2068 Fragments of War (5)

…It came unseen, without sound, and without warning.

Or maybe it had not come at all.

The warriors of the Sword Army were still aiming their swords into the grey void, fearing — hoping — to see vague silhouettes of abominable creatures rushing at them from the ash.

But just like before, there was no sign of the enemy.

Instead, a knight standing by Gilead's side had been there a moment before… but a moment later, he was gone.

Gilead had not even noticed when the man disappeared. He simply became aware of an empty space to his left, and saw that no one was standing there after turning his head.

…By the time he turned his head back, the knight who had been standing to his right was gone, too.

A stifled scream echoed in the grey void, being carried away by the wind. It was not the scream of one of the missing Masters — instead, it was the scream of one of their comrades who had noticed the missing people, and could not contain his terror.

Gilead could not blame him.

Even he, who had braved the Third Nightmare and countless battles since, felt disturbed and uneasy, utterly powerless in this grey hell.

This was the peril of getting too close to ground in Godgrave. When the wind rose, it carried clouds of ash from the sea below… and when the ash covered the world like a veil, beings who dwelled below rose to the surface, as well.

He would have hoped to face them in battle, no matter how dire such a battle would be, but from the day they reached the edges of the scarlet jungle till today, no one had even glimpsed what the harrowing enemy looked like.

They had been happy to escape the jungle at first. It was only later that Gilead realized that there was a reason why the scarlet infestation kept away from the lower reaches of the titanic femur.

Because it was too close to the Sea of Ash… and they were too, now.

Feeling angry and resentful, Gilead did the only thing he could do — continue to study the ash and remain as vigilant as he could.

…By the time the winds died down and the clouds of ash dissipated, revealing the vast expanse of sun-bleached bone once more, only half of his soldiers remained. The valiant Knights of Valor — those of them who remained — simply slumped on the ground, their faces so pale that they resembled ghosts.

Ashen.

Gilead dismissed his Transformation Ability and remained motionless for a while, counting the survivors and noting which of his comrades were gone.

Hopefully, dead… or maybe doomed to suffer a much more terrifying fate.

It was while he was counting the vanished that the woman with the parasol approached him once more, her face resting in the cool shadow.

Her green eyes were cold and somber.

"Have you reconsidered abandoning this doomed expedition, Sir Gilead?"

He stared at her for a few moments, then shook his head.

She laughed.

After a while, she asked:

"...It's you Flaw, isn't it?"

He simply raised an eyebrow.

"What exactly do you mean?"

She studied him coldly.

"Your indomitable loyalty. It is a result of your Flaw, right? That is why you serve the King so faithfully, despite despising him and his family so much."

Gilead smiled faintly and looked away.

After a while, he sighed.

"You people… are all the same."

The woman with the parasol raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

He nodded.

"None of you can imagine a world where a man stays loyal to his oaths for any reason other than having no other choice. Yes… I am loyal to the King. And yes, I have come to resent the man I am loyal to, after a while. But no, my Flaw has nothing to do with it."

Losing the smile, Gilead turned to the woman and looked at her with a somber expression.

"It is simply my choice. There are few things in this terrible world we can control — we do not choose our births, we do not choose our lives, and we rarely get to choose our deaths either. But there are still some choices that only we can make. A long time ago, I chose to be a knight of Clan Valor. That is all there is,and that is why I am loyal to the King."

The woman studied him with a hint of confusion.

"Even if the King is not worth being loyal to?"

Gilead frowned.

Why was she being so… bold? The Legacies from the vassal clans had always been less loyal to the throne than the members and retainers of Clan Valor were, true — but still, they were sufficiently steadfast and devoted to the cause. More importantly than that, they simply had no choice but to be loyal.

Because no one could defeat a Sovereign.

What had changed?

Was the pressure of the war and the mounting losses getting even to the proud Legacies? Or was this particular Legacy simply that impudent by nature?

Eventually, he shrugged.

"What does the King's character have to do with me being loyal? It's my loyalty, not his. I am the one who gave an oath, not him. If being true to a promise was predicated on how one felt about keeping it further down the road, then there wouldn't be much worth to one's word, would there?"

The woman studied him for a while, then sighed and shook his head.

"Yes... you are an icon of chivalry, Sir Gilead. A knight of whose nobility and virtue are beyond reproach. Do accept my ardent reverence and admiration. Still, what about the rest of us? It is fine if you are willing to march happily to your demise on the King's order. But must you drag us with you?"

Gilead stared at her silently for a few moments.

Then, he smiled.

"What are you talking about? Of course, I must. I mean…"

He waved his hand south and added nonchalantly:

"I can't claim the Citadel myself, since I already have one in the Sword Domain. So, I need at least one other Saint to stay alive and do it for me."

She looked at him, not amused.

"Surely, you jest."

Giland chuckled and turned away.

"Old Jest would do, considering that Rivergate was destroyed. Sadly, he is not here. But we are, so… let's get moving before the wind pick up again."

The woman sighed and hid under her parasol, mumbling something under her breath.

The rattled knights rose from the ground.

A minute later, the remains of the conquest force continued on their way south.