1881 Leaving the Camp

For the last few days of the dreadful march across the bones of the dead deity, Godgrave had been different from before. That was because the stormy clouds that always obscured the sky, suffused with blinding radiance, had finally given birth to an actual storm.

Strong winds assaulted the bone plain, and a torrential downpour fell like a flood. The scarlet jungle had turned marron in the desaturated twilight, pressed down by the heavy rain.

The dark chasm of the great fissure was drinking the torrents of water like a hungry maw. Standing at its edge, fourteen Saints were looking down with somber expressions.

The expedition force had just claimed the area around the vast crack that split the plain. The soldiers were busy building a fortified encampment — this time, they would be remaining in one place for some time, besieged from all sides by the hungry jungle, so it had to resemble a fortress.

All Awakened warriors and Masters were remaining on the surface. So were Summer Knight and about half of the Transcendent champions that had participated in the expedition — their task was to defend the camp and make sure that the soldiers survived.

The fourteen Saints facing the fissure were those who would be venturing into the Hollows to conquer the Citadel.

Nephis and Sunny were among them. So were Saint Jest of Dagonet, Rivalen of Aegis Rose… and Roan of White Feather, as well. The rest were all exalted warriors that Sunny had come to know over the past few weeks.

Not too long ago, this many Transcendent champions would have been seen as a dire force capable of rivaling a Great Clan. Here in Godgrave, however, they were grim and uneasy, looking into the dark fissure with wary eyes.

Saint Jest suddenly let out a soft chuckle.

"I just know there's a good joke somewhere here. Let's see… there's a deep, dark crack in front of us, and we're supposed to enter it… entering, crack… damn, what can it be? It's on the tip of my tongue!"

The rest of the Saints stared at him with silent reproach. Eventually, a beautiful woman with auburn hair, the matriarch of one of Valor's vassal clans, said evenly:

"Please abstain from trying to joke, Sir Jest."

The older man glanced at her dully, then looked away with a dejected mumble.

"Really, now… you were much more fun as a little girl…"

The beautiful Saint did not respond, but her glare intensified.

After that, Rivalen of Aegis Rose broke the silence by addressing Sunny in his usual gallant manner:

"Lord Shadow,you know the Hollows better than any of us. What should we expect?"

The obnoxiously dashing man had not changed at all since the first day of the expedition. The rest of them looked ragged and worn-down, covered in sweat and soot — but he was clean and freshly shaven, with not a scratch on his resplendent golden armor. Even though his hair was messy and wet because of the rain, it somehow managed to look purposefully styled that way.

The relationship between him and Sunny had somewhat changed, though. Saint Rivalen was much more friendly and respectful toward the Lord of Shadows now, while Sunny couldn't really dislike the pompous Legacy anymore… for a very silly reason.

It was Rivalen's Transcendent form. When Sunny first saw it, he was a bit mesmerized. Shield Wall transformed into a towering beast with four stubby legs and hide so tough that it looked as if he was covered with plates of heavy armor. A single massive horn protruded from the beast's nose, longer than a ship's ram…

It was the legendary rhino!

As it turned out, Sunny had a soft spot for rhinos — for obvious reasons. He had never expected to see one in the flesh, but now that he did, disliking Saint Rivalen was harder than before.

He stared at the dashing man coldly.

The sight of his mask was quite unnerving, so Shield Wall's gallant smile grew a little forced.

Sunny sighed.

"...Imagine the surface of Godgrave, but ten times worse. The jungle never burns away, so it is much thicker. The Nightmare Creatures are older and more powerful. Fourteen of us are strong enough to handle Great abominations, but down there in the Hollows, there are Cursed beings as well. Those, we cannot provoke. So, you will follow me quietly, and I will make sure that we don't wander into their hunting grounds."

Saint Rivalen nodded grimly.

At that moment, Roan took a step closer to the edge of the fissure, then turned and looked at Nephis with a smile.

"Then, Lady Nephis… shall we?"

With that, two powerful wings appeared behind him.

As the two Saints in the team who were capable of flight, Roan and Nephis were supposed to descend into the Hollows first — along with Sunny, who could turn into a crow.

Roan's Transformation had surprised Sunny, as well. He had always assumed that the easygoing man would turn into a noble griffin, but in hindsight, there was no reason to think that.

The griffin Echo Roan used to ride on the Chained Isles, as it turned out, was a gift from his wife — it was not an ordinary Echo,either, but rather her Aspect Legacy. By now, the noble beast had reached Transcendence, and served as a protector of their daughter, Awakened Telle.

Saint Roan himself, meanwhile, could turn into a mighty winged lion. The giant creature was just as handsome as his human form was, with gorgeous white fur and enormous amber eyes.

And since Sunny had designed the [Belated Apology] with the purpose of being able to accommodate a Saint's Transformation, the giant lion's body was usually encased in intricate armor.

Saint Tyris and Roan must have been quite a sight, soaring high in the sky together…

Nephis summoned her own wings and nodded.

"Let's go."

With that, she jumped over the edge and plunged into the darkness.

Sunny and Roan followed, and soon, they saw the Great Hollows sprawling beneath them.