1918 Growing Strength

The souls shards were some of those that the engineers had time to scavenge from the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures in the recent battle. That task was important enough that it had to be completed even in the middle of the most terrifying clashes... after all, with every soldier that managed to fully saturate their soul core, the strength of the Song Army grew.

Tamar had long saturated hers, so the share of their cohort was divided three ways between Rain, Fleur, and Ray.

Today, that meant that Rain received about a dozen shards. The rewards were distributed according to the contribution of a cohort, and theirs always performed exemplary... granted, in a chaotic situation like this one, no one was actually keeping score — usually, the centurions would make reports to legion command after the battle, and the allocation of spoils would be decided later on. But their centurion was dead, and the battle was not even over yet. So... Rain felt lucky to even receive anything.

All of these shards were of a higher Rank than Rain herself was, as well. It was a sizeable boon.

Forgetting her worries for a few minutes, she concentrated on shattering the shimmering crystals in her fist.

And look at that! She did not even need to use the pommel of her knife to break them. Just her Awakened strength was enough.

'I'll never grow used to it...'

A stray grin somehow found its way onto Rain's face.

She had not been Awakened for long, so the novelty of possessing superhuman strength was yet to lose its luster. She loved the feeling of being strong, of being powerful... after all, it was the feeling of powerlessness that had instilled into her the desire to step on the path of Ascension all those years ago, to begin with. Rain still remembered the day when a Nightmare Gate opened near her school clearly. The panic, the dazed faces of the students, the teachers who tried to look calm in front of the children, but still couldn't hide their fear.

She was supposed to die on that day, most likely. But through a twist of fate, somehow, she survived. An Awakened warrior appeared out of nowhere at the last moment, shielding Rain from the lunging abomination and slaying it with a single slash of her sword.

Rain's memories of that Awakened were strangely blurry... well, it wasn't that surprising, considering her mental stare at that moment. She vaguely remembered a graceful black armor, a feminine silhouette, and a cold indifference with which the unknown woman cut down one Nightmare Creature after another, not letting a single one pass.

In the end, none of the students died. The teachers had survived, as well. And Rain... Rain had come to know that she never wanted to feel that weak again. For her parents, for her siblings, and for herself as well.

Her path to Awakening had been a long and brutal one. She often complained and berated her teacher for his whimsical antics and unreasonable demands, wondering why she was putting herself through all that grief... but she had never once regretted her decision to strive for strength, and had never once regretted agreeing to her teacher's offer.

Even if Rain died in this godforsaken land, she would probably still die feeling gratified for having chosen strength over weakness. Strength... was a bit intoxicating, like a sweet drug.

And with each soul shard she absorbed, Rain grew stronger.

The improvement was small and incremental, but noticeable... especially now that she had already absorbed close to two hundred of them. Since most, if not all, Nightmare Creatures in the Godgrave was of a higher Rank than Rain, her core was supposed to be getting close to full saturation. The same was probably true for most Awakened warriors of the Song Army, as well.

...She was still unclear on how to Ascend without the help of the Spell, but this increase in overall power was most welcome.

"What's that stupid grin for, Rani?"

Crushing the last soul shard, Rain glanced at Ray and winked at him.

"That? Oh, I'm just glad to be an archer. How is the frontline duty treating you, stealth boy?"

He gritted his teeth and hissed in outrage:

"Hey! That's a low blow!"

She simply laughed.

Sadly, Rain had not laughed for long when a new command arrived, stirring the entire camp.

"Assemble! Battle march formation! Hurry, hurry, hurry! Move!"

Tamar sighed and jumped to her feet, going about bringing their centuria to order. The soldiers seemed a little disoriented, but not very surprised by the sudden command — no one had expected to get a good rest in the Hollows. But why did the orders sound so urgent?

Soon enough, they found out.

"By the dead gods..."

High above them, ant-like figures appeared on the great vine bridges that stretched all the way to the surface, flowing down their twisting Width like a tide. The engineers, who had been desperately trying to destroy their roots, cursed and dashed away, dropping their tools as they ran.

It was a good decision — just a handful of seconds later, the first Nightmare Creature fell from above, its body hitting the ancient bone with a disgusting squelch.

The massive beast let out a shriek of agony, then struggled weakly, trying to stand up. Although its body was terribly damaged, it was still alive.

A split second later, there was another squelch, and then another.

...Driven mad by the smell of human souls, the horde of Nightmare Creatures was following the expedition force into the Hollows.

Rain broke her rule and stared at the flood of ant—like figures that covered the surface of the vine bridges far above.

Her hands shook a little.

'Well... crap.'

On second thought, maybe she should have chosen weakness over strength after all!

Then, the commanding shout of one of the Blood Sisters brought her back to reality.

"Move!"

Barely rested, the Song Army abandoned the relative safety of the illuminated area and marched into the darkness of the Hollows.

They were following a blood trail left by their commander, Princess Seishan. Behind them, more and more Nightmare Creatures fell from high above. The fastest of those abominations who managed to remain on the vine pillars were already halfway down.

The future looked bleak, just like the dim expanse of the great Hollow ahead.