1916 Burning the Bridges

A few moments later, the Blood Sister escaped from the tide of abominations, sliding dozens of meters back on the slick surface of the ancient bone. Coming to a halt just behind the frontliners, she straightened calmly, her beautiful face smeared with blood... none of which was her own.

Blood was also dripping from her hands, soaking the edges of her sleeves.

Her eyes, however, were eerily calm, as if she had not just perpetrated a brutal slaughter in the midst of a frenzied horde of Nightmare Creatures and then escaped unscathed. Her crimson garments had no tears in them, and her expression was cold and emotionless.

By mere coincidence, the Blood Sister was standing just a few steps away, so Rain could see every detail. She allowed herself to stare for a moment, then looked back at the carnage in front, worriedly searching for Tamar's swift figure.

It was easy to spot the young Legacy due to the fact that she moved like lightning, stepping on air to slay the abominations while avoiding their claws. Her giant zweihander was like a white blur, severing enormous beasts in half and taking off their limbs.

'...Still alive.'

The entire formation was pushed back, and Rain took another step back, as well. Her body was not exhausted yet thanks to Fleur, and her mind had not turned numb yet thanks to the Puppeteer's Shroud.

She drew her bow, aimed, and put another arrow through an abomination's eye. Usually, it would have been difficult for her to kill a Beast of such Rank in one shot, but her bow had an enchantment that enhanced the damage each of her arrows dealt. Her aim was even better, and she rarely failed to strike a weak point.

Just then, another Blood Sister appeared near the first — this one had come from the rear of the formation, with a somber look on her face.

The first Ascended turned her bloodied face toward her.

"What is it?"

The second answered in an even tone:

"Lady Seishan sends orders."

Rain could not help but hear their conversation, so her heart started to beat faster.

She did not see a way for the army to survive this avalanche of Nightmare Creatures... not without suffering crippling casualties, at least. But maybe the person in charge of the whole expedition had a solution.

The Blood Sister paused for a moment and then continued:

"There is no hope of withstanding this stampede in a frontal battle. We are to retreat into the Hollows."

The first one raised an eyebrow.

"Everyone? Awakened soldiers, too?"

The over Ascended nodded.

"Lady Seishan has already descended into the fissure to cleanse a landing zone for the army. The other Saints will hold the line while the troops follow. The Seventh Legion's precise orders are..."

Rain gulped.

Among all military maneuvers, an organized retreat was probably the hardest to pull off. One that included an orderly descent from a vertical cliff, though... was almost unheard of.

And they were not descending to safety, either. Instead, they were descending into the Hollows — a place where the weakest abomination could devour a Saint.

She suddenly felt cold despite the suffocating heat.

An army of Awakened would not survive in the Hollows... not without the support of a Sovereign's Domain, at least. Which meant that their only chance to live on was to reach the Citadel and conquer it.

By giving such an order, Lady Seishan was basically burning the bridges behind herself.

Well, it wasn't like they had a choice. They weren't going to survive this nightmare tide, either.

Rain sighed, and then furtively glanced at her shadow.

'...He'd better give me another Memory if I survive this. Two Memories, even!'

Before too long, there was the sound of a war horn, and the Song Army started the dreadful and laborious process of retreating into the vast fissure.

With how many soldiers there were in the expedition force, the process wasn't fast, and the battle had only grown more fierce as troops were pulled back and sent rappelling into the fissure.

The engineering corps had swiftly established moving platforms to hasten the process, and those with Aspect Abilities that could help in the descent were recalled to the rear.

Surrounded from all sides, the Song legions were gradually backing under the onslaught of an endless stampede of Nightmare Creatures. If they were too slow, they would be swallowed by the flood of abominations. If they were too fast, the fragile formation would crumble, and countless soldiers would be pushed into the chasm, finding gruesome deaths after a long fall.

Rivers of blood spilled onto the white surface of the ancient bone.

Through all of that, Rain and her cohort had somehow stayed alive.

Fleur had run low on essence and ceased healing the soldiers, only using her Dormant Ability to help them stay in the fight. Ray stumbled back at some point, miserable and cradling a grisly wound. Tamar had assumed command of the entire centuria they were assigned to, at some point — simply because the Ascended centurion had died, and there was nowhere else to replace him.

Rain herself had used up all the essence stored in the Beast of Prey, felling an especially powerful abomination with a Death Dealer shot. By then, the front line of the legion had a few breaches in it, so she dismissed her how, manifested the Mark of Shadows into a serpentine black tachi, and moved forward to join the melee fighters.

She was now protecting Tamar's back as the two of them fought desperately against the frenzied Nightmare Creatures.

Rain was controlling her soul essence with intricate finesse, which made her capable of displaying bursts of greater strength and speed than most Awakened could muster while spending less essence. Her swordsmanship was precise and deadly, and her mind was in a state of clarity... that was how he was barely managing to stay alive.

The Seventh Legion was one of: the last ones to descend into the fissure.

By then, most of the Awakened soldiers had already entered the Hollows, and only the Saints were left on the surface, defending a much narrower battlefront with all their might.

Rain would have loved to observe these legendary figures unleash their powers in any other circumstances, but today, she just wanted to get away from the fury summoned by these human monsters.

Could they even be called humans?

From the few glimpses she had caught, Saints were much closer to demigods.

"Wake the hell up, Rani!"

Tamar, covered in monster blood and pale as a ghost, pushed her onto a shaky wooden platform and then dragged Ray and Fleur to follow.

Around a hundred more soldiers crowded the platform, which then began to jerkily move down. The ropes creaked, and a few moments later, the surface of the white bone hid the battlefield from their view. Everyone felt tense, happy to escape from the terrible battle, but also apprehensive about the sturdiness of the platform and wary of what would happen next.

Rain let out a tired sigh, then crawled to the edge of the platform on all fours and carefully looked down.

There, far below...

The Hollows were waiting for them, full of darkness and terror.