1880 Hell March

The expedition force continued to push into the depths of Godgrave.

The First Rib had a bending shape, so for the first week, they were facing a literal uphill battle. Sometimes, the treacherous slope under their feet was so steep that the fallen soldiers rolled down the bloody ground, crashing into the second row of the battle formation. The unforgiving pace of the offensive was only made more cruel by the difficult terrain and the battering heat.

With each passing day, the scarlet infestation was growing. The jungle was turning more nightmarish, and the abominations populating it were becoming more powerful. However, the soldiers were also growing stronger — those of them who had yet to saturate their cores were absorbing the scavenged soul shards, and many were receiving powerful Memories during the long days of slaughter.

All were gaining valuable experience and growing more used to the dreadful peril of Godgrave.

The main reason why the progress of the expedition force was so swift, though, and why the casualties among the soldiers were not nearly as terrible as they could have been, were the three leaders of the expedition — Changing Star, Summer Knight, and the Lord of Shadows.

Changing Star was like a ruinous herald of annihilation. The battlefield transformed into a radiant, fiery hell when she entered it. Her cleansing flame, her incandescent sword, and her brilliant resolve were both a solace and an inspiration to the warriors of the Sword Army.

Those who saw her fight found strength that they had not known they possessed and raised their swords to follow her without hesitation. More than that, the Memories of those who fought by her side would be imbued with a newfound power, and all but the most fatal wounds her followers received were quickly healed by her soothing flame.

The first war party was the fiercest, and pushed the jungle back the furthest.

Summer Knight was no less radiant. Woven from light, he was like a beacon that dispelled the darkness of the abominable jungle. Seemingly knowing no fear or hesitation, he barred the path of the most harrowing Nightmare Creatures and cut them down both nobly and valiantly, showing the soldiers what a true knight was meant to be with his own example.

His personal power might not have been as devastating as that of Lady Nephis, but his valor and martial prowess were beyond reproach. He was the most seasoned commander among the three,and led his fellow Saints with the greatest measure of understanding of how to use their powers . Even though there were more Transcendents in his war party than in the other two, their coordination was just as seamless, if not more so.

The second war party was the most steady and stable, moving forward at a measured pace.

And lastly, there was the Lord of Shadows.

The mysterious Saint of Godgrave was like a dark revelation for the soldiers of the Sword Army. No one had expected him to be this deadly, this ruthless, and this insidious as he rampaged on the battlefield, shifting from shadow to shadow and slaughtering the Nightmare Creatures of the scarlet jungle. His silent ferocity was both chilling and astounding, making his soldiers feel a sense of wary awe.

He did not seem to possess a great affinity for combat, as far as his Aspect went, but seemed like a personification of death despite that — simply due to his lethal skill, devious intelligence, and merciless killing intent. With his three powerful Echoes and unfathomable awareness of every peril facing the battle formation, the sinister Saint was in no way inferior to the most renowned champions of the Sword Domain.

The third war party was not the fastest, but it suffered the fewest casualties during the gruesome march.

The expedition force slowly conquered the Eastern First Rib, moving from one fissure to another and cutting off the sources of the scarlet infestation one by one.

By the time the great elevation of the Breastbone Reach drew near, a small team of the strongest Saints split off from the main force to escort Sky Tide of the White Feather clan to its slopes.

The Cloudveil parted, revealing the boundless white abyss beyond. Torrents of blinding light poured down, and the soldiers of the expedition force witnessed the unforgettable spectacle of the vast expanse of the Reach being devoured by flames in terrified silence.

They were far enough away from the breach in the clouds to be safe from the white abyss, but not far enough to be spared the fear of watching half of the world burn.

After that, the progress of the expedition force slowed down considerably, and grew much more perilous.

That was because Saint Tyris had finally exhausted her essence after protecting the soldiers for more than a week. Without the aegis of her power, nothing could save them from the merciless heavens anymore.

They suffered the first breach three days later,while scaling the slopes of the dead god's breastbone. It was a short one, only lasting a few hours, but many soldiers still lost their lives and became ash, their bodies scattered by the wind.

If there was one small consolation, it was that the abominable jungle and the vile creatures populating it burned with them.

The Cloudveil broke one more time before Saint Tyris regained her powers, to the same result.

The expedition force pushed south, slowly carving a path across the vast expanse of the enormous breastbone.

The soldiers were tired. The sixteen hours of rest they received between having to go to battle were nowhere near enough for them to regain their vitality. The battles themselves were long and harrowing, reaping too many lives each time. The tide of Nightmare Creatures seemed endless, and the suffocating heat was hard to endure.

Worst of all, the geography of the Breastbone Reach prevented them from permanently cleansing its surface from the scarlet infestation — at least now that they were pursuing a different objective. Even if an extermination outpost was established around a fissure, the jungle would sooner or later spread to it from another direction.

Therefore, the expedition force moved south without leaving itself a path of retreat. A few days after they moved on, the infestation reclaimed the cleansed portions of the bone plain, enclosing the human army from all sides.

It would only be banished from these lands permanently if the Citadel in the Hollows was conquered, and the authority of the King of Swords spread to the Breastbone Reach.

Advancing forward was getting harder with each day…

And yet, after three weeks of the nightmarish marathon, the battered army finally reached its target.

In front of them, an enormous crack split the white surface of the ancient bone, and in the darkness below, unknown horrors awaited.

From here, the best warriors of the expedition force would attempt to brave the Hollows to reach and conquer the Citadel that lay in the dark depths.