1844 On The Other Side

"I think we are all going to die. What do you think, Rani?"

Ray's voice was tinged with melancholy, but Rain had learned to ignore his complaints in the last few weeks. Sitting on the ground — well, on what served as ground in this godforsaken place — and leaning her back against a wagon's wheel, she gave him a relaxed shrug.

The young man stared at her with indignation. After a while, he sighed.

"Have enough decency to look concerned, at least…"

They were currently in the middle of the army camp, resting after a long and arduous march. It was hard to tell what time of day it was, since there were no nights in Godgrave. A veil of clouds obscured the sky, shining with diffused radiance.

It would have been quite pretty if it was not so terrifying.

Everyone had been informed over and over again about the lethal nature of the sky in this land. They knew that the only way to survive in case the clouds parted was to remain absolutely still. The army had ascended the dead god's arm far enough, by now, to fully cross the realm boundary… so, those warnings were of vital importance.

They had yet to see the clouds break, though.

Rain, Tamar, Ray, and Fleur were among the Awakened warriors of the Seventh Legion — which was led by the seventh and last daughter of the Queen to reach Transcendence, Saint Seishan. Granted, Rain barely remembered how he ended up in such august company. So many things had happened in the last month that it was all like a blur.

The news about the King of Swords declaring war on the Song Domain had reached them not long after reuniting with the members of the survey team in the main construction camp. It was a great shock to many, but not to Rain herself.

The initial shock was soon replaced by fear and outrage. It was then that Queen Song left her palace in Ravenheart, appearing in public for the first time in many years. Rain did not witness it herself, but she was told that the Queen's speech was incredibly rousing.

It ignited the hearts of the people of Song, so when the call to arms was issued, countless Awakened warriors chose to answer. The vassals of the Queen responded to the call, as well, gathering their armies to help defend the Song Domain against the tyranny of the King of Swords.

Rain was one of those Awakened warriors. She was made a soldier right there and then, in the construction camp, as a member of Tamar of Sorrow's cohort.

Tamar's father was leading his own war party, but he sent his daughter to serve under Song Seishan and her Blood Sisters — Rain wasn't entirely sure why, but she had no reason to complain.

There were hundreds of thousands of Awakened in the Song Army, but only seven royal legions. And although Saint Seishan was the last among the seven Transcendent princesses to conquer the Third Nightmare, her personal power was in no way inferior to that of her sisters.

So, the Seventh Legion was among the most elite forces in Godgrave, comparable to the Knights of Valor led by Morgan, the Princess of War.

Rain was honestly unsure how she had ended up here.

'I guess that's the benefit of getting in through acquaintances.'

The weeks between the declaration of war and today were incredibly hectic. So many things had happened… and yet, one of them stood out as more bizarre than any other.

It happened immediately after Rain joined the Song Army. She was woken up in the middle of the night by her teacher, who gestured for her to follow him quietly. Together, they left the busy camp and walked far into the wilderness, eventually reaching a secluded gorge.

There, Rain had to stop and rub her eyes, bewildered by what she saw.

Out there, in the middle of the Dream Realm… a quaint brick cottage stood, illuminated by the pale light of the three moons.

The sight was so strange that Rain assumed that she was seeing things. However, she was not — there was really a neat cottage standing in the desolate wasteland of the Moonriver Plain, a walking distance from the main camp of the road construction crew. It was not a mirage, and neither was it an ancient ruin.

In fact, the brick building was neat and tidy, as if someone frequently swept its porch and washed its windows.

Rain looked at her teacher with wide eyes.

"What is that?"

He answered matter-of-factly:

"That… is an Ascended Devil pretending to be a cottage. Come inside."

She did not know what else to do but to follow him into the cottage. The door opened by itself, and then closed behind him.

The interior… looked like a dining hall of a small café. There was no one inside, and no source of light except for the moonlight pouring through the windows.

It was more than a little bit creepy.

A moment latter, the moonlight was extinguished, as well, leaving Rain in absolute darkness.

"T—teacher?"

There was a scratching sound, and a small light appeared in the darkness. Her teacher was standing near a shelf, holding a burning candle in his hand.

"Come."

With that, he turned around and went back to the door. Rain had no idea why they had come inside only to leave with a candle, but she obediently followed.

To her shock, however…

The Moonriver Plain was gone. When they came out, there were no moons, no stars, and no wind. The floor was perfectly flat, as if cut from black marble. She couldn't quite see where they were, but it felt as if they were underground.

And there was someone else there, as well…

"Goddammit, it's so creepy… boss! Boss, you're back! Where the hell did you… huh? Who's that?"

Rain had the same question.

Out there in front of her, sitting on the black marble floor, was a little girl... who had a very dirty mouth and addressed her teacher as "boss", for some reason.

Rain raised a hand and pointed to the strange child:

"Who's the brat?"

The little girl floated up, lowered her feet to the floor, and stared at her with wide eyes.

"Brat? What do you mean, brat? I'm twenty-eight years old!"

Rain blinked a couple of times. She had assumed that the petite girl was a child, but now that she looked closer…

'Ah, how embarrassing!'

Rain looked down.

"Oh… sorry, Auntie."

The petite girl opened her mouth in shock.

"A—auntie? No, wait, what do you mean by auntie?!"

Listening to the two of them, her teacher let out a heavy sigh and shook his head.

"To answer your questions… this is Awakened Rain. This is Awakened Aiko. Aiko, Rain is my disciple. Rain, Aiko is my assistant."

They turned to him almost simultaneously.

"You have an assistant?"

"You have a disciple?"

Then, they looked at each other, both wearing a similar shocked expression.

Her teacher smiled.

"No need to sound so stunned, really. Sure, I do. Why wouldn't I? Now, the reason I brought you two here… is to extend an offer to you both. Consider it a great honor."

His smile turned a little sinister, making both of them feel a bad premonition and shiver.

His smile turned a little wider.

"...How would you ladies like to join the Shadow Clan?"

And that was how Rain ended up with an intricate snake tattoo coiling around her arm.

Leaning on the wheel of a supply wagon, she closed her eyes and listened to Ray's complaints silently.

The snake tattoo, which was apparently called the [Mark of Shadows], was more than a simple tattoo, of course. It was akin to an Attribute, granting her several useful abilities. Among them was the ability to see in absolute darkness, walk stealthily in the shadows, and sense their movements.

It also helped her control her soul essence. Apart from that, the snake could also slither off her arm, manifesting into a weapon.

Most importantly of all at least according to her teacher it allowed him, as well as the creature that had created the soul snake, access to her Soul Sea. Which meant that they could defend it should something invade Rain's soul.

She had not even known that there were things out there that could invade human souls, but knowing that her teacher would be there to deal with the invader made her feel better.

All in all, the soul snake was an excellent gift to receive.

Of course, it was not the only thing she had received from her teacher…