1849 Taste of Ash

The Sword Army entered Godgrave with relative ease. Of course, it was a tense and solemn day. The Awakened warriors were pale with dread as they ventured into the scarlet jungle and crossed over from the humerus bone of the dead deity to the vast collarbone.

They were in a Death Zone, after all.

However, the army barely suffered any casualties. Changing Star and her Fire Keepers had pulled the attention of the local Nightmare Creatures away and established a beachhead on the collarbone plain. Most importantly, the brought the authority of the king to this dire purgatory — emboldened and empowered by his presence, the army marched on.

The veil of clouds did not break, held together by the power of Sky Tide of the White Feather clan. The Transcendent and Ascended warriors repelled the sporadic attacks of remnant abominations without too much strain. And later, the King of Swords himself descended upon the battlefield, using the Ivory Island as an anchor.

Once the storm of swords manifested above the jungle, the battle was ostensibly over.

The army cut a path through the predatory jungle, using the beautiful silhouette of the Ivory Tower to navigate it. By the time they reached the scene of slaughter, there were no abominations left for them to fight against. They were only numerous corpses and the rustle of countless swords swirling in the sky above.

Instead, the task they faced was of a more mundane nature. They had to establish a camp and start fortifying it, building an impregnable fortress on the surface of the ancient bone. That fortress would serve as the staging ground for the rest of the military campaign in Godgrave.

…The Song Army, however, fared much worse than that.

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Rain was staring at the ground with a tired expression. On the ground in front of her, the wind was playing with flakes of ash.

She was staying completely motionless, and those flakes of ash had been a person not too long ago. Above her, an incandescent white void shone blindingly through the broken clouds.

Her first day in Godgrave had been a long, bitter nightmare.

The first battle the Song Army had fought was a sobering experience. Led by the seven princesses, the Saints and the Ascended warriors of the Song Domain clashed with the horde of Nightmare Creatures and repelled it. The unimaginable violence unleashed by that clash made the world quake — but, worst of all, some of it reached the battle formation of the Awakened warriors.

The casualties were not immeasurable, but they weren't negligible, either. Perhaps because it was the first time the soldiers fought against the abominations of Godgrave, the strategies developed by the royal clan to breach the difference in Ranks between them could not be deployed promptly, or at all.

That could improve as the army gained experience, but today, too many people died.

Rain herself did not participate in the slaughter, because the Seventh Legion was positioned in the second line of the formation, where the battle had not reached. However, she could hear and feel the terrible mayhem of the desperate struggle happening ahead.

Nevertheless, eventually, the battle ended. The vanguard obliterated the horde of the frenzied Nightmare Creatures. Those of them who had got past were immobilized and eventually cut down by the Awakened soldiers. After the soul shards were harvested, the corpses of the abominations were pushed aside, and the bloodied army continued to ascend the arm of the dead god.

Soon enough, they entered the jungle.

The jungle itself was as much of a shock to the invading humans as the horde of Nightmare Creatures had been. Everything here was not what it seemed — but all of it was insidious, hungry, and chillingly deadly. The grass, the flowers, the vines, the trees… every single thing here wanted them dead.

Those of the soldiers who had more experience exploring the Dream Realm did not seem too phased, taking the dread of the scarlet jungle in stride. But those who were younger and less experienced, like member's of Tamar's cohort, were left shaken. Their mental fortitude was sorely tested, and that was after having already received a painful blow by the recent clash against the vast horde of abominations.

If there was on silver lining to the situation, it was that the abominable flora of Godgrave was not as impervious to being damaged by the Awakened as the Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were. It was still incredibly tough and tenacious, but they could at least try to contend against the myriad of deadly dangers hiding in the jungle. So, they did not feel as helpless, at least.

There were still many that died.

Some died, screaming, after inhaling a bit of drifting pollen. Falling to the ground, then wailed and convulsed as their bodies gruesomely became fertile soil for sprouting blossoms.

Some died after being stung by tiny insect-like vermin that crawled into their armor. The effect of the paralytic poison was instantaneous, making the victims fall down without making a sound… however, it was unclear if they remained conscious and felt excruciating pain when the eggs deposited by the vermin into the wounds started to hatch a dozen seconds later.

