2065 Fragments of War (2)

Eventually, the battle was over. The Nightmare Creatures had been eliminated, and the tired soldiers sprawled on the ground, breathing heavily.

Rain was sitting on the scarlet moss, as well, cradling her bruised side with a somber expression. The sweltering heat of Godgrave was felt especially suffocating today, so she summoned the Green Canteen and poured cool water over her head.

'...I won't survive like that.'

She had thought that dealing with her Flaw was possible… and it was, most likely. However, learning how to deal with required time, which was hard to come by during a war, and tools that she lacked.

Rain had managed so far with Tamar's help, but how long could it last?

Shifting her gaze, she looked at her shadow.

Her brother was right there. His offer still stood. If she so wished, she could desert the Song Army at any moment and be whisked away to safety.

Leaving her comrades — and her principles — behind.

Looking away from the shadow, Rain studied her fellow soldiers.

'Fourty, fourty-one…'

There were forty-two of them left. Less than half of the initial number… some had perished during the conquest of the Collarbone Citadel, some while subjugating the wild reaches of the Breastbone Reach. Many fell during the Battle of Godheart, and finally, many more died during the retreat north.

Most of the forty-two Awakened had suffered minor wounds, while some were wounded severely. There had been two healers in the centuria before, but now, there was only Fleur. Her essence, sadly, wasn't endless.

Mercifully — or perhaps cruelly — there were relatively few people who were wounded heavily enough to require her immediate treatment. That was because the Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the jungle were too powerful, and most people who became their prey simply died.

It was a terrible thing, but also somewhat fortunate for these tired soldiers — after all, they were pursued by the members of the Sword Army.Each person who could not march on their own would slow the rest down.

Just as Rain considered this matter, Tamar's voice resounded across the recent battlefield.

"Alright… you have ten minutes to rest! We will continue north after that."

Her order was not unexpected. It was unwise to remain in the vicinity of the battlefield, where the scent of blood could attract swarms of abominable scavengers. There was also the Sword Army to worry about, so they had no time to tarry.

Everyone understood that. And yet, many dark gazes were aimed at Tamar, the faces of most soldiers turning resentful.

It couldn't be helped.

The warriors of the Song Army were still reeling from the Battle of Godheart. Even before that, their morale had been harmed grievously by the ghastly horrors of Godgrave — a literal Death Zone where no human was supposed to exist. And things were only turning harder now.

They were tired, rattled, and afraid.

How could they not feel resentful when the empty space left by their fallen comrades was so obvious as to almost be palpable?

Therefore, the soldiers had little warmth left in their hearts for the leadership of the Song Army at the moment. And since Tamar was the only officer here, she had to receive the brunt of these negative emotions.

Her situation was even worse than that of other officers, most likely, because she was a young Awakened doing the job meant for a seasoned Master. It did not matter how competent she was or how deadly of a fighter — all that mattered was that soldiers were dying, and she was a convenient target to place blame.

Looking at Tamar, the soldiers, who had followed her with fervor just recently, could not help but wonder now… how many of them would have been alive if there was an Ascended leading them instead of this Legacy youth?

The more tired and afraid they were, the more dejected they became.

The same was probably true for how they felt about the higher officers of the Song Army.

Perhaps even the Queen herself.

…Tamar, meanwhile, did not seem to pay the resentful gazes any attention. Walking over to Rain, she sat on the ground and nodded at the Green Canteen.

"Give me that."

Receiving the canteen, she drank the cool water greedily.

Exactly ten minutes later, the battered troop left the scene of the battle, not even bothering to harvest soul shards from of the bodies of the Nightmare Creatures.

Time was too short.

They hurried north without making any stops. From time to time, a stray abomination would wonder into their path, forcing the soldiers to fight. Luckily, there were no more battles as sudden and dire as that last one had been, so Rain did not have to engage in melee.

She was much safer, as well as much more effective, with a bow in her hands.

[Heavy Burden], [Outskirts at Noon], and [Don't Cut Yourself] — the three arrows crafted for her by Sunny — were far more excellent at slowing down and immobilizing the enemy than her deadly sword. Especially with how unerring Rain's aim was. Once a Nightmare Creature was hit by one of them, it was much easier for other soldiers to finish it off.

So, even though she was unable to kill anything anymore, she was still contributing plenty.

Most of the soldiers did not even notice that the way Rain fought had changed. Only Ray and Fleur were attentive enough to know that something about her was different.

"Are you… alright? Your aim is strangely off today."

She simply forced out a smile.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just exploring what my new Memories can do."

Ray seemed unconvinced, but nodded and left her alone inthe end.

They braved the northernmost tip of the Breastbone Reach, fighting the many perils of the scarlet jungle on the way.

There were several more skirmishes, but luckily enough,the veil of clouds above them broke after a few hours. A vast swathe of the jungle was annihilated, and once the clouds repaired themselves, Rain and her companions continued on their way north.

After two more days of marching… they finally reached one of the two Crossing Strongholds.