2064 : Fragments of War (1)

"T—tamar!"

Rain desperately dashed back, trying to avoid the claws of an appalling beast that had lunged at her from the underbrush. All around her, the battered remains of the centuria were besieged by the rabid Nightmare Creatures. The world was painted in the shades of scarlet, and her feet were drowning in the soft moss.

The main body of the Song Army was far ahead, having most likely already reached the Crossing Stronghold. However, many small squads had been sent back to slow down the vanguard forces of the Sword Domain and make them pay dearly for every step they took.

There were traps, ambushes, and countless skirmishes being fought under the indifferent grey sky of Godgrave. Most importantly of all…

The extermination outposts had been destroyed days ago, and now, the scarlet jungle was spreading feverishly across the weathered surface of the sun-bleached bone once again.

Having accomplished their missions, the rearguard forces of the Song Army had to flee north — unfortunately, they had to brave the abominable jungle themselves in order to escape.

Tamar's soldiers were among those unfortunate souls who had been ordered to stay back. They ambushed the scouts of the Sword Army in the charred ruins of a destroyed outpost, fought a bloody skirmish, and then retreated before the enemy reinforcements could arrive.

They had lost many good men in the battle against the warriors of the Sword Domain… but they had lost many more to the hungry jungle on the way north.

After several long months of the terrible war, no more than a half of the soldiers remained alive.

'Damn it…'

Rain slid on the scarlet moss, blocked the beasts's jaws with her black tachi, and used the abomination's own momentum to throw it to the ground.

It was a perfect moment to deliver a fatal blow — the only moment she would receive, perhaps. The black tachi was positioned perfectly to fall down and end the creature's life. But although Rain's muscles remembered the motions of thrusting the tachi into the beast's neck with painful clarity, and her mind willed it, her hands did not move.

The moment had come and passed. Rain's eyes widened.

The beast twisted, jumped to its feet, and lunged at her once again.

'Damn it!'

Rain had no choice but to retreat once again. This time, the claws of the abomination brushed against her side, failing to cut the black lusterless leather of her light armor, but still sending a sharp jolt of pain through her body. There would be angry black bruises covering her ivory skin come morning…

She was in a terrible position.

The abomination was in a murderous frenzy, lusting to kill Rain — but Rain could not do the same.

Even if there was an opportunity, her limbs simply refused to move.

She was still trying to get used to her Flaw. But as things were going currently… there was a high possibility that Rain would never get the chance to come to terms with it.

Because she was going to die right now, today!

She had already done all she could to debilitate and immobilize the Nightmare Creature, but subduing a powerful enemy was much harder than simply killing them. At close distance, with no time to think, let alone summon Memories and come up with cunning plans, all Rain could do was retreat, sustain wound after wound, and hope that someone would rescue her.

The beast was bleeding, its limbs cut deeply by the blade of her sword, but that did not seem to slow it down one bit.

Instead, it had only grown more enraged.

'Curse it!'

Rain looked around frantically, hoping to see that one of her comrades was close enough and in a position to assist her. But it was all for naught — everyone had their own deadly threats to deal with, having walked into the breeding ground of an especially nasty kind of abominations.

Actually, in a different situation, she would have been full of curiosity… where were all these Nightmare Creatures coming from? Every time the scarlet jungle returned to the surface after being burned to ash, it was flooded with all kinds of abominable fauna in a matter of hours. The beasts would then proceed to devour each other and rapidly grow stronger.

But how did they come to be? What gave birth to them?

Were they like the moss, the vines, and the trees, growing from seeds? Were they born from the scarlet pollen or clouds of deadly spores? Were they the offspring of the ancient Nightmare Creatures that dwelled in the Hollows, perhaps, brought to the surface by the slithering vines?

Did they simply materialize out of thin air, or crawl out of the ash?

Rain did not know, and nobody else knew, either. Godgrave still held countless mysteries, and this was one of them.

More importantly…

She had to find a way to survive.

Dashing back, she avoided another of the beast's attacks, gritted her teeth, and then allowed her black tachi to turn back into a snake tattoo.

Then, Rain faced the lumbering abominations with bare hands.

Tearing the scarlet moss with its claws, the Nightmare Creature lunged forward, its maw opening wide, as if to bite her in two.

For a moment, everything seemed to grow still… except for Rain's shadow, which stirred slightly on the ground.

Then, at the last moment, she sidestepped to avoid the maw of the frenzied beast. At the same time, her hands moved, untying the black sash from her waist.

Rain dodged the enraged abomination like a graceful toreador and looped the beautiful silk sash around its neck.

Then, allowing the momentum of the abomination's charge to carry her forward, she poured her essence into the [In Case of Emergency] and activated its single enchantment.

Originally, that enchantment had been meant to save her from turning to ash in case the Cloudveil broke unexpectedly, flooding Godgrave with incinerating white light. It was supposed to fix the wearer of the black sash in space, making them completely still.

But currently, it wasn't Rain who was wearing the sash. Since it was wrapped around the abomination, for all intents and purposes, it was the abominations who was wearing it.

So, when the enchantment of the [In Case of Emergency] activated, it was the abomination that was frozen in place, coming to a sudden halt.

Rain staggered and hung on the beast's neck, still gripping the black sash tightly.

The enchantment had been… calibrated?... to work on an Awakened being of approximately her weight. However, currently, she was forcefully immobilizing a much heavier creature of a higher Rank.

Therefore, her soul essence was dwindling with terrible speed.

"Tamar!"

She had maybe half a dozen seconds left…

Luckily, just a few moments later, a swift figure leaped from somewhere above and landed near Rain in a whirlwind of steel. The brutish zweihander fell, biting into the neck of the abomination — it did not quite manag to behead it in one strike, but the wound was deep enough to reveal the white spine of the frozen creature.

Tamar balanced herself in one fluid motion, then delivered a second strike, cleanly cutting the abomination's head off.

Glancing at Rain, she let out a hoarse breath, lingered for a moment, and then asked neutrally:

"You called?"