2073 : Fragments of War (10)

A strange and eerie scene was taking place under the radiant sky of Godgrave.

A great battle was raging above a bottomless dark chasm… yet it was utterly still and unmoving, as if frozen in place.

On the southern side of the chasm, swarms of soldiers were standing still like statues. Some stood straight, some were frozen midstep. Sweat was pouring down their pale faces, and their eyes were full of dark resignation… but none of them moved.

In front of them, the sun-bleached surface of the ancient bone was wet with blood. There had been a great bridge across the chasm once — that bridge was gone, and a new one was constructed on its ruins, looking like a marvel of military engineering.

The new bridge was held up by steel cables that had been shot over the chasm by powerful siege engines and anchored in the bone, with hastily raised scaffolds and cross-beams supporting a wide wooden floor.

That floor was now painted red, with countless bodies littering it like a macabre carpet. Many soldiers had perished while trying to hastily construct the bridge under an avalanche of arrows — the massive shields they had used to protect themselves lay there, as well, splintered and shattered by powerful enchantments and destructive Aspect Abilities of the defenders.

Many soldiers had perished while trying to cross the bridge, too. There were plenty of those who still lived, though… all of them were utterly motionless, some crouching behind shields, some standing tall. Even the wounded remained motionless, bleeding silently in the middle of a frozen battle.

The blood fell from the bridge like a crimson rain, boiling and evaporating in the blinding sunlight.

Across the bridge, a mighty fortress towered above the dark chasm. Bodies had piled under its tall walls, where the battle was the most ferocious. Despite the heavy losses, the attackers managed to raise siege ladders and attach grappling hooks to the top of the ramparts — currently, countless warriors were climbing up, desperate to take over the wall.

Or rather, they had been climbing. At the moment, they were like frozen statues, too. Soldiers were standing still on the rungs of the ladders, holding enchanted shields above their heads. Others were clinging to the ropes with desperate gazes, their tortured muscles trembling from fatigue.

And finally, there were those who had crested the wall.

Sid was among those few.

She was standing at the top of the battlement, unmoving, staring at the tip of the enemy blade that had stopped mere centimeters from her neck.

The blade was so near, but had failed to touch her skin for an entire hour.

Around her, a ferocious melee seemed to have been frozen in time. The warriors of the two great armies were entangled, fighting and dying, killing each other — only all of them were motionless, not daring to move even a centimeter.

Some were about to kill their opponents, some were about to be killed. Their eyes were shining with terror, panic, indignation, rage, bloodlust… or growing numb with numbness, desperation, and exhaustion.

But all of them remained still.

It was quite an exquisite torment, to have the executioner's axe hang above your neck , neither retreating nor falling down, without end.

…Flakes of ash were drifting in the air.

Of course, the furious battle came to a halt because the veil of clouds above the battlefield had broken, and harrowing sunlight poured down from the pristine white hell above.

The scene of frozen carnage was bathed in incandescent radiance, making the terrible slaughter seem strangely ethereal and heavenly. Of course, there was nothing beautiful about it — war was always appalling, after all, and this battle had been especially ghastly for the Sword Army.

The great army of the Sword Domain had split in two a few days earlier. A large contingent turned toward the Western First Rib — the lesser of the two Crossing Strongholds. The main body of the army, meanwhile, continued north, eventually reaching the Greater Stronghold at the precipice of the Collarbone Plain.

The Lord of Shadows was accompanying the western contingent, while both Changing Star and Sky Tide had not reached the battlefield yet. Nevertheless, the King commanded the soldier into an assault to probe the enemy's defenses.

That was how the Fire Keepers ended up participating in a large-scale battle without their lady for the first time in many years.

The elite forces of the Sword Army had stayed back at first, allowing the less experienced Awakened troops to amass and move forward to construct the bridge — it was a pragmatic decision, albeit a cruel one. The losses among the engineering corps and the soldiers that were assisting them were terrible…

Of course, the Fire Keepers were sent forward in the first wave, as well.

They were the first ones to step on the newly built bridge, too, leading the assault across its long expanse under a barrage of ranged attacks.

Perhaps without them, the assault would have ended before ever reaching the walls of the fortress. But the Fire Keepers carved a path across the chasm, allowing the soldiers of the Sword Army to advance.

The gates were too impregnable to be broken without a sufficiently powerful siege ram, which was hard to carry across the chasm until the bridge was widened and reinforced. So, the only option they had was to scale the wall and try to take it.

And they did...

But at a dire cost.

Many more soldiers died under the walls of the Greater Stronghold. And the Fire Keepers… the luck that had been on their side since the Forgotten Shore finally turned its back on the Fire Keepers, and they finally suffered their first casualties since the siege of the Crimson Spire.

Full of bitterness and resentment, Sid couldn't help but think that, perhaps, that was the real punishment the King had intended for their lady. Not just to send her away, but to send her soldiers into deadly peril while she was away.

'Curse him… curse his entire damned clan...'

But there was no time for sorrow in the middle of a deadly battle. Despite losing several people, the Fire Keepers were the first ones to scale the wall.

And it was there, when the warriors of the Sword Army were desperately trying to carve out a bridgehead on the battlements, that the veil of clouds broke, and the world became drowned by the blinding radiance.

The battle halted in an instant.

And it was frozen still, an eternity later, with only the flakes of ash moving in the still and motionless world.

Sid felt a drop of sweat roll down her face.

Then, a wounded soldier who had been crouching a few steps away let out a tired groan and swayed, blood seeping between his fingers.

The man collapsed.

…His body turned to ash before even touching the ground.

Countless people witnessed his death, but no one moved. No one reacted. No one even averted their gaze.

A moment later, the furious battlefield was utterly silent once again, with only the wind singing its indifferent song.

Sid took a shallow breath and concentrated on the blade of the sword that was mere centimeters away from her neck, ready to cut it at any moment.

'What to do?'

There was nothing to do.

All she could do was wait.