1924 Pit of Despair

In the middle of the flooded clearing, Song Seishan was standing in the crimson water, looking at the gargantuan creature in front of her with a twisted smile. Her eyes were shining with an eerie red glow in the dim darkness of the Hollows, and her long braid was fluttering in the wind that had risen from the Demon's last attack.

The Great One was like a mountain, its mighty body covered by bristling black fur. Its body was not quite bestial, but also not quite human... the creature was like an abominable ape, its fangs protruding like cliffs, its eyes burning with diabolical cunning and murderous fury. It was wielding a great club made out of bone, and each time it struck the ground, the entire world quaked.

Siord, the beautiful harpy, was playing a deadly game of cat and mouse with the demonic ape by flying around its head, barely dodging its obliterating attacks. Ceres, the enormous three-headed canine, was in an even more precarious position, dancing between the abomination's feet and trying to tear pieces of flesh out of its shins.

Neither had managed to deliver even a single wound to the Great Demon, yet. However, the Demon was bleeding.

Opening its maw, the terrifying creature let out a deafening roar and shuddered, forgetting about the annoying fly and the three—headed pest for a moment. Then, it vomited a terrifying waterfall of blood.

Blood was flowing from its mouth, from its nose... even from the corners of its eyes, spilling into the shallow water like a red river.

That was because Seishan was using her Awakened Ability. It had taken a while for her Ability to take effect, considering how powerful her enemy was... but she wasn't powerless, either.

If anything, the most difficult part was limiting the area of effect of her Ability to spare her allies from sharing the same fate as the Demon.

The intoxicating smell of blood was driving her mad, and at the same time making her many times stronger — standing in the middle of a lake of blood spilled by a Great abomination, Seishan was infused with a raging inferno of hungry, furious power. It was the scaling augmentation granted by her Ascended Ability.

It was partially because of that power that she had been able to move with stunning speed to evade the Demon's earth—shattering attacks and recover from the terrible wounds littering her body, staying alive despite how vast the gap between her and the guardian of the Citadel was.

The second reason was her Transformation Ability.

Seishan had possessed the ability to turn into a monster from the time she was a young Sleeper, lost in the darkness of the Forgotten Shore. Therefore, she had not gained the ability to Transform into something else when attaining Transcendence...

Instead, she had gained the ability to Transform others — those she transformed became stronger, and their strength could enhance her own power in turn.

And finally, the third reason was the blood of Beast God that flowed in her veins, bestowed upon her — whether she had wanted it or not — by her mother... the Raven Queen.

And then, there was her Flaw.

Seishan grinned and dashed forward, flying above the red water with stunning speed. The infuriated Demon swatted Siord away and kicked Ceres with devastating might, sending the giant canine flying like a tiny pup. Both Saints crashed into the shallow water, their bodies bleeding and broken.

After that, she was the sole target of the Great One's fury.

'Ah...'

The enormous bone club crashed into the ground, displacing countless tons of water and making the world shake. Seishan never slowed down, pivoting and then leaping gracefully. Before the displaced water could even start raining down, she already landed on the surface of the club and rushed across its surface, ascending hundreds of meters above the clearing in a heartbeat.

Her polished nails turned into terrifying claws, and the red glow of her eyes turned furious and predatory, full of murderous intent.

Sadly...

She knew that she could not kill the Great Demon.

Maybe if she had time to observe and study the abomination, learning its strengths and weaknesses, gaining a thorough understanding of its powers, and getting insight into the way its perverse mind worked, she would stand a chance.

But she was forced to attack it blindly, without making any targeted preparations, so her chances were close to zero. Just the sheer size of the abominations was already an obstacle — not to mention every unholy trait and Attribute that thing possessed.

Siord and Ceres were severely wounded and would not be joining the fight again.

...But that was alright.

There was a reason why Seishan survived the longest out of anyone who had ever been sent to the Forgotten Shore. That reason was that she knew how to find a way out of the most desperate situation... and then drown her enemies in the pit of despair she had escaped.

Right now, for example, there was little chance of defeating the Great Demon. Therefore, there was no reason to try.

Instead, her goal was simply to draw its attention — which she had already done — and stall it for a while.

After all, they had not come here to slay a Great Demon.

They had come here to conquer a Citadel.

And while Seishan was dancing with death by enduring the wrath of the dreadful abomination, her sister Hel was sneaking into the Citadel to claim its Gateway. The Great Demon raised its club, lifting Seishan ever higher above the surface of the water.

For a moment, she was level with its enormous head, and saw the waterfalls of blood flowing from its maw and nostrils.

She shivered, feeling her Flaw call upon her from somewhere deep, deep within. Seishan licked her alluring red lips.

'Ah. I want to taste it…'

\*\*\*

"Advance!"

The battered Seventh Legion rushed forward once again. The retreating soldiers stumbled between them, bleeding and barely staying upright. Their pale faces and sunken eyes were full of numb terror.

Reaching the frontline, Rain saw a carpet of corpses covering the ground everywhere she looked. Most belonged to hideous Nightmare Creatures, but many were those of humans — some sickeningly mangled, some strangely intact.

There were so many dead that the ancient jungle seemed unable to swallow them all, its profane hunger satiated for the first time in eons.

'Curse it all…'

The Song Army was still holding fast, but its breaking point was drawing close. Once they reached it and the battle line collapsed, an even more harrowing slaughter would take place, and all of them would be devoured by the rampaging of Nightmare Creatures.

"Stay alive! Forward, together! For the Queen!"

Tamar's shout brought her back to her senses.

Gripping the hilt of her black tachi, Rain gritted her teeth and braced herself.

A moment later, the Nightmare Creatures were upon them.

'Hopeless. It is hopeless…'

No matter how much they fought, no matter how much they killed, no matter how much they died... the flood of abominations would not end.

And these Nightmare Creatures were the lesser evil, at that. Even if the expedition force somehow managed to eradicate them all, the true horrors of the Hollows would soon arrive, attracted by the overwhelming smell of blood.

Rain felt a chilling shiver run down her spine when she realized that she could, indeed, die here today.

Her sweat turned cold, and she drew in a shaky breath.

And then...

Something imperceptible changed about the world.

It was as if the sweltering heat of Godgrave receded a little, and a cool breeze gently caressed her skin.

Rain was not just imagining it, either. She could see her fellow soldiers react to the strange change, too.

Even the Nightmare Creatures were affected. Their ceaseless onslaught turned slower, for a moment, and then lulled.

'What...'

Confused and struggling to believe what she was seeing, Rain stared at the abominations. The abominations had actually stopped, and were now sniffing the air, growling, and... and...

It almost seemed as though some of them were cowering in fear.

...Far behind her, in the middle of the flooded clearing, the gargantuan Great Demon noiselessly fell down.

And, at the same time...

Rain froze in terror.

The countless corpses littering the vast swath of the jungle all moved at the same time.

The dead Nightmare Creatures, the fallen humans... they all stirred, moved, and then slowly rose from the ground.

Far behind her, the slain Great Demon was rising from the bloody water, as well, its dead eyes staring forward with no emotion.

Rain took a step back, her face turning even paler than usual.

'The... the Queen...'

A moment later, the legion of the dead came alive, tearing into the nightmare horde.

Soon after that, the battle was over.

The Queen of Worms had finally arrived to Godgrave.