put two and two together.

She should have done better.

So, Rain had no one to blame but herself.

Still... still!

She was indignant.

To die like that, it was really unfair!

All these thoughts flashed through her mind in the span of a moment. Then, she gritted her teeth and tried to think of a way to survive.

First things first... the fall itself would not kill her just yet. The bottom of the canyon was far away, and she could survive bouncing off its walls once or twice. The most pressing threat were the falling boulders — they were massive and heavy enough to turn Rain into a pancake, or at least smash her skull open.

Raising her arms, she tried to shield her head. A moment later, something slammed into her forearms, and she felt sharp pain. Luckily, the boulder was not large enough to crush her, so her bones weren't even broken.

The next one, though...

Catching a glimpse of it, Rain shuddered.

It was like a wall of rough rock was pursuing her, mere moments away from colliding with her fragile body. There was no chance to evade.

A moment before she was crushed by the massive slab of stone, however, something strange happened. The darkness seemed to touch it lightly, and the enormous boulder shattered into a million pieces.

Instead of being killed, Rain was simply showered by small pieces of debris.

'Teacher...'

Her teacher rarely helped her directly. However, it seemed that he was unwilling to let his student perish so senselessly, and interfered — just like he had interfered to keep the porters and surveyors from being ravaged by the Tyrant.

'I take back all the bad words I've called him!'

There was no time to feel touched, but Rain still felt a strange warmth in her heart.

Then, she turned her head to find the only source of salvation there was, apart from her eccentric shadow companion...

Tamar of Sorrow.

The Legacy girl could take two steps on the air, so if anyone could help Rain survive, it was her.

If she would even bother wasting her time to save a mundane porter, of course. It would be much easier, not to mention safer, to only worry about herself and let Rain fall to her death.

'Where is she?'

Everything was happening so fast, but time also seemed to slow down. Plummeting into the wailing darkness, Rain looked around feverishly and tried to catch a glimpse of Young Lady Tamar.

But she could not see her...

However, that was not because Tamar was nowhere to be seen. Rather, it was because Rain was looking too far.

She did not expect that the Legacy was nearly upon her, and only realized it when something blocked her vision.

'What...'

Then, Rain gasped as something hard rammed into her abdomen.

"Argh!"

As it turned out, Tamar had been quicker to react. After regaining her bearings, she swiftly evaluated the situation, located Rain, and then used the first of her two steps to arrest her fall and launch herself to intercept the falling porter instead.

The hard thing that had collided with Rain's abdomen, knocking the wind out of her, was the Legacy girl's shoulder. Since Tamar was clad in a suit of plate armor, her steel pauldron was not at all soft.

Grabbing Rain around the waist, she continued to fly toward the wall of the canyon. However, another huge boulder barred their path — hissing a stifled curse, Tamar used the second step to change their direction and avoided it.

Now, her Dormant Ability was exhausted — she would not be able to use it again before touching a solid surface with her feet.

They flew into the darkness, falling deeper and deeper... but, at the same time, getting closer to the wall. Tamar shielded Rain from falling debris and yelled:

"...old ...n!"

A moment later, Rain's body was violently jerked and came to a halt.

'Ah... crap, that hurt...'

She opened her eyes and tried to assess the situation.

The wailing rising from the depths of the canyon was absolutely deafening, making her ears ring. She was surrounded by darkness — the sky was like a narrow line of light far, far above.

Tamar was hanging from the damp wall of the canyon. One of her hands was thrust into a narrow crack, while the other was still holding Rain.

'I'll be damned.'

They were actually alive.

Well... for now.

Since Tamar had technically landed on something, she could activate her Dormant Ability again. Then, like a squirrel, she could slowly make her way back to the surface while carrying Rain.

There was a big problem, though...

The canyon was weeping.

Which meant that it was going to turn into a raging river at any moment.

Rain couldn't really see well in the darkness, but she thought that she noticed a panicked look in the Legacy girl's eyes.

Then, they were enveloped in the roar of rushing water.

A moment later, the flood slammed into them like a concrete wall. Rain did not even have time to scream.

Tamar's hand was violently wrenched out of the crack, and they were carried away, deeper into the canyon.

The last thing Rain remembered was the sight of a solid surface of stone, approaching her at terrible speed.

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She was cold.

And tired.

Everything hurt, so Rain did not want to wake up.

'I'll just sleep a five more minutes...'

She could be late for class... but she could, a little bit. If she pretended to be pitiful, maybe mom would let her sleep a bit more.

Only... wasn't her mom far away?

And there were no classes anymore. Instead, she was... she was...

Opening her eyes, Rain stared at the gray sky.

Drops of rain were falling from above, cooling her face.

She studied the sky for a bit, then flinched and sat up.

She was laying on the solid ground, surrounded by the vast expanse of the Moonriver Plain.

There was a small fire crackling near, with her teacher warming his pale hands over it.

The battered figure of Tamar of Sorrow was laying on the other side of the fire. She seemed to be in a rough shape, and still unconscious.

Rain blinked slowly.

'We're alive.'

That was good news.

The bad news was that she had no idea how they had escaped the canyon, and where they were. She vaguely remembered being surrounded by soft darkness and carried by the raging current, but then... at some point, she must have passed out.

It was hard to differentiate one part of the plain from the other, but Rain did not think that she recognized the surroundings. The members of the survey team were nowhere in sight, as well.

Letting out a deep sigh, she turned to her teacher and asked hoarsely:

"What happened?"

He looked at her and smiled.

"Well... you two fell into the river, and I fished you out."

Rain nodded slowly.

"How far were we carried by the current?"

He shrugged.

"Pretty far."

'...It's okay.'

Since both of them were alive, the situation could still be salvaged. They could find the survey team... maybe... and return to the main camp of the road crew. Or proceed to one of the advanced camps on their own.

Or...

Rain looked at her teacher and forced out a smile.

"Teacher... you are so kind and powerful! Can't you... you know... take us back?"

He responded with a smile of his own.

"Oh... sure, I can!"

However, his voice was a little sinister.

"Look at that poor girl, Tamar... she's barely alive. It would be really kind of me to take you both back, wouldn't it? One might even say that only a heartless monster wouldn't. So I really should... ah, but I won't."

Rain's smile grew a little forced.

"What? Really? Come on... it won't even be that hard for you..."

Her teacher nodded.

"Really! If you want to get out of here alive... well, what can I say? All you need to do is Awaken. Do that, and you'll be fine."

With that, he gave her a pleasant smile and disappeared into her shadow. A moment later, his voice resounded from the darkness:

"Alternatively... that Lord of Shadows, he seems to know what's what. You can ask him for help!"

Rain stared at her shadow incredulously, then took a deep breath.

'I take back everything I took back! That... that petty bastard!’