1869 War Machine

A few hours later, the great war machine of the Sword Domain was set in motion. The encampment surged as a myriad of soldiers were called upon by the foreboding rumble of the war drums. Dozens of legions were gathered into march formations and ventured outside the stronghold walls, making the ground shake.

The tents were taken down, the temporary buildings disassembled. Even the tall palisade itself was being dismantled — the sharpened stakes would be transported with the army and raised to form it anew at the next campsite.

Awakened warriors were moving in a strangely orderly chaos. Countless Echoes were on the move, as well — some pulling heavy wagons, some to accompany their masters into battle. The enormous scale and somber spectacle of it all were nothing short of daunting.

Feeling the booming sound of the drums reverberate in his bones, Sunny could not help but let his heart respond to the low, stirring beat. The blood flowed faster in his veins, growing hotter — and yet, a sudden chill brushed against his skin.

He had witnessed the start of the subjugation campaign from the Ivory Island, but he had not observed the expedition force in action until now. It was a grand, grim, and unforgettable scene.

'...Damnation.'

Sunny was no stranger to war, and had participated in his fair share of massive military engagements. But even the most large-scale battle in Antarctica could not compare to the subjugation offensive of the Sword Army in terms of impact, awe, and sheer scale.

Meanwhile, he was meant to be in charge of a third of this grandiose combat force. Sunny was one of the most seasoned fighters of humanity and had rich experience commanding troops, as well. Still, he spared a few moments to appreciate how bizarre and unsuitable the fact that he had been entrusted with this duty was.

But then again, a war like this one had never happened before. So, there wasn't really anyone fit for this responsibility out there — not in the Sword Army, and not among the enemy champions.

He was no worse than the best of the best.

If there was one glaring flaw Sunny possessed, though, it was that he was not as well integrated into the expedition force as Nephis and Summer Knight were. Luckily, he was in charge of the third war party, which meant that he had sixteen hours to observe the other two in action and familiarize himself with the warriors he would be leading into battle.

The geography itself presented him with a great view of the expanding battlefield. Far below, the jungle covering the surface of the First Rib had already been reduced to ash, and was now spreading anew from the fissures in the ancient bone. One could see with the naked eye an onslaught of vermilion growth devouring the white surface of the lowlands.

The scarlet infestation was spreading from several sources, expanding swiftly in every direction. Here and there, the stains of vibrant red grew large enough to merge, forming vast stretches of the recovering jungle

Before the jungle could really entrench itself, however, the first war party descended upon it like a tide.

From a distance, the clash between the human invaders and the native horrors of Godgrave seemed immense in scale, but slow and tame. Sunny knew better, however — he had expanded his shadow sense far and wide, so he could feel how fierce and terrifyingly violent the battle was.

The war party consisted of tens of thousands of Awakened warriors, hundreds of Masters, and a dozen Saints. They were stretched along a wide battlefront, advancing steadily to the closest of the fissures.

It was hard to deploy Awakened as a cohesive formation, since every soldier possessed a unique Aspect — in a combat force of that size, they were divided into units based on the general characteristics of their Abilities. Those with physical enhancement powers formed the vanguard, warriors capable of ranged attacks were grouped together, and so on.

The formation was, by necessity, loose and flexible. There were no solid shield walls or tight spear-wielding phalanxes, since a rigid structure would prevent the warriors from fully expressing their Aspects.

Such a manner of deploying troops was optimal, but put a lot of strain on the middle-rank officers, who had to possess both a keen mind and a deep understanding of tactics in order to manage their span of the overall formation with enough finesse.

'...Impressive.'

Fortunately for Sunny, the Sword Army was extremely disciplined and highly capable. Its core, after all, was composed of the seasoned veterans of the Valor Crusades — the famed subjugation campaign that had spanned several decades, bringing many regions of the Dream Realm into human hands.

The Knights and Squires of Valor, as well as many retainers of the vassal clans, were more than familiar with this kind of warfare, albeit maybe not quite on such a scale.

Even though the number of Awakened and Masters had exploded since the Chain of Nightmares, and the seasoned warriors were a minority now, the legions were assembled specifically in a way that put veterans in charge of inexperienced recruits, thus instilling the whole army with the same competency.

The result spoke for itself. The jungle was being slowly, but inevitably, pushed back and incinerated.

After observing the battle for a little while, Sunny concluded that he could become an effective commander of such a force… in theory. Of course, he would need a few months to truly learn the ropes. Sixteen hours were woefully insufficient to achieve any kind of acceptable result — so, there was no point in trying.

Luckily, he did not really need to.

The middle-rank officers were already more than capable enough to manage the soldiers and keep the formation from falling apart. His role was different — he had to create the conditions for the war party to face the dread of the scarlet infestation from the most advantageous position.

Far below, there were flashpoints of fearsome violence ahead of the steadily advancing formation. These flashpoints were centered around the Saints and the elite forces supporting them — they were the ones who eliminated the most dangerous foes, faced the most dire threats, and made sure that the war party only fought against perils that it could handle.

The bloodiest and most fearsome flashpoint was where Nephis and the Fire Keepers fought. White flames were rolling like waves, and entire swathes of the jungle were obliterated, the corpses of the abominations teeming in the scarlet undergrowth turning to ash.

Nephis moved strategically from one crisis to another, solving them before the danger could befall the main formation. The pace she set was truly unforgiving — she had to face and destroy lethal horrors and insidious hazards without reprieve, one after another.

The dire onslaught of them was both constant and appalling, and even with her great power, she could barely meet the deadly demands of the battlefield. That was why she also directed the rest of the Saints accompanying the war party, sending them to handle those threats that she herself could not reach in time like a nimble conductor.

As long as Nephis did her part well, there was no need for her to personally involve herself with the main formation.

Sunny frowned behind the mask.

He could do that, as well. The problem was that the intensity of the battle was truly chilling… and while Nephis was holding fast for now, she still had seven hours to go before Summer Knight and the second war party replaced her tired troops.

And this was only the first day of many. The bloodshed would not pause until they crossed the First Rib, ascended the Breastbone Reach, and pushed the jungle far enough south to reach the designated fissure.

By Sunny's calculations, each war party would have to lead the charge at least a dozen times... or, much more likely, north of twenty. Would the soldiers endure the hellish marathon? What about the Saints?

There was another issue, as well…

Nephis had the Fire Keepers to support her and assist the other Saints in her party. A core force of seasoned elites who helped her stay in control of the battlefield. Sir Gilead had a similar group of elites supporting him, as well — the most seasoned and skilled veterans among the Knights of Valor would follow him into battle.

Sunny did not have a force like that, though.

Instead, he had Saint, Fiend, and Serpent…