2066 Fragments of War (3)

Godgrave was a strange land. Although it was vast like a continent, to the point that it was easy to forget its true nature while traversing the vast plains of white bone, the titanic skeleton was just that — the remains of an inconceivable giant.

As such, its topography was strange and alien at times. The same was true to the points where the colossal breastbone connected to the immense collarbones. There was no smooth transition from one to another — instead, the ground simply sloped downward, rolling into a vast and seemingly bottomless chasm.

Of course, it was possible to descend into the darkness, reach the distant bottom, and climb back to the surface on the other side, then completing the crossing. But transporting entire armies in this manner was not feasible… not to mention that the lower part of the chasm was covered in a thick layer of soft ash, and all kinds of horrors could be hiding under its surface.

So, the Song Army had constructed fortified bridges at the two points where the chasm was the narrowest, and built mighty strongholds to guard them.

The greater stronghold was located at the point where Breastbone Reach connected to Western Collarbone Plain directly. The other was technically a chain of two lesser strongholds at both ends of the Western First Rib.

Both of the Crossing Strongholds had been built to withstand terrible sieges, so taking them by force was a daunting task.

The Song Army also fully intended to destroy the bridges before the enemy arrived…

But they had not destroyed them yet, because there were still Song soldiers trickling into the strongholds after spilling blood to slow down the approaching Sword Army.

The Greater Crossing Stronghold made for an impressive sight. It was hard to deliver building materials to Godgrave, so it was mostly built from local materials — namely, lumber scavenged from the ancient jungle of the Hollows.

The mystical wood was tougher than any mundane alloy could ever be,to the point that it sometimes seemed nearly indestructible. Sadly, it had an apparent weakness — it burned all too well, which made it vulnerable to fire attacks. Even if Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan was not fighting on the enemy side, this vulnerability could prove fatal.

So, there was an additional layer of protection atop the mystical lumber — the hides of countless abominations were stretched over the entire fortress, serving as a shield against flame.

Much of it had belonged to the Great Demon who the Queen had slain immediately after descending to Godgrave. The bones of the gargantuan ape, meanwhile, had served to reinforce the structure of the fortress wall and of its gates.

The fortress built from the bones of a Great Demon oversaw the entrance to the bridge, while a tall wall stretched in both directions for many kilometers, serving as a barrier for any being that could try climbing out of the dark chasm.

The bridge itself was long and wide, built to accommodate a great army of countless Awakened, transformed Saints, and abominable thralls of Beastmaster.

The battered remains of Tamar's centuria were currently crossing it, having finally reached safety.

Two people were standing on the protruding bastion above the gates of the stronghold, looking down at their tiny figures from great height.

One of them was Seishan, the Lost Princess of Song, while the other was her sister, Beastmaster.

Beastmaster was looking down with a somber expression on her enchanting face. The scar marring her beautiful features seemed especially sacrilegious in the bright light of the overcast sky.

She sighed.

"These ones are yours, aren't they? They should be one of the last."

Seishan nodded.

"Yes. It's the daughter of the Saint of Sorrow and her soldiers… I am glad that she returned alive. She is a good kid."

Beastmaster slowly shook her head.

"How long will she remain alive, though? At this point, is it even possible for us to win?"

Seishan looked at her with a hint of amusement.

"What are you talking about? Of course, it is possible."

She leaned on the parapet of the rampart and studied the horizon.

"Sure, the situation does not look good. We only have one Citadel while Anvil has two… perhaps three. Most of Godgrave is under his control now, and his soldiers are stronger. No one seems to be able to deal with Changing Star or the Lord of Shadows, either, which makes our superior number of Saints pointless."

Beastmaster smiled crookedly.

"You… really know how to lighten the mood, Shan."

Seishan smiled, as well.

"But war is unpredictable. It can turn on a dime."

She pointed to the dark chasm and the mighty wall of the fortress.

"And this… is our dime."

Beastmaster grimaced.

"You think we can break the Sword Army with this fortress?"

Seishan shook her head.

"No… but we can make the Sword Army break itself against this fortress."

Then, a sudden smile illuminated her graceful face.

"I know a thing or two about castles, you know."

Beastmaster chuckled. Seishan remained silent for a few moments, and then added calmly:

"A direct siege can be disastrous for the attacking side, if things go wrong. And that is what the King of Swords will do — he will throw his soldiers at the walls of this fortress without holding anything back. Because time is not on his side. If he waits for too long, he will lose Bastion, and his power will be severely diminished."

She shook her head.

"After all, the outcome of this war will not be decided by the battles of mortals. It will be decided by the battle between the King of Swords and our mother. Everything we do is ultimately to give our Supreme a better chance at victory."

Beastmaster did not respond for a while.

Eventually, though, she said quietly:

"I am not sure if you are overconfident or simply being a contrarian, but things are way worse than that. Look behind you… the soldiers are tired and terrified. The morale is low,and it will continue to plummet as the siege drags on. Whatever loyalty they have will dwindle, until, in the end, the Song Army army will break instead. No matter how great our fortress is, you can't win a siege with a broken army, sister.. So, time isn't on our side either."

Seishan remained silent.

Some time passed, and a few more battered groups of soldiers crossed the bridge.

She looked at Beastmaster somberly.

"...It's not like we have a choice, though, do we?"

Her words hung in the air, full of many meanings.

Then, Seishan turned away and sighed.

"That should be the last of them. We must blow up the bridge now."

Soon, there was a thunderous explosion, and the great bridge connecting Collarbone Plain to Breastbone Reach shuddered. With a groaning sound, its central section collapsed into the darkness. Wreathed in a cloud of dust, debris rained down, and wisps of ash rose from below.

The Greater Crossing Stronghold was ready for battle.