2067 Fragments of War (4)

Far to the south, the winds howled in the deep canyons that broke the surface of a sloping plain. Here on the femur of the dead deity, the ancient bone was covered in cracks, as if something had shattered it countless years ago.

However, there were no scarlet vines protruding from the cracks, and no jungle covering the slopes of the titanic femur. The entire place was dead and silent, bathed in the scorching radiance of the cloudy sky.

The femur stretched all the way down to the surface of the Sea of Ash, where even the Lord of Shadows did not dare step foot. It was unclear whether the tibia and fibula of the dead god were missing or simply buried in ash — no human had ever made it to the ground before, and no one was mad enough to try and find out the truth.

Currently, a battered troop of warriors was making its way across the desolate expanse of white bone, suffering in the unbearable heat. There were three Saints among them, commanding a force comprised of Ascended Knights — those who were still alive, of course. Many had perished on the way.

Sir Gilead, the Summer Knight, was walking at the head of the column. His lustrous armor was covered in dust and had lost its sheen, and his usually clean-shaven face was now covered by a short beard. His skin had turned darker with tan, and his fiercely blue eyes were squinting against the merciless radiance of the grey sky.

Raising a hand, he wiped the sweat off his brow and lingered for a moment, listening to the howling wind.

His expression darkened.

The wind had grown stronger, bringing with it a refreshing coolness. The tired knights seemed invigorated by its touch, their movements becoming livelier.

However, the Saints looked at each other somberly.

One of them — a man wearing a suit of heavy armor and a closed helmet despite the terrible heat — spoke in a hoarse voice:

"The wind is rising."

The other, a woman carrying an ornate parasol, pulled up the scarf to cover her face and sighed heavily.

Gilead lingered for a few moments, then nodded.

"It is."

He took a few more steps, then stopped and looked at the distant sky. After considering something for a few moments, Gilead continued walking.

"We will try to get to the nearest fissure in time. We might get lucky…"

By then, the knights had noticed that the wind was growing stronger, as well. Their faces paled, and a hint of subdued terror appeared in their eyes.

"Move! There is no time waste!"

After giving the command, Gilead switched from measured steps to a jog and led the conquest expedition south. The rest of them followed.

The men in the heavy armor fell backto guard the rear of the troop, while the woman carrying a parasol caught up with him.

As the wind pushed them forward with ferocious force, she said quietly:

"How many of us do you think will make it to the Citadel, Sir Gilead?"

Gilead glanced at her briefly, but did not respond.

The woman laughed bitterly.

"Is that supposed to mean that you don't know? Or that none of us will?"

He looked at her again, this time with disapproval.

"We will prevail."

She shook her head.

"You said the same when our soldiers were being slaughtered while traversing the surface of the Spine, and when we lost three cohorts on the Girdle as well. Even when we were being eaten alive in the jungle on the northern edge of the Femur, you kept telling us these words. And yes, sure… maybe we will prevail. But who will we be? A dozen survivors? A handful?"

She shook her head again.

"Sir Gilead… it is not too late to give up. We can still retreat to the waking world, carrying the knights across one at a time."

Gilead frowned and remained silent for a few moments.

"We can. But our orders were to conquer the Citadel, so we won't."

The woman moved the parasol lower, hiding her face behind it, and sighed heavily.

"Ever so loyal…"

Gilead smiled wistfully and raised a hand, shielding his face from the wind.

The members of the expedition rushed south,hoping to find shelter before it was too late… precarious as it might have been. However, luck was not on their side.

Before too long, the woman cursed and closed her parasol, afraid that its fragile frame would be broken by the powerful gale. Soon, the wind blowing from the depths of Godgrave had turned so powerful that even Masters were struggling to keep their balance, roaring as it blew across the sloping vastness of the dead god's femur.

Worse still…

Dark flakes were raining from the sky, having been brought by the wind from the distant Sea of Ash.

Knowing that there was no time anymore, Gilead stopped and gritted his teeth.

Then he commanded his soldiers in a sober tone:

"Halt. Form a circle! Defend your brothers!"

The knights moved with the flawless precision of seasoned veterans. Whatever fear they might have felt had no effect on their readiness and coordination — just a few moments later, the expedition force formed a tight circular formation, the sharp blades of their swords pointing outward like a steel palisade.

The ash continued raining from the sky, and soon, the entire world was enveloped by a grey veil. The radiance of the overcast sky dimmed, and the suffocating heat had grown even more oppressive, battering the trembling humans like a celestial hammer.

The visibility had been reduced almost to zero.

In the twilight of the ashen storm, a brilliant light suddenly shone, chasing the darkness away. Gilead, who was standing shoulder to shoulder with his knights, had assumed his Transcendent form, turning into an ethereal figure that seemed to be woven out of pure, warm sunlight.

On the other side of the circle, the man wearing a heavy suit of armor raised his mace. In the next moment, his body seemed to expand, turning into an enormous steel warrior.

The woman was standing in the center of the circle, leaning lightly on her parasol. Her scarf was fluttering in the wind, and although her face was hidden by the fabric,her green eyes were glowing in the ashen twilight like two emerald flames.

For a while, there was nothing in the grey world but the billowing clouds of swirling ash. There was no sound surrounding them but the howling of the wind.

And yet, the Knights of Valor seemed terrified, staring into the grey void with fear, despair, and wary anticipation.