1919 Ancient Jungle

As the army marched into the jungle, several figures plummeted from high above to surround it. This time, however, they were not Nightmare Creatures — although some looked quite monstrous.

Instead, they were the Saints who had been holding the abomination tide back on the surface, and were retreating now that the enemy could not be stalled anymore.

Some had assumed their human forms to descend safely with the help of Memories, some were naturally able to fly while Transformed. Others simply took the fall, relying on the nature of their bestial bodies to withstand the damage. The thick canopy of the jungle helped cushion their fall, somewhat, but the impacts were still chilling.

In that brief moment, Rain noticed all kinds of awesome creatures.

There was a monstrous, but eerily beautiful harpy with flood dripping from her sharp claws and red lips. There was a giant with the head of a jackal, his towering body the color of obsidian. There was a hill—sized canine with three heads, his bloodied jaws powerful enough to grind mountains to dust. There was a horrid creature that resembled a horned lion with a viper for the tail, drops of venom dripping from its fangs.

There was even an enormous reptile with powerful hind legs and short, underdeveloped arms, its tyrannical footsteps making the ground shake.

The Saints were battered and bleeding, their powerful bodies a map of wounds. However, they did not seem to pay it any attention — landing on the ground, they instantly assumed positions around the army, ready to defend the soldiers from those inhabitants of the ancient jungle that had survived the passage of the daughters of Ki Song.

Sadly, the expedition force was so large that even three dozen Transcendent champions were not enough to protect everyone. The feeling of safety provided by the sight of them was an illusion.

Rain gripped her bow nervously as the scarlet canopy obscured the distant dome of the great Hollow.

Countless luminous Memories chased the darkness away, making it easy to see the surroundings. The jungle of the Hollows... was both similar and different to the one infesting the surface.

The shapes, the colors, and the smell were all the same. However, this jungle was much more ancient, therefore, more harrowing.

The trees were many times taller, the vines were as thick as a human body, and the moss was deep enough to swallow a person whole in some places...

Of course, to digest them.

The trees were just as hungry, and some of the vines moved like enormous snakes, ensnaring people and rending their bodies with razor-sharp thorns. There were blood-sucking insects the size of a human head and crawling bugs with mandibles long enough to bite off one's foot... those moved in swarms, of course, felling people and devouring them in a matter of seconds. Soon enough, the jungle was filled with the rustle of weapons and chilling screams.

The ancient jungle of the Hollows was absolutely deadly — and that was even after Princess Seishan and Death Singer had passed here, obliterating the most dangerous predators.

The traces of their passage were everywhere. The towering trees were snapped and shattered, the predatory vines torn apart. The hideously torn, enormous corpses of terrifying Nightmare Creatures were laying here and there like dark hills of torn flesh, lakes of fetid blood pooling below them.

In some places, entire swathes of the jungle were entirely destroyed, as if a hurricane had passed there.

Dark liquid was sipping from beneath the fallen trees.

Rain was stunned and horrified by the nightmarish reality surrounding her at first, but quickly grew numb to it. There was no time to feel fear, anyway.

"Another one!"

She drew her bow and let an arrow loose, aiming at the buzzing of wings above. The blood-sucking horrors hid themselves in the thick canopy of the jungle and were too fast for an Awakened to see when they attacked — however, she could sense their shadows, see in the darkness, and hear them. That was just barely enough to give her a chance to hit the abominable vermin before they killed someone.

Their elongated, blade-like mouths were already deadly enough, leaving terrible wounds on the bodies of their victims. Much worse, they secreted some kind of toxin that paralyzed the victim, stopping a human heart in a matter of seconds. Usually, by the time the creature was noticed, it was already too late.

But not this time.

A blurry silhouette shot toward the marching soldiers from high above, but was intercepted by her arrow in the air. The wings and the carapace of these creatures were so tough that her enchanted bow couldn't even put a dent in them, but the soft belly was somewhat vulnerable.

Hit by the arrow, the blood—sucker lost balance and fell to the ground. Immediately, the Awakened soldiers rushed at it.

Their Memories were not powerful enough to kill the creature, so they struggled to immobilize it instead — special wire nets were thrown over the appalling insect, which it promptly tore apart and escaped. Luckily, the delay was enough for one of the Ascended to appear, shattering the creature's carapace with a devastating strike of their heavy mace.

At that time...

Not too far away, a soldier was screaming as he found himself drowning in the scarlet patch of moss. His comrades managed to pull him free, but by then, his lower legs had already dissolved in the digestive fluid.

At the same time...

A tall tree shook, and a rain of vermilion leaves fell from its branches. Each leaf was like a serrated blade, easily slicing through enchanted armor, flesh, and bone. A dozen soldiers fell to the ground, bleeding — some of them dead, some gravely wounded. Both the dead and the living were then pulled underground by the roots that emerged from beneath. Other humans tried to dig them up, but it was useless.

At the same time...

A vine covered in beautiful flowers released a cloud of scarlet pollen into the air, and a few soldiers that were not fast enough to escape dropped their weapons to the ground, walking into the red haze with empty expressions. By the time the pollen dissipated, they were gone — vanished without a trace, with not even footprints hinting at what might have happened to them. Rain covered her mouth with a hand, looking around with horror.

'This... this is hell. It must be.'

All around the marching army, the Saints were engaged in desperate battles with the Great abominations that emerged from the jungle from time to time, attracted by the smell of human souls.

And behind the army, the tide of Nightmare Creatures was drawing closer with each minute, threatening to catch up with the formation's tail.

Surrounded and pursued, the warriors of Song marched toward the distant Citadel.