2074 : Fragments of War (11)

At the end of it all, Sid felt as if her entire being was made from ash. Her vision was blurry and her arms felt numb, the weight of her sword and her shield like that of a mountain. Everything was permeated with blinding light and the smell of ash, which fell from the sky like snow.

The terror and excitement of battle had turned into resentment, and resentment turned into resignation. Most of all, there was pain and fatigue.

'...I wouldn't mind a good massage right about now.'

The irreverent thought made her want to smile.

Of course, she didn't.

Instead, she shifted her focus from the sword hanging at her neck to the radiant distance.

The shadows were moving, and the blinding sunlight was growing dim there, far away.

The breach in the veil of clouds was finally closing.

It took Sid a few moments to realize what was happening.

Then, her dull gaze regained some of its sharpness.

'I'll be damned.'

She was not destined to become ash, after all… at least not just yet.

What happened next transpired with a torturous slowness, but also eerily fast.

The merciless white light dimmed, and the frozen battle thawed, exploding into a demented symphony of violence almost instantly once again.

It was as if no time had passed at all.

Far away, on the other side of the chasm, the soldiers staggered and continued marching toward the bridge. Those on the bridge pushed forward, desperate to reach the walls of the fortress before its defenders renewed the deadly barrage — it was a futile hope, of course, because a dense cloud of arrows rose into the sky just a split moment later. The arrows rained down, reaping dozens of lives.

The soldiers who had been climbing the wall moved, too. Some simply released their hold on the ropes and plummeted down, too tired and spent to do anything else. Some swayed but stubbornly continued to climb, knowing that nothing but death awaited for them on the ground.

Nothing but death awaited for them atop the wall, too.

Sid knew it better than most.

As soon as the radiance of the white abyss dimmed, her opponent thrust the sword forward. The momentum of his initial swing had been exhausted, but the blade was sharp enough to cut her throat even without much force behind it.

The bastard did not hesitate at all.

…She didn't hesitate, either.

Sid had been given plenty of time to consider her next move, after all.

Activating her Awakened Ability, Sid hardened her body for a few moments. The enemy sword produced a jarring scraping sound as it traveled across her skin, unable to cut it — in the next moment, Sid activated her Dormant Ability and slammed her shield into the enemy's chest, sending him flying back like a rag doll.

The blow was not powerful enough to break a Master, but it did toss him over the edge of the battlements. The man plummeted down with a shriek, disappearing from view. The walls of the fortress were tall, so it was unclear whether he would survive the fall or not.

Sid did not care either way. She had other matters to worry about…

There were plenty more enemies around her, all wishing to tear her apart. Too many, even — the situation was quite desperate.

Despite the fact that the Fire Keepers had managed to crest the wall and clear a path up for the soldiers of the Sword Army, their position was highly precarious. There were several hundred warriors of the Sword Domain on the battlements now… but there were tens of thousands of enemies they had to contend against.

Their chances did not look too good.

Blocking a barrage of blows and moving nimbly between the enemies, Sid slashed and pierced with her sword. A few moments later, she found herself side by side with Shim, the field leader of the Fire Keepers, and pressed her back against his.

Both of them were breathing heavily, utterly exhausted after having stormed the bridge, scaled the wall, and endured the Cloudbreak on top of that. Their armor was battered and painted red by blood, and their faces were deathly pale.

Their eyes were calm and cold, though, devoid of even a hint of panic.

Sid grinned.

"Hey, Shim… this is pretty bad, huh?"

They separated to deal with their enemies, then moved closer to guard each other's backs once again.

He let out an indifferent sigh.

"...It's less than ideal, true."

At that moment, a Master from one of the vassal Legacy clans of Song lunged at the nonchalant healer from the mass of enemy soldiers. Shim became preoccupied, while Sid had to deal with a swarm of Awakened soldiers aiming to bleed her to death.

Soon enough, surrounded by the stench of blood, the two of them found each other once again.

Sid was staring at her shoulder, which was pierced by an enemy arrow. Usually, she would have been able to dodge or deflect it, but this time, the archer had turned out to be unusually skilled. Not only did the arrow find a crack in her armor, but it had also been shot at the precise moment when she could not do anything to avoid being hit.

More than that, the arrow seemed to possess a peculiar enchantment that made it weigh hundreds of kilograms. Sid was barely able to withstand the burden, and she had to drop her shield.

If there was one mercy, it was that she was still alive. With how skilled the archer was, it would not have been hard for them to sink the arrow into her eye.

'Lucky me...'

Sid grimaced, then gritted her teeth and grabbed the arrow, trying to pull it from her flesh. Of course, the arrowhead had turned out to be barbed, which made for some truly exquisite pain.

She cursed quietly.

"I can't tell if we're gaining ground or being pushed back."

Shim scoffed.

"We are being pushed back, of course. It's hopeless. We were never going to take the wall this way."

Finally managing to rid herself of the heavy burden of the enchanted arrow, Sid glanced at him darkly.

"What the hell are we doing here, then?"

He shrugged.

"Waiting for them to sound the retreat. They'll do it once more of us die."

Sid was speechless for a moment, then shook her head dejectedly.

"Let's wait, then. Bah, what a dreadful day…"

They lunged back into the battle, struggling desperately against the endless tide of Song soldiers.

The warriors of the Sword Domain continued to climb the wall, and continued to die. Slowly but surely, they were pushed back to the ladders, finding themselves on the verge of being thrown down.

'When are they going to sound the damned horn?'

Sid was bleeding, in pain, and tired.

All of them were.

But the order to retreat was still not coming.

She sighed.

'Ah... I really hate sieges...'