1922 Not a Last Stand

Now that the dreadful march was over, the battered expedition force found itself in a somewhat better position.

The flooded clearing was effectively defending them from one side, which meant that they would not be surrounded, at least. With that, the army could assemble into a stable battle formation.

It was truly a miracle of perseverance and discipline that they had managed to maintain a semblance of order and keep themselves from being decimated by the enemy while fighting their way through the nightmarish jungle — but armies were not meant to fight battles while moving.

Finally reaching their destination, the Song Army came to a halt and spread along the edges of the flooded plain, building a proper battle line. It had two layers, so that forward units could rotate back and give way to fresh troops — then switch again after a period of rest. A field hospital was being hastily arranged behind the two layers, as well.

By then, the stalwart Saints already cut down the terrifying predators who had lunged at the expedition force from the flanks during the march. Those were the true rulers of the Hollows, old abominations of the Great Rank — luckily, there were far fewer of them than the Saints, so the champions of the human army were able to team up and bring each of the monsters down in groups of three or four.

Many were wounded, but none had perished yet... the situation might have been different if not for Lady Seishan and Princess Hel, though, who had culled the rulers of the scarlet jungle on their way to the Citadel. Now, the Saints were free to assume positions in front of the battle line, serving as its pillars and anchors. In any case, the situation of the Song Army, while still resembling a hellish nightmare, was much better than before.

However, it was also much more perilous than before, because their fates now depended on the success of Lady Seishan and her party. If the Great Demon guarding the Citadel triumphed, then every advantage gained by the expedition force would turn to ash. The Demon would attack the battle formation from the rear, and they would be devoured from two sides.

Of course...

First, the army had to survive long enough to learn who prevailed in the battle for the Citadel.

'It's going to be fine. Yeah... definitely...‘

Rain stared at the approaching tide of Nightmare Creature with apprehension, trying to convince herself that the current preparations of the Song Army did not resemble getting ready for a heroic last stand.

Lost in a godforsaken hell, suffocated by sweltering heat, their back pressed against the territory of a Great Demon, and facing an endless flood of Nightmare Creatures — that definitely sounded like prime material for an inspiring and tear-inducing ballad that would be sung through the ages. But Rain didn't want to be sung about... he would much rather survive.

Heroes were very admirable, but they were also very dead. She had no aspirations of becoming a hero.

'Damn it.‘

"Archers! "

The Seventh Legion was currently on the frontline, preparing to clash with the vanguard of the nightmare horde. The Blood Sisters — there were around a dozen of them — were very noticeable among the centurions with their red garments and striking beauty. Seeing them gave the soldiers some confidence, and it was these women who commanded the legion in the absence of Lady Seishan.

So, the voice that called upon the ranged specialists to unleash their fury on the approaching horde was rather melodious, making the grim scene feel less horrid.

Rain drew her bow, took aim, and let an arrow loose. With how numerous the Nightmare Creatures were, one would think that she did not have to aim too well in order to hit something... but sadly, that was not the case. Because her arrows were not powerful enough to pierce the hides of the abominations, she had to strike them precisely in a weak spot.

Which was why the horde was not slowed down at all by the devastating barrage of arrows, various projectiles, and Aspect Abilities unleashed by the human army. It was like mundane archers showering heavily armored cavalry with arrows — a few abominations stumbled and fell, but most remained unscathed. Worst still, the Nightmare Creatures were not at all deterred by these losses.

Soon after, they crashed into the battle formation.

Rain continued to shoot, trying to remain stable on the quaking ground. In front of her, the tide of monsters broke against the Saints, flowed past them, and reached the front line of the Seventh Legion. Tamar and Ray were in front of her, surrounded by the Awakened warriors of their centuria — which was in a worse situation than most because it lacked an Ascended, but luckily positioned well. Some distance from them, the Saint who Transcendent form was that of a giant reptile towered above the flood of Nightmare Creatures. It lowered its neck and snapped its jaws, eviscerating several of them at the same time, then swiped its long tail sideways, crushing even more.

An especially large beast jumped on its back, but the tyrannical reptile simply snapped its jaws once more, grabbing it and throwing the bleeding corpse flying hundreds meters back with a jerk of its head.

Then, it let out a chilling roar and plunged further into the horde of abominations.

'...The bow is useless.‘

Now that the Nightmare Creatures had closed in, it was harder for her to hit anything with an arrow. The situation might have been different if they were in an open field, but the jungle blocked her line of sight, while the thick canopy prevented her from shooting over the heads of her comrades.

Cursing, Rain dismissed the Beast of Prey and let her snake tattoo turn into a black tachi once again. Gritting her teeth, she left Fleur and advanced forward. Hack, slash, pierce... block, dodge, evade.

The damned Nightmare Creatures were too strong!

She could barely cut their hide, and it took dozens of strikes to bring a single one down. Rain herself, however, would be either dead or crippled from receiving just one blow, which made the whole situation incredibly frightening, to the point that she felt sick to her stomach.

The humid air was permeated by the terrible stench of blood, and everywhere she looked, she saw nothing but terrible maws, sharp fangs, and frenzied eyes. All around her, Awakened were uniting in small groups, each fighting against a single Nightmare Creature. Rain herself was fighting with Tamar and Ray, the three of them sharing an unspoken understanding on how to deal with the dreadful enemies.

Their cohort might not have been together for long, but Tamar was a competent leader, while Rain was very experienced despite having only just Awakened. So, from the point of View of others, she was simply extremely competent in everything she did. She was a fierce fighter herself, a good partner for others in a battle, and also a bit of a mentor to her three slightly younger companions in many practical matters.

Not to mention her unbelievable ability to survive in the wilderness and make herself and her cohort comfortable in any environment.

The entire centuria rallied around their small cohort, withstanding the flood of Nightmare Creatures with desperate resolve.

Hideous corpses of the abominations fell to the ground.

Human corpses fell, too.

Rivers of blood flowed down, seeping into the shallow water of the flooded clearing and painting it red.

Far away, the gargantuan figure of the Great Demon was moving, its footsteps making the red water surge in foaming waves.