1917 Fast Promotion

Once the platform passed the great width of the porous hone, they were surrounded by emptiness from all sides. The vast Hollow sprawled beneath them, drowning in darkness. Here and there, radiant pillars of light fell from the cracks in its dome and illuminated the ancient jungle...

No one knew what unspeakable horrors hid under its impenetrable scarlet canopy, so the soldiers shivered, trying to distance themselves from the edges of the platform as much as possible.

Rain simply sat on the creaking wood, trying to catch her breath. She did look at the alien landscape below, but only for a short moment — seasoned hunters like her knew not to stare at the Dream Realm too closely.

Lest something stared back.

She looked at Ray.

"How's your wound?"

The young man was pale and uncharacteristically quiet. Fleur was treating him, but with how low she was on essence, the process was taking time.

The young man forced out an unconvincing smile.

"I'll live."

Then, he glanced down and paled even more.

"...Until we reach the ground, at least."

Tamar dismissed her helmet and sat down near Rain, swiping back her sweaty hair. She scowled and looked at him with scorn.

"Why are you worried? You have escaped the Hollows before — as a mere Sleeper and completely alone. You are an Awakened now, and we are surrounded by an entire army."

Ray stared at her gloomily.

"Don't remind me! I still have nightmares about that day... I mean, I would have, if I could dream..."

The other soldiers heard their conversation and turned, looking at the young man in disbelief.

"...Is that true, Ray? You survived the Hollows as a Sleeper?"

Ray seemed startled by the question.

"What the... wait, have I not regaled you guys with the amazing story of our chilling winter solstice? If that's the case, then — why, yes! Listen here... it happened on a dark and gloomy night..."

He launched into the story, making Rain wince — she had heard it retold at least a dozen times, after all, and each was more unwieldy than the previous one. Still, she couldn't help but notice that the expressions of the soldiers eased a little as they listened to Ray talk. All of them were frightened, and hearing that three Sleepers had escaped from the Hollows alive gave them some much—needed solace, and maybe even a little hope.

It was probably Tamar's reason for bringing up their winter solstice all along. Ray had been distracted from his wound, as well.

'How sneaky.'

That girl knew how to be subtle, as well.

Soon, the platform reached the ground, and they all disembarked, looking around with wary apprehension.

All around them, the battered soldiers of the expedition force were sprawled on the ground, resting, or hurriedly wolfing down their rations. The wounded were being treated, the dead or missing were being tallied and mourned.

"Seventh Legion? Your position is right ahead!"

They were corralled to a particular area and left to their devices for a while. No one knew how long this rest would last, so the soldiers did not waste any time and dropped down, unpacking their provisions and dismissing their armor to bandage shallow wounds.

Tamar‘s cohort was no different.

"What do you think the commanders will do now?"

Fleur's voice sounded subdued... but not at all meak. Rain had assumed that the delicate girl was really soft at first, but after getting to know her better, she realized that their sweet healer had more spine than most Awakened.

She shrugged and looked into the darkness.

"We'll know soon."

They weren't properly in the Hollows yet. The fissure the army had used to descend here was so vast that sunshine freely poured down, and so, the scarlet infestation in a wide area was no older than on the surface. It had already been annihilated by the advance party led by Lady Seishan, making the landing zone relatively safe.

But not peaceful.

The sounds of the fighting above barely reached here, but there were other sounds reaching the makeshift camp from somewhere in the darkness — Lady Seishan and Death Singer were currently there, facing the old monsters of the Hollows in a bloody battle to clear a path for the army.

Deadly Nightmare Creatures in front of them, a vast horde of abominations behind them...

The expedition force was in a perilous position.

'Well... there's not much we can do about it.'

All they could do was fill their stomachs, replenish their strength, and prepare for battle.

Which was exactly what they did.

Half an hour later, a weary adjutant approached from deeper in the camp and gave something to Tamar, then ran off after saying a few words. The young Legacy remained motionless for a few moments, then sighed and sat back down. Then, she attached a pin in the form of a blood drop to her armor, and threw another one, this one much smaller, to Rain.

"Congratulations, Rani. I guess you're my right-hand man now, which technically makes you a junior officer."

Rain caught the pin, raised an eyebrow, and asked in an amused tone: "Goodness. I'm so honored I can cry. Right... what does it make you, then?" Tamar stared at her bleakly.

"A captain. No, wait... a centurion, technically, since we're in a Royal Legion."

Ray whistled.

"Ever the overachiever."

The entire composition of the Song Army was a bit of a mess. There were brigades and divisions, following the unit structure borrowed from mundane armies, but also the seven Royal Legions, which did not.

The legions consisted of centuriae, which were supposed to consist of a hundred Awakened warriors, but were actually larger than that. In any case, these units of Awakened were usually led by an Ascended officer, called a centurion. Tamar wasn't the first Awakened in the Song Army who had been given the command of a centuria, but she was definitely the youngest.

It was indeed quite an achievement.

The young Legacy did not seem too impressed, though. Instead, she grimaced and asked in a grumbling tone:

"Whatever. Is the food ready?"

Fleur smiled.

"Coming right up!"

They ate a simple, but filling meal in silence. After that, another messenger arrived, dropping a scattering of shimmering crystals in front of them.

Rain's eyes glistened.

'Finally!'

The crystals were, of course, soul shards.