1923 Dwindling Hope

"Just... die, damn you!"

Rain staggered back, supporting the blade of her tachi with a hand to block a descending stinger — its speed was so great that she had barely managed to react in time, and its force was so terrible that she was thrown back a dozen meters.

Her arms felt numb.

When fighting Nightmare Creatures of a superior Rank, blocking was really not a good idea. But the damned thing was so fast that there was simply no time for her to move out of the way.

Luckily, she had done her job.

A split second after Rain was tossed back, 'l‘amar's zweihander plummeted on the tail of the abomination, striking precisely at the spot where its armor had already been broken. The severed stinger fell to the ground in a flood of fetid blood, and the monstrous creature turned threateningly toward the young centurion, its claws flying forward at lightning speed.

Tamar had no time to disengage and dash to the side — she simply stepped on air and leaped over the claws, then did so again. This time, the invisible platform seemed to be situated perpendicular to the ground, so he threw her body sideways instead of up, twisting and landing in a slide.

The Nightmare Creature was already lunging at her, but at that moment, Ray — whom it had not noticed, blinded by pain — jumped onto its carapace and drove his sword through its eye.

The abomination convulsed and fell, moving weekly. It was still alive, but completely dazed — the three Awakened rushed forward and unleashed a barrage of attacks, eventually finishing it off.

All three were breathing heavily, barely enduring their exhaustion — and that was despite the occasional infusion of stamina from Fleur.

The rest of the soldiers were faring even worse.

Rain shivered, noticing that another Nightmare Creature was already barreling in their direction.

'Just how many...'

The ground was already littered with so many corpses that it was hard to see the scarlet moss beneath. They couldn't go on much longer.

Luckily, at that moment, the familiar, reassuring voice of the Blood Sister reached them like the most beautiful melody in the world:

"Seventh Legion! Retreat!"

'l‘heir turn on the frontline was over... this turn, at least.

The legion retreated in an orderly manner, and at the same time, another brigade advanced between their ranks.

Soon, their backs hid the battlefield from Rain's view, and she let out a relieved sigh.

Moving back almost all the way to the edge of the water, the Seventh Legion came to a halt. The soldiers fell to the ground where they stood, shell—shocked, exhausted, and covered in blood. Some dismissed their armor despite the dire danger — the heat was just too unbearable, and they were all drowning in sweat.

Everyone was dehydrated, so the first thing many did was greedily drink water from their canteens.

Rain was no exception.

"Ah..."

After drinking her share, she finally felt alive again.

While Fleur was tending to their wounds — all minor, fortunately -— and infusing them with refreshing vitality, the three members of the cohort who had actively participated in the melee remained silent. Honestly, they were too stunned by the magnitude and ferocity of the violence, too dazed, and too tired to talk.

Even Tamar, who had been programmed to always maintain composure by her clan, seemed subdued and shaken.

None of them had died yet, at least. The same could not be said about most other cohorts. The number of slain Nightmare Creatures was incalculable, but the casualties suffered by the Song Army were also heavy.

'...It is not a last stand.'

Rain knew that it wasn't, but it seemed like one more and more with each passing minute.

The Seventh Legion had fought well during their first rotation, and during the second, too. However... during the third, the tired soldiers started to make more and more mistakes. As a result, more and more of them died.

They had just finished the fifth rotation, and the situation was starting to look bleak — not just for them, but for the entire army.

The warriors of Song were desperate, exhausted, and slowly succumbing to fear. Their morale had especially plummeted when one of the Saints — the one whose Transformation resembled a horned lion with a venomous viper for the tail — finally fell, debilitated by countless wounds, and was immediately swallowed by the tide of Nightmare Creatures. Like that, the Song Army lost its first Transcendent champion.

Watching a Saint die was a shock to everyone... not only because they were watching the death of a living legend, but also because it forced the soldiers to ask themselves a simple question.

If even demigods were dying, then what hope did mere mortals like them have? Rain threw a glance at her shadow, drawing strength from it, then turned to the flooded clearing and stared into the distance with a detached expression.

The battle had been unbearably hard on the army, lasting an eternity... she couldn't imagine how Lady Seishan and her team could still be alive while fighting a Great Demon, but they were, continuing the devastating battle.

Even though it was taking place too far to discern the silhouettes of the daughters of Ki Song, everyone in the second layer of the battle formation could turn around and look at the flooded plain to see the massive shape of the Demon moving across the water, making it surge and boil.

At some point — Rain did not know when — the water, which had been clear and transparent before, had turned entirely red, like a lake of blood. Some of it was because of the blood flowing from the shore where the Song Army was fighting, but most of it... she had no idea where it had come from.

Something flashed in the distance, and a few moments later, the echo of a terrifying roar reached them from afar. The ground quaked, and the lake of blood surged, a tall wave crashing into the low shore.

The Queen's daughters were still fighting the Great Demon.