1915 Broken Balance

A hideous abomination lunged at a screaming soldier, only to have an arrow pierce its eye and tumble to the ground. As the massive beast rolled in the red moss, another was already climbing over its dead body.

"Grab him!"

Rain took a shaky step back, necking another arrow on the string. As she strained her muscles to draw the Beast of Prey, two Awakened warriors of the Seventh Legion dashed forward, grabbed the soldier, and dragged him back toward the crumbling phalanx.

The man was missing both legs and bleeding profusely, his screams drowning in the horrid cacophony of the battle. He was going to bleed to death shortly — if not for Fleur, that was, whose Aspect allowed her to stem bleeding and hasten healing.

The dying soldier was thrown to the ground behind the loose line of the melee vanguard, and she immediately fell to her knees next. to him, reaching with both bloodied hands to treat his terrible wounds.

The delicate young woman had lost her usual sweet bearance and luster, looking grim and haggard. Her beautiful silk robe was painted red by blood, and her red hair was soaked with sweat. She gritted her teeth, which made her fair face look even paler.

Rain did not have time to see if her friend was doing alright. She barely managed to take aim before letting go of the string, then stumbled another step back.

All around them, the expedition force of the Song Army was drowning in a seemingly endless tide of abominations. There was no end to them, and the hideous corpses kept piling, forming a morbid rampart around the stubbornly resisting human legions.

That rampart of bleeding flesh, at least, slowed the Nightmare Creatures down. The scale of the battle was inconceivable. There were countless Awakened warriors, more than a thousand Masters, and three dozen Saints battling the frenzied hordes of Nightmare Creatures under the blinding radiance of the cloudy sky.

The ground was quaking, the air was permeated by an unbearable stench of blood, and the abominable jungle was burning all around them, black pillars of smoke rising above the chaotic battlefield.

Tamar and Ray were just ahead, holding back the flood of Nightmare Creatures as part of the first line. Rain was using her enchanted bow and stunning archery skill to support them, while Fleur played the role of the field medic.

The situation was dire.

The expedition force led by Lady Seishan had made it all the way across the Collarbone Plain, reaching the great fissure that led to the vicinity of the supposed Citadel. The march had been a feverish nightmare of gruesome battles and appalling bloodshed, but they had arrived at their destination with relative ease.

The jungle had been pushed back and burned, its inhabitants had been obliterated. A chain of fortified forts had been raised along the way, encircling lesser cracks in the bone plain, their garrisons tasked with holding back the scarlet infestation.

The soldiers were growing used to the deathly threat posed by the sky, so fewer and fewer of them lost their lives when the veil of clouds parted. The Transcendent champions of the Song Domain were learning how to deal with the scarlet infestation better, as well.

The great fissure was now behind them, vast like a valley, with scarlet tendrils protruding from it akin to bulging hills. The dreadful Hollows were far below, teeming with ancient horrors and Nightmare Creatures so fierce that even Saints were not safe from their fangs and claws...

The plan had been for the army to camp near the edge of the fissure while the elite conquest force went into the dim darkness of the Hollows to conquer the Citadel. Sadly, there had been a wrinkle in that plan.

That was because a terrifyingly vast and inexplicable horde of Nightmare Creatures suddenly emerged from the jungle and rushed at the expedition force like a tidal wave, threatening to swallow the entire army.

No one knew where the abominations had come from in such great numbers and why. However, in hindsight, their appearance was only logical — Godgrave was not just a place, after all, but also an eerie and bizarre ecosystem. Everything here was connected.

When the Sword Army initiated its conquest. of the Collarbone Plain from the east, they had destroyed and incinerated vast swathes of the scarlet jungle. Their advance disturbed the balance of the ecosystem, driving countless Nightmare Creatures west — which, in turn, displaced even more abominations, forming a terrible stampede of monsters.

The army led by Lady Seishan was now under threat of being buried under that monstrous avalanche.

The cause and timing of it all were so deadly and unfortunate for the warriors of Song that Rain couldn't help but think that the person in charge of the Sword Army had somehow known that this would happen, and caused it deliberately. How devious did one have to be to use absolute chaos to their advantage?

In any case, the Song Army was now surrounded, with their backs pressed against the edge of the great fissure, with nowhere to retreat and no chance but to fight.

Which was what they had been doing for many hours, killing countless abominations... and still, there was no end to them.

Worse still, there were dreadful Nightmare Creatures climbing out of the Hollows to attack the rear of the battle formation, as well — each vastly more powerful than those attacking from the front. Because of that, the attention of the Song Saints was split, and the front line received far less support from the Transcendent champions than it needed.

Lady Scishan was in the rear, as well, holding the ancient predators of the Hollows back while her army was being slowly consumed by the nightmare stampede. The Seventh Legion was currently being commanded by her personal retinue, the Blood Sisters.

Just as Rain thought about it, one of them appeared in view.

A swift silhouette of a beautiful woman with a slender figure plummeted from somewhere above, diving into the horde of Nightmare Creatures like a splash of red. Blood spilled like a river, and her crimson garments fluttered as she tore through the flood of abominations, rending them with what seemed like her bare hands.

Even though the Blood Sisters were merely Masters, each of them was worth a cohort of Ascended in battle. With just that woman alone joining the fray, the pressure on Rain's span of the front line lessened significantly, and she could finally catch her breath.

'Ah... I'm tired...'

The Blood Sisters were cold and unapproachable, usually keeping to themselves, so they seemed a little mysterious. Because of that, there were many strange rumors floating around about them — however, Rain did not care about those rumors one bit.

As far as she was concerned, these older sisters were the epitome of grace and coolness. At the moment, especially, she was ready to kowtow in front of them and sing them endless praise.

Using the momentary lull in the onslaught of abominations, she staggered toward Fleur and patted the delicate girl on the shoulder.

"Fleur... recharge, please..."

Even her seemingly inexhaustible Awakened endurance was being sorely tested by the grueling demands of this battle. The delicate young woman's Dormant Ability, meanwhile, could alleviate one's fatigue.

That was just what Rain needed after drawing the heavy string of her enchanted bows so many times.

Fleur looked up at her, forced out a smile, and raised her hand.

In the next moment, Rain felt as if she had been given a second wind. Of course, it was more like a sixth or seventh wind, already... in any case, her body felt reinvigorated, and a new strength filled her limbs.

She smiled back.

"Thanks."

Then, she nocked another arrow and drew her bow once again, quickly searching for new prey. She had already wounded, maimed, and killed many Nightmare Creatures...

What frightened her, though, was that no matter how many of them they killed, there did not seem to be fewer of the horrid creatures still hungering to taste their blood…