2077 Fragments of War (14)

The Sword Army had crashed against the Two Crossings like a tidal wave.

And just like a wave, it had receded over and over again, unable to break through the impregnable barrier. Even the arrival of the Ivory Island did not manage to breach the defenses of the entrenched Song Army — at least not yet. The death toll among the defenders increased sharply, and each assault now cost them more.

But the losses among the attackers were no less dire.

The siege had become a stalemate. Countless soldiers on both sides were dying, and the casualties were mounting. And yet, neither side could crush the enemy... the situation simply continued to escalate endlessly, making it feel as if a breaking point would arrive soon.

Those soldiers who were lucky enough to survive were being forged into truly dauntless warriors. The war was like a crucible that produced the toughest of alloys, but rigid steel could be easily broken.

Everyone had a limit, and many people were approaching theirs.

Rain did not know what was happening in the camp of the Sword Army, but here in the Greater Stronghold, the mood of the soldiers was hitting rock bottom. Even though they were suffering less than the poor wretches who had to assault the walls of the fortress under a rain of arrows, they still suffered terribly. People were dying, and people were receiving terrible wounds.

There were not enough Awakened healers to tend to everyone, so many of the wounded could only receive mundane treatment. The field hospital of the Song Army was struggling to contend with the influx of patients, its overcrowded halls permeated by the stench of blood and despair.

Rain knew because she volunteered as a nurse at the hospital when she had free time. It wasn't just out of the goodness of her heart, but also because she felt bitterly useless. She was not a very good soldier anymore, after all, considering her inability to deal fatal wounds to enemies… even if those enemies were in the process of brutally killing her comrades.

So, Rain wanted to be of use to her fellow soldiers in some other way. There were a lot of things to do in an army as large as the Song Army was for it to function properly, many of them having nothing to do with combat. She was not ready to ask Tamar for an official transfer — which her friend would without a doubt arrange if need be — because she wasn't quite ready to abandon her cohort. But sparing a few hours doing menial jobs here and there was fine.

The field hospital was like a pit of resignation and despair.

...It wasn't much better in other parts of the fortress, either.

Morale was low, and soldiers were exhausted — both mentally and physically. To their desperation, there did not seem to be an end to the dreadful siege anywhere in sight. It just continued day after day, while the enemy was learning from each failed assault and employing increasingly effective strategies the next time.

Of course, the soldiers of the Song Army were learning, too. They had gotten much better at damaging the makeshift bridges, preventing the soldiers of the Sword Army from raising siege ladders, defending themselves against the shock troopers who dropped onto the battlefield from the Ivory Island, and so much more.

Each lesson was paid for in blood.

The remains of Tamar's centuria had been merged with another company and assigned a wooden barrack. The soldiers rested there between the battles, which happened once every few days — the last one had been especially terrible, so everyone was slow to recover their vitality.

As if they could recover it at all.

Rain entered the barrack and looked around, studying her fellow soldiers.

Some were huddled together in the corner, playing cards. The game was supposed to be boisterous and energetic, but looked mechanical and joyless instead.

Some were tending to their equipment or bandaging minor scrapes. Their gazes were bleak and distant.

Most were simply laying on their cots, though, unable to fall asleep, but also too drained to do anything else. They just stared at the ceiling with hollow eyes, indifferent to what was happening around them.

At least their barrack was better off than most. Tamar had a cooling Memory in her arsenal, so it was not as hot as it would have been otherwise… Rain should have been able to enjoy the reprieve from the sweltering heat, but she found herself indifferent to such minor comforts these days..

Walking over to her bunk, she dismissed the leather elements of the Puppeteer's Shroud and fell on it heavily. Luckily, her bunk was the lower one — well, of course it was. After all, Rain could not walk on air like Tamar.

Fleur, who had been recovering from essence exhaustion, glanced at her from the next bunk in the row. The delicate girl remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"Rani… were you at the baths?"

Rain nodded.

"Yeah. I heard that the attacks on the supply convoys had stopped, so they're not rationing water as strictly now. It's a nice change of pace."

A fragile smile appeared on Fleur's face.

"You're so calm."

Rain looked at her in confusion.

"Me, calm? Goodness. You must have confused me for someone else."

Fleur shook her head weakly.

"No… I can't even muster enough motivation to get up. The rest are pretty much the same. But you just go about your routine like usual."

Rain hesitated for a bit, then shrugged.

"It's just a habit, I guess. Back in Ravenheart, I used to reward myself with a good soak in the baths after a hunt — they have proper facilities back home, of course, not just makeshift showers. But still. It feels nice to do the same after a battle."

Fleur smiled a little wider, then looked away.

After a while, she asked:

"Do you think we'll get to return? Home?"

Rain sprawled on her bunk and sighed.

"Sure. When the war is over."

Hearing that, a soldier laying a few meters away turned his head, stared at her, and then scoffed.

"Fool… we will all be dead by the time this damn war is over."

She stared at him coldly, not at all happy that her attempt to cheer Fleur up had been thwarted.

But also not really knowing how to retort.

'That idiot…'

There was some merit to his words.

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"What are you…"

But the soldier interrupted her mid-sentence.

"What is even the point of the war? It doesn't make sense. That bastard, the King of Swords, claimed that it was on behalf of Changing Star, who had almost died at the hands of Song assassins. But Lady Nephis herself was against the war, to begin with! She still is. It's just the royals who are thirsty for blood."

Another soldier glared at him darkly.

"What the hell are you even saying? There is no way that those assassins were from the Song Domain. It was just an excuse Clan Valor used to start the war. So what was the Queen supposed to do? Roll over and allow those bastards to plunder our land? It's not like she wanted this to happen!"

The first soldier remained silent for a few moments, then scoffed.

"I don't know whether she wanted the war to happen or not. All I know is that the Sovereigns started it, and yet it is us puny mortals who are dying in it. If they want to fight so badly, why don't they fight among themselves? What's the point of bleeding us dry instead?"

Turning his head, he stared at Rain.

"What do you think, Rani? Does any of this make any sense?"

She lingered for a bit, then sighed.

"Is that how the rest of you feel, as well?"

A few soldiers grumbled. The rest did not respond, simply looking at her with dark, tired expressions.

Rain shook her head.

"What I think… is that you should keep your mouths shut. This is a royal legion. It's alright if Tamar hears you, but if one of the Blood Sisters happens to be nearby when you spout such things, there's gonna be trouble."

Morale was that bad in one of the seven royal legions. She didn't even want to imagine how other brigades were faring.

Looking at the ceiling, Rain sighed heavily.

'...What will become of the Song Domain?'

It was hard to remain hopeful.

Or sympathetic, really... many people just wanted for the war to be over, secretly losing interest in which side won, or even if there was a winner at all. But the war showed no sign of slowing down.

It only ever seemed to accelerate.

Were they really going to all die here?

The belligerent soldier cursed with dark resentment.

"What, I can't even talk now? Great. That's great! They expect us to just die silently, I guess... how are we different from the pilgrims, then?"

That was a good question.

Were they any different, really?

Letting out a dispirited sneer, the soldier turned away and covered himself with a blanket. Rain stared at his vague silhouette with pity.

'That fool. He's going to cook alive under that blanket.'

Tamar's cooling Memory was great, but it wasn't that great.

The rest of the soldiers listened to her advice and dropped the topic.

She could see it in their eyes, though…

Dejection.

They were brave people, and they were ready to die in order to protect their home.

But there was a difference between dying for a good cause and dying senselessly.

And this war…

Was making less and less sense with each day.