1920 Marching Through Hell

Eventually, the already dire situation turned into absolute chaos.

The horde of Nightmare Creatures had caught up with the expedition force, and the rear of the formation became engrossed in a moving battle. Several Saints led the defensive efforts, slaughtering the menacing abominations with all their might.

The death toll among the Nightmare Creatures was high, but the soldiers were suffering heavy casualties, as well.

Luckily — or perhaps unfortunately — the mad frenzy of the pursuing Nightmare Creatures had caused a destructive chain reaction in the Hollows. The local predators were overcome by hunger and bloodlust at the sight of human troops, but they weren't happy to see the numerous abominations from the surface invade their territory, either.

To the Great Ones inhabiting the ancient jungle, the weak surface dwellers were nothing but prey, just like humans were.

For that reason, the pursuing horde suffered a terrifying massacre when appalling silhouettes lunged into it from the jungle. The ancient predators grew mad from the stench of blood, slaughtering everything they could see with chilling cruelty... a few of them fell, too, buried under an avalanche of hideous monsters.

The internal strife between the rightful rulers of the Hollows and the invading surface dwellers alleviated some of the pressure on the army, but not a lot of it. The expedition force was still bleeding lives -— not a staggering number of them, but more than ever before.

The people trapped in this morbid hell soon found themselves missing the unpredictable and inescapable radiance of the deadly sky. Who would have thought?

Rain, meanwhile...

Was missing the weird antics and ridiculous stories of her teacher.

In the past four years, she had lived through plenty of frightening situations. Hunting Nightmare Creatures as a mundane girl was not a safe vocation, after all... but he was always there, with her, talking her through the difficult ordeals and taking care of her when she felt lost.

He was still with her, hiding in her shadow, but because they were surrounded by thousands of soldiers, her teacher could not speak.

Even though Rain would never admit it, she would have loved to hear him tell an outrageously nonsensical story with a straight face right now.

'Let's see...'

Breathing heavily, she helped Tamar deal with a monstrous tick that had lunged at them from a branch and assessed how much essence she had left.

One benefit of not having an Aspect was that she rarely ran low on it, unlike other Awakened. So, Rain was doing quite fine, for now.

'What would he say in this situation?'

Probably something like...

"What, this? This is nothing! Have I told you about that time I climbed into a Cursed Terror's nest and stole its egg? l was actually looking for tasty fruit to treat someone special, but that nest was in the way..."

Actually, he might have actually told her that one.

Or...

"The Hollows? Oh, I've been there. On a date, of sorts. With Lady Changing Star. Who is my girlfriend..."

Despite the dreadful situation, Rain smiled crookedly.

'Yeah, right.'

She could actually believe that her teacher had stolen from a Cursed Terror once — he did look like the kind of scoundrel to attempt such lunacy — but that last one was too laughably ridiculous even by his standards.

Manifesting another arrow in her enchanted quiver, she nocked it on the string of her bow and took a deep breath.

'Let's just survive. Believe in Lady Seishan... she will not lead her army to certain doom.'

If not because she was a virtuous leader...

Then at least because she needed that army to fight the forces of the Sword Domain in the future.

'The Citadel must not be that far, by now.'

And it wasn't.

Some time later, the Seventh Legion was sent to the rear of the formation. They steeled their hearts and plunged into the bloodshed, retreating slowly while holding back the frenzied mob of Nightmare Creatures. The Saints were fighting some distance away, breaking the tide, while the soldiers served as the shield of the formation.

In some ways, it was much more dangerous here, in the rear of the escaping army — that was because the abominations were numerous and driven to utter madness both by their lust for human souls and by the terror of the Great Ones rampaging in the horde far behind.

Between the ancient rulers of the Hollows and the human soldiers, countless Nightmare Creatures had already been slain, and more were dying each minute. But in other ways, fighting against them was much safer than marching further into the army formation. That was because most of the dangers hiding in the ancient jungle — like the blood-sucking horrors, the razor—sharp falling leaves, the man—eating patches of moss, and the clouds of scarlet pollen — would be dealt with or at least discovered by those who marched in the front.

After withstanding the flood of abominations for a while, the Seventh Legion was rotated to the head of the column.

By then, the army had almost caught up with the daughters of Ki Song.

Rain and the other legionnaires dragged their tired bodies to the front of the formation, where they were supposed to get a little rest. Since Lady Seishan and Death Singer were so close, the jungle was safer than before — its inhabitants had just been slaughtered by the Transcendent princesses, and those pests that had survived were hiding, afraid to attract their attention.

Finally, they caught sight of their general.

Lady Seishan was standing on the trunk of a fallen tree, her crimson dress ripped and soaked in blood. Her eyes were sunken, and a dark smile was twisting her alluring red lips.

Her sister was leaning on the trunk, huddled and covering her face with the hood of her black robe.

Rain was curious to know what they were looking at.

Up ahead, behind the fallen tree, the jungle receded, revealing a vast clearing. And there, in the distance...

She could finally see the Citadel.