1884 Scarlet Garden

They set out in the morning — which wasn't any different from the day in Godgrave. The jungle, which had been teeming with Nightmare Creatures before, gradually became quiet and eerily empty as they moved further south, making the Saints tense with its sudden tranquillity.

Even the plants, which were as predatory as the beasts in the scarlet jungle, remained still.

That was because the conquest force was entering the land which belonged to the master of the old ruin… the creature they were meant to defeat.

As they moved, Saint Jest happened to catch up with Sunny, who was leading the party. The old man was using his cane to swat away branches and vines, looking annoyed because of the heat and humidity.

"That guardian we're supposed to kill… what kind of creature was it again?"

Sunny turned his head briefly, giving Saint Jest an impassive look.

"I do not know. Although I explored the Hollows casually, I never failed to avoid getting too close to this place. All I can say is that the guardian of the Citadel is a Great Nightmare Creature of a higher Class… a Terror, perhaps. Maybe even a Titan."

The old man chewed his lips.

"A Great Terror, really? Gods, the world is changing… it used to be that the existence of such beings was merely a theory. In fact, I remember mocking a bunch of academics viciously for suggesting that something this unreasonable exists! And here I am, on my way to battle one. Who's the fool now, huh?"

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

"I'd say that we are all fools, for choosing to face such a creature voluntarily."

He paused for a moment, then added in his usual cold tone:

"Still, what's wrong with being a fool?"

Saint Jest gave him a surprised look, then laughed.

"Exactly! I couldn't have put it better myself. What a poignant sentiment… now, we just need to work on your delivery…"

Soon enough, the canopy of the jungle parted, and they found themselves on the shore of a vast lake. Dozens of rivers joined to form it, and even though the storm had already passed, the lake was still full and deep.

At the center of the lake, a tall structure rose from the water. It looked both like a beautiful temple and a grand castle... however, that castle was unlike any other that Sunny had seen.

Its walls were made out of pale wood instead of stone — not out of boards or logs, though. Instead, it was as if countless white trees had grown and fused into a seamless whole to form the shape of a towering structure.The entirety of it was one great keep that resembled a pagoda, with layers of tiled roofs, deep eaves, and triangular gables.

The crimson tiles of the sloped roofs were worn and faded, but they must have been vividly scarlet once, just like the canopy of the jungle. The white temple was overgrown with vermilion moss, with vines and tree branches protruding from the gaping holes in its broken roofs and empty windows. As such, it almost looked like a vertical garden that rested in the middle of the lake.

Sunny studied it with unease, but also with a sense of curiosity.

He wondered what purpose that beautiful structure had served once, before the civilization that thrived in the Hollows once was destroyed.

Was it a sacred place where people came to worship? A stronghold to protect them from the perils of the shattered world? A logistical hub where the ships sailing to the far reaches of the Hollows came to trade?

Considering how many rivers connected to the lake, the latter would make sense. Or maybe all three of his theories were true, and the garden temple served many purposes while it was tended to by the ancient people.

In any case…

Sunny was pretty sure that Godgrave had been a part of Sun God's realm once. As such, the civilization of the Hollows would have been infected by the Nightmare Spell, and destroyed as a consequence — just like the civilization of the Twilight Sea.

He had witnessed some of what these people had been capable of in the ruins of Condemnation. Although they had not possessed the technology and war machines of the waking world, the War God's realm, they were in many ways no less advanced than them… even superior in some regards, judging by the ingenious sorcery used to create the asuras.

Such a civilization had fallen, and now, Nightmare Creatures ruled over its ruins.

Whatever sacredness the garden castle had once contained was gone, replaced by vile corruption. And the abomination whose lair it had become would be a terrible one, without a doubt.

Sunny sighed and extended his shadow sense forward. Something was hiding there, behind the pale wooden walls… he could feel the eerie threat of it, but not much else.

'...Damnation.'

He would have really preferred if it hadn't rained, and they could reach the Citadel by walking. He was tired of diving into perilous lakes.

"There's no point in wasting time. Let's go."

The Saints prepared for battle. Before too long,Saint Roan assumed his Transcendent Form — a beautiful lion with white fur and amber eyes suddenly appeared on the shore of the lake, the vital spots on his mighty body protected in an intricate armor. Turning his enormous head, the giant beast lowered one wind and allowed the rest of them to climb onto his wide back.

The only exceptions were Nephis, who summoned her wings, and Sunny, who turned into a crow.

The white lion let out a low, reverberating growl and pushed himself off the ground. A small hurricane was stirred by his wings, and he soared into the air, flying above the dark waters of the lake in the direction of the Citadel.

Sunny and Nephis followed.

…To his surprise, they reached the distant temple safely. The lake remained still, as if there were no swarms of dreadful abominations hiding in its depths. In fact, Sunny could not sense any movement in the water at all.

And yet, he could swear that it smelled faintly of blood. It almost felt like someone was watching him, as well.

They landed on the steps that led to the gates of the ruined Citadel. The Saints jumped to the ground, and Roan dismissed his Transformation.

Nephis took the lead and ventured forward with tense caution, holding her sword at the ready.

No one spoke, afraid to inform the enemy of their arrival.

They had just passed the gate and entered the echoing interior of the garden temple when Sunny finally sensed it…

Not a shadow, but a movement of all the shadows, as if a source of light was barreling toward them with terrible speed.

...Then, there was a flash, and an arrow that seemed to be woven of moonlight brushed past Nephis, piercing the chest of one of the Saints.