1823 Mud

A desolate plain stretched as far as the eye could see under the cloudy sky. The horizon was shrouded by a rustling veil of cold rain, and the ground had turned into an endless expanse of mud.

A canyon cut the plain like a deep scar, resounding with eerie weeping sounds. It would turn into a raging river soon, but for now, the vertical slopes were drowning in nothing but darkness.

A young woman was moving across the plain, pulling a makeshift sled behind her. . . although, it would have been hard to recognize her as a human from first sight. Covered in mud from head to toe, she looked like a gaunt golem made from clay. The mud stuck to her skin and clothes, making the woman look like a part of the barren wasteland that had somehow come alive.

Her face and hair were covered in layers of dirt, as well. Only her dark, sunken eyes could be seen, burning with fierce determination.

. . . In the end, Rain had lasted more than a day. In fact, she had lasted for six, enduring the inhuman strain and crushing exertion of their desperate flight against all odds.

She had reached her breaking point a long time ago. But, somehow, she managed to keep going even after becoming broken. Later, she faced some other, much deeper limit. . . Rain wasn't sure what it was, and couldn't clearly remember. All she knew was that she was still standing.

That was all that mattered.

The original stretcher had long fallen apart. The enchanted cloak was fine, of course, but the wooden frame had cracked and shattered. Rain had kept repairing it as best she could, but at some point, she could only discard the broken branches and replace them.

She built the new frame from the bones of the

Nightmares Creatures that had attacked them in the dead of night.

The melodious ringing of essence crystals colliding with each other in the depths of her soul was almost deafening now, filling her ears. Her vision had grown vague and narrow. Most of her consciousness was consumed by the sensation of soul essence spinning in a raging whirlpool, permeating every cell of her body. The rest was filled with exhaustion and pain.

Step. Step. Another step.

The further south they went, the more bleak the weather became. Chilling rain poured from the grey sky more and more frequently, and grew more and more forceful. She didn't mind. Not only did it mean that they would not suffer from thirst, but pulling the stretcher through the mud was easier than it would have been if the soil was dry.

Of course, it was a perilous exchange. Rain would have probably been dead if not for her military bodysuit — being wet meant losing heat, and heat was energy. With how much she was exerting herself, energy was a precious resource that she dared not waste.

Her body had already started consuming itself, so it was a dire commodity.

Tamar, meanwhile, was not faring much better.

She did not have to exhaust herself physically, and her wounds were healing. But new ones were added to the old ones after that nighttime attack.

The young Legacy had lost a lot of blood, and although they slaughtered the abominations in the end, it was not without a cost.

Rain was concerned about the younger girl.

They did not have a lot of chances to get to know each other better in the past six days — most of their time was taken by the endless, exhausting march, and when they rested at night, both were too tired to talk.

And yet, Rain felt like an invisible bond had formed between them. How could it not, after they had gone through so much hardship together? The muddy plain, the weeping sky, the burning desire to survive. . . no one else would know or remember these trials, but they would.

There was a sound that suddenly distracted her.

She could barely hear it behind the rustle of rain, the roar of the water rushing through the canyon, the melody of her soul essence, and the silence of her numb thoughts.

“ni! Rani! Ra. . . "

She flinched and came to her senses. In the next moment, she saw several swift silhouettes rushing at them through the rain.

Nightmare Creatures.

‘Curse them. . . ’

Without wasting any time, Rain fell on the ground.

Behind her, Tamar was already sitting up on the stretcher. She was holding a bow in one hand, nocking an arrow on its string with the other.

While Rain was feverishly untangling herself from the alloy harness, the young Legacy let the arrow loose. It streaked through the pouring rain and hit one of the abominations in the shoulder. Despite her weakened state, Tamar still managed to maintain admirable accuracy — however, it wasn't quite enough. The creature stumbled and rolled on the ground, but then rose again and continued sprinting.

Although it had received a deep wound, none of its vital organs were destroyed.

‘Damn it.’

There were three abominations, each the size of a wolf. From the looks of it, they were merely

Awakened. . . in fact, the two of them had been lucky to not encounter a Fallen Nightmare

Creature yet. Still, an Awakened abomination was absolutely deadly. Especially in a situation like this one, when the initiative was on their side.

‘…So tired. ’

Rain remained laying on the ground for a few moments, then rose to her knees and unsheathed her hunting knife. She gripped the hilt of the enchanted dagger with her other hand and rose, holding both blades in a defensive stance.

By that time, Tamar had already sent another arrow flying, finally bringing the wounded abomination down. Her face was pale, and the ugly wound that stretched across her shoulder and chest had opened, seeping with blood. The strain of drawing a powerful enchanted bow was too much for her to endure.

And yet, she was already pulling the string for the third time.

The Nightmare Creatures were almost upon them.

Both lunged forward in a flash of claws, fangs, and frenzied eyes.

Just then, Tamar's arrow hit one in the head, killing it instantly.

The other jumped on Rain. She dove under its claws and thrust both of her blades forward. The hunting knife barely penetrated the tough hide of the abomination and slid from her grasp, but the long dagger sunk into its flesh to the hilt.

The creature fell on Rain and sent her crushing to the ground. She just barely managed to push the abominable beast, sending it flying over her head.

They fell simultaneously.

‘It hurts.’

Rain fell on her back, but spun and rose to her knees almost immediately. Dashing torward the struggling abomination, she pinned it to the ground with the weight of her body and stabbed it repeatedly. Her strikes were aimed at all the spots where vital organs should have been.

A while later, the beast stopped moving.

Rain crawled off its corpse weakly and sprawled in the mud.

After that violent burst of strength, she felt like she would never be able to stand up.

And yet. . . throughout all of it, the melodious ringing never grew silent. Even while being lunged at by a snarling abomination, wrestling it to the ground, and sinking her blade into its flesh, Rain had never stopped circulating her essence.

Somewhere deep within her, another radiant grain of sand was formed.

She smiled tiredly.

‘Soon. . . Soon. . . ’

Drops of rain were falling heavily on her burning face.