1854 The Shadow’s Response

The King of Swords certainly had a commanding presence, but when the Lord of Shadows spoke, it was hard not to pay attention to him as well.

Both possessed a cold indifference to them, but while Anvil's voice was calm and regal, Sunny's was sinister and dark.

The impenetrable darkness nestling in the eyes of his ferocious mask only made him seem more eerie and captivating.

Leaning forward a little, he spoke in an even tone…

Or rather, he pretended to. In truth, he simply activated the enchantment of the Extraordinary Rock and allowed it to repeat what he had spoken aloud earlier, before summoning Weaver's Mask.

"There are no more Citadels to be conquered on the surface, and I can't say anything about the sea of ash below — even for me, that place is too dire. However, there are several strongholds hidden in the Hollows, which I have scouted out extensively in the last few years."

Sunny pretended to pause for a moment, then moved his hand subtly.

Following his command, shadows crawled from the floor and flowed onto the round table like a stream of darkness. There, they solidified and manifested into a flawless model of the dead deity — a trick he had used once before in front of the Fire Keepers.

Soon, it was as if a large black skeleton was laying on the wooden surface of the council table.

There was a wave of whispers in the stone chamber. Sunny allowed it to pass, and then continued coldly with the help of the Extraordinary Rock:

"I know the approximate location of four Citadels. One is situated in the western part of the Collarbone Hollow, and is the closest one to the war camp of the Song Army. Taking it would, without a doubt, become a priority to them, since they need to conquer a Citadel desperately. The second is located in the central part of the Breastbone Hollow, at an equal distance from both of the war camps — considering our advantage, we should be able to reach it first."

Sunny leaned back and crossed his arms.

"The third is situated far below, in the spine of the dead god. Reaching that one would be much more challenging… all of Godgrave is hell, but the great Spine Hollow is one of the most dreadful parts of that hell, by far. The fourth Citadel is the furthest, and is hidden all the way in the far south, in one of the two Femur Hollows."

He lingered for a few moments, and then commanded the Extraordinary Rock to speak the last prepared lines:

"I… suspect that there is a fifth Citadel, as well. If there is, it is situated in the skull of the dead deity. However, that place is far too harrowing. I have never dared approach it, and I suggest that none of you try, either. Whatever is hidden there should never be disturbed by humans."

Sunny had indeed never ventured close to the colossal skull of the dead god. Even though it could be seen from anywhere in Godgrave, propped up by the mountains and staring at the ancient corpse with its enormous, empty eyes, it was the last place he ever wanted to explore.

Sure, the ancient darkness drowning the great chasms of the skeleton's eyes was nebulous and alluring, promising mysteries beyond his imagination — and, maybe, keys to unimaginable power.

Who knew what could be hidden in the head of a dead deity? Maybe it was the secret of its death. But no matter what the secret was, it had to be something of tremendous importance.

And yet, Sunny felt it in his own bones that trying to enter the colossal skull would result in a death more thorough than any he had brushed against before. He wouldn't be surprised if there was an Unholy Titan dwelling there — and he was not ready to face an Unholy Titan.

Simply witnessing a creature like that could very well cause Sunny's mind to shatter and his soul to collapse.

His final words were met by a tense silence. The gathered Saints studied the black skeleton laying on the table with somber expressions.

Eventually, Morgan asked in a subdued tone:

"Saint Shadow… how sure are you that these locations you've discovered are indeed Citadels, and not simply ancient ruins?"

Sunny shrugged.

"As sure as I can be."

In truth, he was reasonably certain, but there was always room for doubt. He had never explored the interiors of the supposed Citadels, since there were immensely powerful abominations guarding each of them. But he had learned enough to believe in his judgment.

Hearing his response, Morgan smiled.

"How fortunate it is that my sister managed to convince you to share your knowledge, then."

The King of Swords gazed at him once more, then spoke evenly:

"The course of action is clear. For now, it is too perilous to send our soldiers into the Hollows. We need to proceed slowly by conquering the surface and make our way to the center of the Breastbone Plain. From there, we will launch an assault on the Citadel situated below it."

That was just as expected. During this first stage of the war, both armies would be preoccupied with the laborious task of subjugating the surface of Godgrave. They would move deeper inland, eradicating the jungle and mapping out the major fissures in the ancient bone. Then, fortified outposts would be built near the fissures to stop the jungle from crawling out of the Hollows once again, thus slowly expanding the zone of human control.

It seemed like a titanic task, to conquer the colossal skeleton, one crack in the bone at a time. But Sunny was not stupid enough to underestimate the tenacity of the human pioneers.

All regions of the Dream Realm had once seemed impregnable. And yet, humans had slowly conquered them, one after the other — Clan Valor in particular was responsible for subjugating the vast territory between the Twilight Sea and the Hollow Mountains. The story of their expansionist crusades was the stuff of legends in and of itself.

And while humanity had never conquered a Death Zone before, its expedition forces had never been as vast, and had never been led by rulers of the Supreme Rank, either.

So, Sunny had no doubt that the surface of Godgrave would fall into human hands eventually. Perhaps it would take many months, and cost countless lives. But the result had already been decided — the Sovereigns had willed it, and so, their wills would reshape the world to fit their ambitions.

He looked at the King of Swords, and at the same time, the king looked at him.

Anvil remained silent for a moment, then said without any emotion in his powerful voice:

"While most of us will be paving the road south, you will have another task, Saint Shadow."

Sunny raised an eyebrow behind the mask.

"Oh?"

The King of Swords shifted his gaze to the black skeleton, looking intently at the spot where the war camp of the Song Army was supposed to be.

When he spoke, his tone contained authority that could not be denied:

"You will venture to disrupt the enemy's attempts to conquer the Western Citadel. The location of your own stronghold is quite convenient for launching raids... so, I expect you to deliver good results."