1921 Stuff of Legends

There, in front of them, the jungle parted and revealed a vast expanse of white bone. It was almost completely flooded, but the water was so shallow that it would barely reach a human's shins. Most stunningly of all, the flooded clearing was completely devoid of the scarlet infestation — there were no trees, no Vines, no grass, no moss...

It was as if the ancient jungle was afraid of getting any closer to the dark hill that towered in the heart of the empty expanse and reeled back in fear.

The hill itself was tall and strangely shaped, its slopes dark and barren. From time to time, strange ripples spread from it across the shallow water, reaching all the way to the edge of the jungle. As if something enormous was breathing somewhere out there, behind the hill, the measured weight of its breaths reverberating in the ancient bones.

Rain and her cohort were not far away from the fallen tree on which Lady Seishan stood, so she caught a good look at her.

At that moment, the regal Saintess turned around, looking down at her sister from the considerable height of the ancient trunk.

Standing above the battered masses of the Seventh Legion, she was like a sinister deity. Her otherworldly beauty was both breathtaking and chilling — Princess Seishan looked subtly inhuman because of her silken grey skin, and the lower half of her exquisite face was smeared by crimson blood, as if she had been tearing the Great Nightmare Creatures apart with her teeth.

She looked like a malevolent spirit summoned into the world by a great blood sacrifice.

...Despite that, Rain found herself calming down at the sight of the graceful princess. Her heart was overcome by a soothing sense of tranquility, and she felt her fears dissipating.

The feeling of peace and safety was like a breath of fresh air in the sweltering heat of this dark, dreadful hell.

However, Rain felt strangely disturbed.

Because, to her... it did not feel like the healing kind of tranquil calmness. Instead, it was like the kind of false relaxation that deadly predators instilled in their Drev before sinking their fangs into the victim's flesh.

'Still, this predator is on our side. That's good... right?'

Lady Seishan, meanwhile, spoke to her sister in a pleasant, velvety voice:

"What do you sense, Hel?"

Death Singer, who was leaning on the fallen tree with her head down, flinched and looked up. Her hood slipped, revealing her luscious hair and lovely face.

At the moment, however, that face was contorted by a terrible grimace. Her beautiful eyes were wide, full of fear.

"D—death... death is coming! Our blood will flow like a river, our flesh will fester and rot, our eyes will be eaten by hungry ravens, our viscera will become a feast for maggots! There will be no hope, no escape, no relief, no salvation... death is coming! It's here!"

Hearing that terrible prophecy, Rain shuddered. Even Tamar seemed to pale, gripping the hilt of her zweihander tighter.

Lady Seishan, however, seemed unperturbed. She smiled and nodded patiently.

"Yes, yes. You've been saying that since we were in the orphanage. I'm sure we will die one day, you and I... but what about now? What do you sense now?"

Death Singer stared at her sister for a few moments, her face a mask of terror. Then, she suddenly sighed and shook her head.

"Oh, that. Well..."

The petite princess frowned and scratched the back of her head clumsily. After a while, she said in a nonchalant tone:

"It's a Great Demon, I guess."

Death Singer might have been nonchalant, but every soldier that heard her shuddered.

Rain did, as well.

'Crazy... this is crazy!‘

What the hell was she doing here, in a Death Zone, hearing about Great Demons? Great Nightmare Creatures were something that humans theoretically knew existed, but were never supposed to encounter. They were the stuff of legends — the kind of legends that were too terrifying to retell in the darkness. Great abominations were synonymous with death from before Rain was born...

The regions of the Dream Realm where they dwelled were called Death Zones for a reason!

But now, the rules and laws that had seemed inviolable were swiftly changing. Supreme humans were out there in the world, and people like Rain suddenly found themselves brushing sides with Great Nightmare Creatures.

She had already seen several dead ones in the jungle, and had caught glimpses of several more rampaging in the horde of the weaker abominations.

But at least those terrible beings were mere Beasts and Monsters.

A Demon... a Demon was a different kind of being.

Because demons were intelligent, and possessed their own malignant wills.

'D—damnation...'

Out of everyone, only Lady Seishan remained calm.

She turned her bloodied face to gaze at the distant hill once more, remained silent for a few moments, and then nodded.

"So it is. Well, then... warriors of the Song Army, hear my order!"

Her crimson dress moved in the wind as she spoke in a melodious voice:

"Fortify this position and hold fast. Hel, Siord, Ceres — with me! We will claim this Citadel... in the name of the Queen!"

Death Singer signed again, straightened her dark robe, and jumped onto the fallen tree. At the same time, Lady Seishan jumped down — the trunk was several meters tall even laying on its side, so Rain did not see her land into the shallow water, only heard the splash.

A moment later, two Saints joined the daughters of Ki Song on the edge of the clearing — one of them was the beautiful harpy Rain had seen before, the other was the three —headed canine.

From what she knew, both were scions of the lesser Legacy Clans, like Tamar, and had attained Sainthood together with Lady Seishan as members of her cohort.

Soon, the four Saints disappeared in the direction of the distant hill.

And a few moments later...

The bill suddenly moved, slowly stirring and unfurling its immense limbs.

Rain stared at it in horror for a moment, then forced herself to look away and lowered her gaze.

As it turned out... the Great Demon had not been hiding behind the bill. It was the hill — a gargantuan beast that had been slumbering in the middle of the vast clearing, and was now waking up at the smell of Transcendent souls.

Rain took a shaky breath and thought about the four brave Saints.

'...May Beast God help them from beyond the grave.'

Clan Song seemed to have a close bond with beasts and hunting, so she thought this prayer would be suitable.

Rain considered praying for herself, too.

She was quite sure that if Lady Seishan failed to conquer the Citadel and perished, the rest of the expedition force would perish as well.

'Oh well...'

At least she had her personal dark deity to pray to.