2035 : Two Crossings

Not long after the Godheart Battle was over, the Song army abandoned its temporary camp on the vast expanse of the Breastbone Reach and started its long and arduous march north.

At this point, the enemies had proven their superiority. The warriors of the Raven Queen could not compete with the Sword Army in an open field — not as long as Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows were alive, at least.

So, they could only retreat.

The situation was not hopeless, though, and the retreat was not aimless. It had two strategic goals that could very well bring the Song Domain victory in the next battle, or the battle after that.

The first goal of returning north was quite obvious — there, they would gain terrain advantage. The Song Army could not overcome the enemy in a frontal clash, but things would be different if there were complicated terrain and fearsome fortifications involved in the equation.

The forces of Song had established two impressive strongholds on both crossings from the northern tip of the Breastbone Reach to the West Collarbone Plain — one direct, and the other one via the Western First Rib. Laying siege to either of the crossings would be a perilous task for the Sword Army, no doubt…

And there was the second strategic goal of the retreat, as well.

This one was more mystical.

The swath of the titanic breastbone where the Battle of Godheart had taken place was located on the invisible boundary between the two clashing Domains. There, the power of the Sovereigns was at a balance.

Now, however, the situation would change. The Song Army was retreating, and therefore, the sphere of influence of the Song Domain would shrink, while the sphere of influence of the Sword Domain would expand. All that the King of Swords had to do to claim this territory was conquer the scattered extermination outposts established by the enemy on the surface of the sun-bleached bone.

He would become the sole ruler of the Breastbone Reach soon…

His Domain would not reach the western collarbone of the dead god, though, where the Citadel of Ki Song were located. Her power would be fully expressed at the two crossings, while his would be at its weakest.

So, the Song Army was determined to defend them at all costs. It had a good chance of succeeding, as well.

But the King of Swords was undeterred. And so, his army set out in pursuit.

The longer it took for the Sword Army to arrive at the two crossings, the better the soldiers of the Song Domain would be able to entrench themselves and prepare for the siege. So, there was no time to waste… perhaps Anvil wished to maintain the forceful momentum of the triumphant victory at Godheart, as well, hoping to smash through the enemy defenses and march straight to the Collarbone Citadel.

Ki Song knew this, of course, so it was inevitable that she would try to slow the Sword Army down.

There would be ambushes and countless skirmishes between the soldiers of the two Domains, no doubt…

Worse than that, there was a very simple tactic she could employ to sabotage the speed of the advancing enemy forces.

It was to destroy the extermination outposts as her own army retreated, like the armies of the ancient times burned the fields and poisoned the wells as they passed.

The extermination outposts were like seals that humanity had placed on the abominable jungle, preventing it from escaping to the surface from the humid twilight of the Hollows again. They were fortresses built around the fissures in the ancient bone, garrisoned with soldiers whose task it was to destroy the tendrils of the scarlet infestation every time it reached out from the darkness.

As the Song Army retreated across the territory it had subjugated in the past, these garrisons were retrieved, and the fortresses were destroyed. With nothing containing the ancient jungle in the depths anymore, it crawled out of the dark fissures to hungrily absorb sunlight and warmth once again.

The return of the scarlet infestation was like an explosion of abominable life. Its taint covered the sun-bleached surface of the bone with dire speed, and myriads of Nightmare Creatures were born in an instant — most to be consumed, some to gorge themselves on the flesh and souls of their fallen brethren and grow with startling speed.

By the time the Sword Army reached where the enemy had passed, they were often met by vast wealds of thick vermilion growth.

The islands of the abominable jungle had to be tamed and burned down once again, the extermination outposts had to be restored, and new Awakened garrisons had to be left behind to guard the fissures. Therefore, the Sword Army was losing both time and manpower while advancing north.

There was another matter it was dealing with, as well…

The fallout of the Godheart Battle and the punishment that the King had delivered to Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan for her defiance.

His punishment… was not that harsh, really. She was stripped of her position as the commander of the Sword Army, with Anvil assuming the role personally, and sent back to the main camp to oversee the complicated logistical task of shifting the established supply chains in preparation for the inevitable siege of the two crossings.

Basically, she was being slapped on the wrist and sent to her room, to be grounded for a few weeks.

However, the soldiers were still unhappy.

Not only were they still reeling from the horror and senselessness of the recent battle, but they also had to witness the person who had saved their lives and delivered victory to the Sword Domain being admonished and demoted — instead of honored and praised.

Some saw it as an injustice and were quietly incensed, while some were simply confused.

Why was the King sending one of his most powerful warriors away?

What would happen if the Queen of Worms decided to turn her army around and attack? Would the Sword Army fare well with only the Lord of Shadows standing between it and the superior number of enemy Saints?

…Would the Lord of Shadows even do anything now that the person who had brought him under the banner of the Sword Domain was humiliated and punished like that?

They were blowing the symbolic punishment out of proportion, of course.

But Sunny was not going to dissuade them.

In fact, it was exactly what he had wanted to achieve.

It was also quite a fortunate turn of events, for Nephis to be sent to the main camp.

With her speed, she would be arriving there quite soon… and when she did, they would be able to decipher Rain's True Name away from the prying eyes of the two Sovereigns.

They would be able to attempt forging her sword, too.

...Well, and do some other things as well.

Honestly, he couldn't wait.