2208 Will of the People  
  
The femur of the dead deity turned from a great inclined plain into a labyrinth of vast, deep canyons near its southern edge... the end of Godgrave.  
  
That was because both legs of the titanic skeleton had been shattered by a harrowing blow once, thousands of years ago. Both of its femurs were heavily damaged near the knees, deep cracks marring the surface of the ancient bone. Some cracks led to the Hollows... some were even deeper, going all the way to the Sea of Ash far below.  
  
The knee joints themselves were out of sight, buried in the ash. Since nobody knew how deep the Sea of Ash was, it was impossible to tell if the dead god's tibias and fibulas were hidden under the endless grey carpet, or if something had severed them completely in the distant past.  
  
The Citadel Gilead had been ordered to conquer was situated at the very last bone plateau, standing on the shore of the Sea of Ash...  
  
The journey to the end of Godgrave had been harrowing. The battle for the Citadel, located so close to the endless expanse of ash, promised to be more harrowing still.  
  
"Are you sure that we can even take it?"  
  
The voice sounded tired.  
  
Gilead kept his gaze aimed across the last canyon, then turned slowly to look at his last companion.  
  
The two of them were all that remained of the expedition.  
  
His lustrous armor had long been destroyed, and his skin had turned the color of bronze under the merciless radiance of the overcast. Even his tunic had been bleached by the light, losing all color.  
  
The woman's parasol was in the same sorry state. The beautiful patterns that used to cover its surface were now faint and feeble, barely noticeable in the bright light.  
  
It was a miracle that the flimsy thing had survived at all.  
  
Looking at the woman, Gilead suddenly found the situation comical.  
  
So many brave warriors had died... skilled Awakened, fearsome Masters. Even a powerful Saint. And yet, this mundane luxury item the woman had brought with herself on a whim was in one piece.  
  
He sighed deeply.  
  
Gilead's blue eyes were vivid and feverish, but the woman's green eyes were dim and calm.  
  
After endless days of horror and suffering, they had finally reached their destination. Now, there were only these few last obstacles left for them to overcome... the last canyon, the last plateau, and the Citadel itself.  
  
He remembered that she had asked him a question and nodded belatedly.  
  
"We must take it, and therefore, we will."  
  
The lower part of the woman's face was hidden behind a scarf, but he could tell by her eyes that she smiled.  
  
She had not smiled in a while, so that was probably a good sign.  
  
"It's just the two of us now. Two Saints against whatever profane horror guards that Citadel... I'd say the odds are not in our favor."  
  
Gilead pursed his lips, then shook his head grimly.  
  
"We've made it so far. So, we'll take it."  
  
The woman studied him for a while, then leaned back and laughed.  
  
Then, she folded her parasol and looked at him coldly.  
  
Confused, Gilead turned to the canyon.  
  
"Let's rest here. I will carry you to the other side once we have recovered our essence..."  
  
"No."  
  
He paused, unsure if he had heard her right. Looking back, he frowned.  
  
"...No?"  
  
The woman was smiling.  
  
"Yes... no?"  
  
She leaned on her parasol and spoke, her voice remaining calm.  
  
"I was going to tell you a while back... on the day we lost half of the remaining soldiers, and you refused to turn back. But then, I decided to wait a bit. To crush your spirit better."  
  
Gilead blinked, staring at her in confusion.  
  
"What do you mean? The Citadel..."  
  
The woman chuckled.  
  
"I refuse."  
  
Noticing his incomprehension, she shook her head.  
  
"Everyone is dead, but I am alive. I am alive because you've kept me alive, and you've kept me alive because you need a homeless Saint to claim the Citadel. But I won't. I refuse. Honestly, I'd rather dive into the Sea of Ash head-first. Oh... and you go to hell, Summer Knight. There is a special place there prepared for people like you, I'm sure."  
  
She laughed again, sounding more than a little unhinged to his ears.  
  
Had she been harboring these thoughts quietly all this time?  
  
Her green eyes came alive again, growing as bright as they had been once... before they left on this cursed expedition.  
  
