1668 Expedition Force

The encampment of the expedition force was much different from the base camp of the Sword Army.

It was busy and immense, too, surrounded by a palisade and with countless Awakened guarding its walls. However, its scale was much smaller, and there were no permanent buildings — the encampment moved with the soldiers, who pushed deeper into the lethal expanse of Godgrave every few days.

There were no Ivory Tower or Dream Gate, either, so nothing obscured the sight of the cloudy sky. The radiant clouds were always there, above the soldiers, reminding that that fiery death was only a gust of wind away.

The stretch of the bone plain between the advancing army and its main camp had been cleared of the predatory jungle. The jungle had been defeated, subjugated, and burned to ashes.

The fissures leading to the Hollows, the source of the scarlet infestation, were now surrounded by garrisons of human soldiers. Those soldiers served as ruthless eradicators, continuously destroying the tendrils with which the jungle desperately reached toward the surface again and again.

Denied the light and warmth, the starving Hollows were already changing. The Death Zone would launch a counterattack on the human invaders one day soon, no doubt — but by that time, the authority of the Sovereigns would already spread into the depths of the dead god's bones. Therefore, the dreadful Hollows would be subjugated, as well.

Sunny, Nephis, and the Saints of the Sword Army moved swiftly from one extermination outpost to another, reaching the expedition force encampment in a few hours — the same journey would have taken Awakened soldiers many days, but they possessed much greater speed.

The current location of the camp was close to the edge of the Collarbone Plain, in the spot where the Eastern First Rib passed below it. So, Sunny could see a sea of vermilion leaves stretching south far below him, connected to something that looked like an ascending mountain range in the distance.

That was the great Breastbone Reach — the goal of the expedition force.

The Sword Army could have followed the collarbone west to where it eventually connected to the Reach, but crossing to the First Rib and traversing it would save them several days of grueling combat. So, a lengthy lift was currently being constructed on the bone slopes, leading all the way to the jungle below.

The jungle itself was aflame, and a wall of smoke was rising from it into the radiant clouds.

Godgrave was a sweltering place despite the overcast sky, but here, the air was even more sultry. Sunny could feel beads of sweat rolling down his skin under the stonelike carapace of the Onyx Mantle — most of the Saints had dismissed the outer layers of their armors, wearing light clothes, but sadly, he could not follow their example.

He could enjoy the view of Nephis out of her latest suit of plate armor, though, which was a consolation.

Sunny spared a glance to the burning expanse of the First Rib, and then followed her into the encampment.

The mood here was much more heavy and subdued than in the base camp. The authority of the King of Swords did not spread this far west, so the soldiers were on their own. There were tents and temporary buildings, but many were simply sitting on the ground, covered in soot and with exhausted gazes. Dents and cracks covered their armor, and many were smeared with dried blood.

Those with serious wounds would have been tended to by the healers, but minor scrapes were not worth the waste of essence — at best, they would receive mundane treatment. The injuries and the fatigue slowly accumulated, as did the mental trauma of having to battle the dreadful abominations of the jungle every day.

The lack of nighttime, meanwhile, was wreaking havoc on people's sleep and perception of time.

Everyone here could not wait for their turn to rotate back to the main camp of the army, where they could rest and recover in relative safety, away from the nightmarish, incessant dread of the scarlet infestation.

'It does not seem like they know.'

The news of Mordret's invasion of the Sword Domain had not reached the expedition force, yet. Once it did, the mood of the soldiers would plummet ever further.

For now, though, they were glad and relieved to see the Saints return.

Nephis walked across the encampment confidently, responding to the salutes of the soldiers with an occasional nod.

Soon, they reached the command tent, which was mercifully cooled by a special Memory. Sky Tide and Saint Roan, as well as a few others, were waiting there.

Saint Tyris seemed tired, but her stern demeanor remained the same.

The high officers of the expedition force had been informed of the shift in the command structure of the army and the reason for why Morgan did not return, already. So, Nephis launched into a strategy discussion without a delay.

Time waited for no one.

Her voice was even and commanding, and there was no hint of weakness in her striking grey eyes.

"...In short, we need to accelerate the schedule."

The gathered Saints looked at her with doubt. Eventually, Summer Knight spoke in a subdued tone:

"We are already pushing the soldiers as hard as they can handle. Lady Morgan's absence will undoubtedly take a toll on the overall effectiveness of the army… is it wise to intensify the offensive at this precarious moment? Should we not slow down for a few days, instead?"

Nephis spared him an emotionless glance.

"It would have been a good decision if the circumstances allowed it. However, the situation has changed. We do not have the upper hand in this war anymore, and time is not on our side. Going slow and steady is a luxury that we cannot afford… so, we must act swiftly. I am determined to conquer the first Citadel in no more than three weeks."

The faces of the Saints turned somber.

Summer Knight studied Nephis for a few moments, then grimaced and looked away.

"How do you suggest we keep to that timetable, my lady?"

Nephis looked at the map of Godgrave laying on the table in front of her, then traced a line across the First Rib and the northern part of the Breastbone Reach.

"We might have lost the power of my sister, but the Lord of Shadows is now with us. I can assure you that his strength is quite astounding… therefore, there will be no more lulls in the battle against the jungle."

She faced the Saints and said evenly:

"We will split the expedition force into three war parties. One will be led by me, one by Sir Gilead, and the last one by Lord Shadow. The first party will lead the offensive charge while the other two rest. Every eight hours, a fresh force will replace the spent one. By advancing in three shifts, we will be able to maintain a much faster pace. Additionally…"

She moved her finger to a particular spot on the map.

"We will shift the target area of the expedition from the great fissure near the Third Rib to this minor one close to the Second. The subjugation force will have to travel further through the Hollows in order to reach the assumed location of the Citadel, but it will save us a good week of fighting against the jungle."

There was a wave of whispers among the Saints. They seemed to have accepted Neph's plan, despite its dire implications. However, another issue was on their minds.

Eventually, it was Saint Tyris who spoke, not mixing words.

"We trust you and Summer Knight, my lady. Both of you have proven your competence and valor on countless occasions… however, Lord Shadow is a stranger to us. More than that, he is a mercenary. Why put him in charge of the third war party?"

Nephis met Sky Tide's cold gaze calmly.

Her answer was simple:

"Because none of you can defeat him in a fight. Any more questions?"

The Saints looked at each other silently. After a while, they shook their heads.

Saint Jest of Dagonet gave Sunny a curious gaze.

The old man smiled amicably and asked in a light tone:

"Are you really that great?"

Sunny stared at him from behind Weaver's Mask, then shook his head.

"Who, me? I don't even know how to hold a sword. The pointy end should be aimed at the enemy, right? Or wait… was it the other way around?"

Saint Jest gave him a long look.

"Goodness gracious. Finally! Someone with a sense of humor…"