Some were strangled and drained of blood by thorned vines that hid beneath the vermilion moss. Some were pulled below it by what had looked like harmless patches of scarlet grass.

It was all like a ghastly nightmare. Rain would have thought that they were invading the very depths of hell… if not for the fact that the Dream Realm was much more harrowing than any hell imagined by a human could ever be.

Luckily, she had no time to drown in terror.

The army marched forward in a vast battle formation. The train was absorbed into the formation and protected in its center, while the various legions and divisions took turns defending the outer perimeter. The entire arrangement was spearheaded by the thralls of Beastmaster, who faced the most dire peril and suffered the heaviest casualties.

On the flanks, the warriors of higher Ranks dealt with the brunt of the danger once again. But Awakened soldiers like Rain also had a lot to do — both when marching on the outer rim of the formation and when resting closer to its center.

She had killed plenty of scurrying pests with her arrows, saving not only her life but also that of others. Her arrows seemed to not know how to miss, striking down even the smallest pests with daunting precision long before they could sink their stingers, mandibles, and beaks into human flesh.

In truth, she was a bit safer in this hellish place than most Awakened were. It was because she could sense the movement of shadows, and therefore detect dangerous movement even if her sight betrayed her.

And yet, Rain was swiftly growing tired… exhausted, even.

It was not because of marching or having to draw her bow over and over again. It was not even because of having to climb the steep slope of the dead god's humerus bone without rest.

It was due to the mental strain of enduring the horror of Godgrave without allowing herself to break down.

Rain had thought that she was accustomed to the dread of the Dream Realm after hunting in the wilderness around Ravenheart for four years. But now, she realized just how tame those settled regions of this terrible world were after being conquered and cleansed by the previous generations of Awakened. Compared to Godgrave, Ravenheart was a paradise.

She was barely holding on to her composure… if not to her sanity.

But even then, after a while, the march became easier.

Humans were supremely adaptable, after all. The jungle did not change, but the soldiers of the Song Army had adapted to its gruesome reality — at least a little bit.

Eventually, they reached the mountainous shoulder joint that connected the titanic humerus to the collarbone. The engineering corps swiftly established a robust bridge under the protection of the First Legion, and then, the Song Army slowly started to cross over to the over side of the bottomless chasm.

The crossing was perhaps the most perilous step of the invasion of Godgrave. Rain felt incredibly tense while the Seventh Legion waited for its turn to enter the bridge… however, in the end, they reached the collarbone plain without any trouble.

The jungle on the over side was much the same, but somehow, everyone felt safer.

That feeling was a lie.

No sooner than the last division had crossed over, a strong wind rose, and a loud wailing of a war horn washed over the entire army. That horn was different from the ones that had called them to battle, and much more anxious.

"Don't move!"

Tamar's shout was quite timely. The members of her cohort remembered the meaning of the wailing horn despite their fatigue and mental exhaustion, but many of the surrounding soldiers were slow to react. Hearing her voice, they recalled their training.

The entire army suddenly grew still.

A few moments later, the world was suddenly much brighter. The light reflecting from the white surface of the ancient bone was almost painful to look at… a wave of unbearable heat crashed into the human invaders, and the smell of ash filled the air.

The jungle burned.

…Many humans burned, too

Well, perhaps "burning" was not the right word. They just turned to ash, scattering into a cloud of grey flakes in the scorching wind, and disappeared without a trace.

Not everyone had ceased all movement in time, and not everyone managed to remain perfectly motionless.

Seeing their comrades die, some soldiers recoiled or flinched.

They became ash, too.

Rain could not move, could not look away, and could not even wipe the flakes of warm ash off her face.

All she could do was stand still and stare at the ground.

'It's bitter.'

The first day in Godgrave… was too bitter to swallow.

They had not even clashed with the army of the Sword Domain, and so many people were already dead. Yes, their number was inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. But their deaths were not.

Rain couldn't help but feel as if they had been beaten without even entering a battle.

She was tired.

…After a few hours, and more deaths, the veil of clouds finally repaired itself. The Song Army took a short rest, most soldiers sitting on the ground quietly, despondent and unable to say anything.

Then, they continued the march.

By evening — or whatever constituted evening in this eternally sunlit hell — they finally reached the area where the army basecamp was supposed to be established.

Not everyone had made it that far.

But for those who had…

The war was only starting.