2075 : Fragments of War (12)

From afar, the great fortress of Song looked like a disturbed anthill. Countless tiny figures were swarming its walls — some climbing them, some falling down. The approach to the fortress was covered by a dark mass of moving bodies, with arrows falling down like rain.

Of course, these dark figures were not ants. They were humans, and human lives were being lost every moment.

Anvil of Valor was once again observing the battle from the platform on the head of a towering Echo, accompanied by the Saints of the Sword Domain. Only, this time, Nephis of the Immortal Flame was not here to defy him… so, everyone remained still, observing the distant battle in grim silence.

The Greater Crossing Stronghold was refusing to fall.

The terrain was too disadvantageous, and the fortress was too impregnable. The valor of its defenders was beyond reproach. Of course, this first attack on the fearsome fortifications of the Song Army was merely meant to probe their defenses… but still. It was a troubling sight.

By then, it was already apparent that the costly assault would not succeed.

Anvil studied the distant fortress for a few more moments, then turned his head and looked at Cassie. The blind seer was standing closer than any other Saint to him, almost as if she was the sole recipient of the King's favor.

He spoke:

"Lady Cassia… how are things advancing in the west?"

She lowered her head a little.

"It is worse than here, Your Majesty. The Lesser Stronghold still stands… they managed to bring down the bridge, as well. Our casualties are severe, and no one managed to even reach the walls."

Her voice was respectful and neutral… not at all brimming with anger, hatred, and resentment.

He studied her for a few moments, then looked away with a somber expression.

Anvil remained silent for a while longer, then let out a sigh.

"...Sound the retreat."

Soon, the deafening sound of a war horn thundered above the dark chasm. The distant anthill exploded with activity as the battered soldiers of the Sword Army abandoned the walls of the fortress and slowly fell back. Of course, the retreat was just as bloody as the initial assault… not the least of all because those killed on the bridge had already risen, attacking their former comrades from the rear.

Nevertheless, in the end, the warriors of the Sword Domain managed to cross back. The bridge was destroyed just a few moments later and plummeted into the chasm.

The battlefield grew silent.

…The Song Army had lost many soldiers, as well, but its numbers were now greater than before. That was because those who had died trying to scale the walls of the fortress were now standing at the edge of the chasm, staring across its dark breadth with empty eyes.

Anvil frowned.

A few moments later, he said evenly:

"We will establish three bridges next time and attack the wings of the fortress, as well. Summon the leader of the engineering corps… the design worked, but we must study how the bridge at the Lesser Crossing was brought down to further improve it…"

Bowing silently, Cassie turned around and left the platform.

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On the other side of the chasm, Seishan was looking at the distant mass of the Sword Army from the tallest bastion of the great fortress. Her flawless grey skin was marred by stains of soot from the falling flakes of ash, and her scarlet lips were twisted slightly into a grim smile.

Soon enough, Beastmaster joined her.

"According to the initial report, our casualties are mild — unlike the Sword Army. They made it further than expected, but that just ended up costing them more men. Of course, the King of Valor was not serious this time… still, it's a good indicator."

Seishan nodded slowly.

"They'll probably launch several bridges at the same time, next time. They'll send the Knights of Valor into the battle, too… possibly assemble a squadron of elites trained at riding winged Echoes. I hope your herd of flying thralls is ready."

Beastmaster nodded.

"Of course."

Seishan lingered for a few moments, then sighed.

"They won't launch another assault before Sky Tide and Changing Star arrive, though. Those thralls will be necessary to repel the attack from the Ivory Island… our forces will be spread thin. It might get difficult."

The beautiful enchantress looked at the horizon, as if expecting to see the graceful silhouette of the Ivory Tower appearing over the horizon.

Then, she shook her head.

"That is only the lesser problem, isn't it? The main problem is Changing Star herself. Before, both our mother and the King of Valor held us Saints back out of fear that we would kill each other off. But now, everyone knows that a battle between Saints would become a one-sided slaughter due to that girl, Nephis, and her Shadow. So, Anvil can simply set her loose."

Seishan shrugged.

"He can, and she would probably be able to demolish this entire fortress by herself. The Lord of Shadows, meanwhile, is more than capable of taking the Lesser Stronghold from Howl, Hel, and Silence. But then nothing would stop us from eviscerating their entire Awakened army while those two are busy. So, he won't."

Beastmaster studied her for a few moments, then mumbled under her breath:

"Demolish this entire fortress by herself… aren't you giving her too much credit? I spent a lot of effort building this stronghold, you know."

Seishan looked at her without any amusement.

"You were there when Mordret told mother about what he had experienced in the Third Nightmare, were you not? Nephis obliterated an entire city there, not to mention incinerating half of another. And she was merely a Master back then… so, don't underestimate her Aspect."

Beastmaster made an unhappy face and looked away.

"Fine. What do we do, then?"

After lingering for a while, Seishan shrugged.

"Treat the wounded, equip mother's puppets with weapons and armor, and prepare for the next assault as best we can. We'll see what happens then."

Soon, they left the tall bastion.

The first siege of the Greater Stronghold was over.

But not at all the last…