1821 A Thousand Steps

Despite how tired Rain was, how badly she needed reprieve, she still sat on the ground and circulated her essence. Her body was absolutely motionless, but her soul was like a raging whirlpool.

At the heart of the whirlpool, soul essence was being refined into solid form by the crushing pressure. There were plenty of radiant grains there, already, sparkling like gemstones as they spun and collided. Rain could almost hear the melodious ringing, and feel her soul tremble slightly with each clash.

However, the brilliant gemstones were unable to fuse, yet. There weren't enough of them for that to happen.

She had to create more.

But it was such a slow and arduous process...

Rain was already doing much better than anyone was supposed to. After years of slaying Nightmare Creatures, her essence was especially potent. Her control of it was both forceful and intricate, remarkably precise - at least for someone below the Ascended Rank.

All she needed was time.

Sadly, Rain wasn't sure that she had any time left.

'I'm not fast enough…’

Deeply concerned, she gritted her teeth and concentrated wholly on controlling her essence.

When the moons reached the apogee of the cloudy sky, she allowed the raging whirlpool of her soul to dissipate and slumped, feeling like she was about to pass out from fatigue. Dragging Tamar's conical helmet over with a weak hand, she drank half of the water that had accumulated inside and finally felt alive again.

A little.

Then, Rain woke the young Legacy up and curled on the ground, instantly falling asleep.

In the morning, her entire body felt broken. Rain had told Tamar that they would move on as soon as dawn broke, but in the end, they spent more time under the rock outcropping.

Rain knew that she wouldn't endure another day of dragging the stretcher with her hands, so something had to be done. After thinking for a while, she unsheathed her hunting knife and carefully separated the alloy mesh from the lining of her military jacket.

The alloy wire was very fine, but incredibly durable. She spent a lot of time patiently dismantling the mesh with the help of Tamar's enchanted dagger, then weaving the wires together. In the end, Rain was left with several meters of crude alloy rope.

The young Legacy was observing with an incredulous expression. Her pallor had become a little better, but she still looked terrible.

In fact, both of them did.

Tamar had always maintained a valiant and dashing image, quite in line with her exalted status as the daughter of an old Legacy clan. Rain might not have had the same background, but she still endeavored to look if not refined, then at least decent.

Now, both of them were dirty and wretched.

They were covered in mud from head to toe, with sunken eyes and chapped lips. Their hair was damp and tangled. Their clothes might have had color once, but now they were indistinguishable from the surrounding dirt.

It was a complete disgrace.

Looking at Rain, then at herself, Tamar smiled faintly.

"...Aren't we a sight to behold?"

It was good to see that she still had enough spirit to be humorous in this situation.

Continuing to weave wire rope, Rain smiled, as well.

"Indeed. Aren't we lucky that the Tyrant is blind? At least it won't be offended by our appearance when it eats us,"

Listening to Tamar chuckle in a weak voice, she fashioned one end of the wire rope into a simple harness, then secured the other end to the stretcher, Putting the harness on herself, Rain gave it a cautious tug.

'Much better.'

By then, she could already see the hideous giant far away in the distance. The abomination had not lost track of them despite the heavy rain. It was still following their scent, albeit a little slower.

‘Of course it is.’

"We have to go."

Tamar had seen the Tyrant, as well. Rain noticed that she never looked at it directly, keeping the creature in the periphery of her vision - just like Rain herself had been trained to do by her teacher.

Many Nightmare Creatures could sense when a gaze was directed at them. So, she had been taught to never look at abominations directly when stalking them.

'I guess Legacy training has something in common with mine.'

She wondered who had it tougher, and decided that it was probably her.

Helping Tamar onto the stretcher, Rain took a step forward. The wire rope dug into her skin, but it was much easier to pull the stretcher that way... which was not to say that it was easy,

Rain still struggled against the heavy weight.

She sighed quietly and gritted her teeth.

Hooking his fingers under the wire rope to spare her chest and abdomen from being cut by it, she leaned her body forward and pulled. Rain was like a beast of burden, and the stretcher was like a strange mud sled.

She was curious to see how long she would endure.

Step, step. Another step.

A thousand steps.

More...

The world narrowed down to a patch of drying mud in front of her, the feeling of the wire rope cutting into her shoulder, and the depleting struggle to pull the stretcher forward.

The air flowed into her lungs as she breathed hoarsely.

For a while, her mind was empty of thought, full of only the harsh sensation of physical strain.

Rain was doing fine for an hour or two, but then, a sense of deep, suffocating exhaustion slowly seeped into her muscles, filling her body with lead. The horizon seemed as distant as it had been before, and the barren wasteland was unchanged. She felt like she had made no progress at all, and therefore, her silent torment felt endless.

The lumbering silhouette of the blind Tyrant was still following them, far behind, prowling low to the ground.

Rain pushed forward stubbornly.

But at the same time...

A cold realization sent chills running down her spine.

'It's hopeless.'

She wasn't one to give up without a fight, but she also knew better than to fight a hopeless battle.

And this desperate struggle of hers was already lost.

Rain might be able to stay ahead of the Tyrant for a while - maybe for a day, or even a few. But sooner or later, the abuse she was putting her body through would take its toll. At some point, she wouldn't be able to keep the pace anymore. Then, she wouldn't be able to take another step, or even rise from the ground.

That was if nothing else killed her before that happened.

So, all she could do... was keep walking forward and pray that some miracle would save them. Maybe, if she bought enough time, they would stumble on a passing Saint who happened to be traversing the Moonriver Plain by chance. Maybe another abomination would get into a fight with Tyrant, dealing it a grievous wound. Maybe... maybe...

They would get lucky.

But Rain was not willing to entrust her life to dumb luck.

She had to think of something.

She continued to pull the stretcher across the mud, slowly forcing her mind to wake up from the numb slumber.

There had to be a way out. There always was.

After a dozen more steps... or maybe a thousand...

Rain's dark eyes suddenly glistened with ferocious determination.