"There, I spoke my piece. Now, I'm leaving."  
  
Gilead frowned, stumped.  
  
He was too tired, too hurt, and too spent to comprehend the strange situation. His thoughts were moving slowly.  
  
What was she saying?  
  
No, he understood what she was saying. But words weren't magical spells that bent reality to one's wishes. What did she expect would happen because of her outburst?  
  
"We have our orders."  
  
The woman raised an eyebrow, her green eyes full of mirth.  
  
"So what? You might be hellbent on staying loyal to the King, but I am not. In fact, I'm sick of him and his orders. I was already sick before being sent on this futile expedition, and now, after witnessing all our soldiers die senseless deaths, I don't even care to pretend that I'm not."  
  
Gilead raised a hand and rubbed his face tiredly.  
  
The deaths of the soldiers weighed heavily on his soul, as well. He was sick and tired, as well.  
  
But he just could not understand.  
  
She was a Saint. A Transcendent champion of the Sword Domain, the best there was. Sure, not all Saints were retainers of the Great Clan Valor like he was. And even among the Knights, not everyone took their oaths as seriously as he did.  
  
Some people were guided by greed and self-interest. Most people were simply lost.  
  
But most Saints still had enough composure to keep their wits about them. What was she hoping to achieve? Were there others like her among the Transcendent champions of the Sword Domain, ready to abandon reason?  
  
"You... refuse? You can't refuse."  
  
The woman seemed to grin.  
  
"Can't I? What are you going to do to stop me, Summer Knight? I admit, you are far stronger than me. You can kill me. You can overpower me. You can even drag me to the Citadel against my will. But... even if you do, you can't force me to claim it. You can't do anything."  
  
Gilead just stared at her blankly.  
  
Then, a hint of exasperated anger ignited in his piercing blue eyes.  
  
"And then what? What happens after you flee to the waking world? Do you think that the King will just let you be?! Or are you planning to fight him, as well?! It's useless!"  
  
The woman stared at him for a while, then sighed and opened her parasol.  
  
Hiding in its shade, she shook her head.  
  
"Is it useless, though?"  
  
Gilead laughed.  
  
"You don't know anything. You haven't seen anything. If you think that you can fight a Sovereign... if any of us, or even all of us can... then you are delusional. It is nothing but an exercise in futility."  
  
The woman smiled again.  
  
"I think not."  
  
He stared at her somberly, and she shook her head again.  
  
"I think that you are misunderstanding something very important, Summer Knight. You are right, I can't fight the King. It's hopeless... if I do, he'll kill me. But what happens after he kills me? Do you think that I'll be the last one to defy him? Is he going to kill everyone who disobeys his orders?"  
  
The woman scoffed.  
  
"We mere mortals are powerless in front of a Sovereign, because a Sovereign is like a god. His will is the divine will. But gods are also powerless in front of us mortals, because their divinity depends on a Domain, and Domains consist of people. What is he going to be the King of if people turn their backs on him, and he slaughtеrs the people? The King of Nothing?"  
  
Twirling her parasol, she took a step closer to Gilead and looked him in the eye.  
  
"We mortals are not as powerless as you think. And our will is not as insignificant as it seems. But even if it is... well, to be frank, I don't care. I just don't give a damn anymore. I'm done with this farce."  
  
As Gilead stared at her, struggling to find words to retort, the woman gave him a look of pity.  
  
"Oh, and also... for Spell's sake. You swore a knightly oath of fealty to the Great Clan Valor, did you not? Well, the Great Clan Valor consists of many people. Find a less rotten one to be loyal to, you fool. By the dead gods, even Changing Star is an heir of Valor these days..."  
  
With that...  
  
The woman disappeared into thin air, having pulled on her tether to return to the waking world.  
  
The vivid green radiance of her eyes faded, leaving only shades of white and grey in the world.  
  
Left alone, Sir Gilead, the Summer Knight, tiredly lowered himself to the ground.  
  
He had done all he could... more than he could, even.  
  
But despite that, his mission had ended in failure.