2080 Fragments of War (17)

Just like the children of the King of Swords were locked in a bloody stalemate, so were the two great armies.

Both the Greater and the Lesser Strongholds were refusing to fall. Despite the terrible battles that raged above the dark chasms, the Song Army stubbornly held out.

Ash and blood covered the pristine surface of the sun-bleached bone. The toll of human lives was appalling, and worst of all, the deaths of countless soldiers felt senseless — neither side had managed to gain a decisive advantage, after all, and it did not seem like that would change any time soon.

Something had to break the dreadful stalemate. The ashen-faced soldiers felt a strange tension permeate the air, as if a sudden change was coming… or maybe it was just what they hoped for.

Most people believed that the two great armies would unleash their Saints soon, changing the very nature of the siege and heralding in the final act of the harrowing war.

Sunny expected that kind of escalation, too. After all, the King of Swords, callous as he was, was also not a madman who enjoyed wasting the lives of his soldiers — each of the failed assaults on the Two Crossings had been an earnest attempt to conquer them, but now that these attempts were proving to be futile, he would have to employ a different strategy.

That was why Sunny was not surprised to receive a special order. The order was summoning him to have an audience with the King — the other Saints would probably be receiving the same summons, as well. He believed that they would be sent into the fray as a result.

If there was one strange thing about the summons, it was the location. Surprisingly, Sunny was not being called to the camp of the northern contingent of the Sword Army, where the King of Swords was supposed to be residing at the moment. It was not even the Ivory Island, which hovered above that camp.

Instead, he was being summoned to Vanishing Lake — the Citadel in the Hollows that Sunny and Nephis had conquered.

Leaving the camp of the eastern contingent of the Sword Army, Sunny traveled swiftly across the Breastbone Reach. The dire and untamed land he had once settled as the Lord of Shadows was now completely transformed.

The abominable jungle still sprawled in the hollows, but here on the surface, the scarlet infestation was no more. There was no endless sea of monstrous trees in sight, no impenetrable tangle of the vermilion vines, no red moss covering the white bone. There were no Nightmare Creatures prowling to devour prey, and no swarms of malignant vermin buzzing in the air.

Instead, the vast reaches of Godgrave was clear and pristine, with human outposts dotted here and there around the fissures in the ancient bone. There were established routes, soldiers patrolling the bone plain, and supply caravans moving across its expanse to deliver supplies.

There were even specially constructed wooden shelters raised along the routes to help the travelers wait out potential cloudbreaks in safety.

…It almost seemed like civilization.

Gliding across the vast expanse of pristine bone as a swift shadow, Sunny felt a strange sense of alienation from its unrecognizable expanse. It was a little eerie to see how drastically Godgrave had been changed by the passage of time, but also a little encouraging.

Most of all, it was full of irony. After all, this progress had only been made possible by the demands of war.

Perhaps it was no wonder that out of all the Divine Realms, the waking world seemed to have walked the path of progress the furthest.

No matter how Sunny felt about the changes that had happened to Godgrave, though, he was welcomed by a familiar sight after reaching the secondary camp of the Sword Army near the great fissure and descending into the Hollows.

There, the chilling horrors of Godgrave remained unchanged.

…Mostly.

Even the ancient, abominable jungle of the Hollows had been tamed a little — enough, at least, to establish a relatively safe pathway from the fissure to Vanishing Lake. The lake itself had been secured by the forces of the Sword Domain, as well, establishing a safe area around the Citadel.

That was only possible because the King himself had taken action, of course.

Sunny reached the charred ruins of the ancient temple without wasting any time. There, one of the Knights stationed at the Citadel guided him to a spacious underground chamber where a few other Saints were already gathered, standing around a large table with a detailed map of Godgrave.

Their faces were familiar.

Cassie was there, as well as old Saint Jest of the Dagonet clan. There was also Saint Helie, Roan of White Feather, and Rivalen of Aegis Rose… the same people who had conquered the Citadel a few months ago.

However, it was much more curious to see who wasn't there — which included the rest of the Sword Saints, and most glaringly Nephis herself.

Sunny, of course, was aware that she had not been summoned to Vanishing Lake already. After all, he was with her on the Ivory Island at that very moment.

Glancing at Cassie from behind his mask, Sunny nodded at the gathered Saints and ignored their greetings, finding a dark corner to lean on the wall nonchalantly.

[What is going on?]

Cassie, in turn, showed no outward sign of receiving his mental message.

[I am not sure. However… I think the King has some questions for you.]

After hesitating for a few moments, Sunny discreetly switched Weaver's Mask to [Definitely Not Me]. He had a feeling that only being able to lie would not work for him today.

Just as he did, the doors opened, and the familiar cold pressure descended upon them. Anvil walked into the room, his vermilion cloak fluttering behind him like a stream of blood, and approached the table with measured steps.

His heavy suit of black armor was crafted so finely that it made no noise at all.

Glancing at the map, the King of Swords turned to the dark corner where Sunny was skulking and said in an indifferent tone:

"Lord Shadow. I summoned you here because you possess the most knowledge about the Hollows among us. Take a glance at the map."

With a sigh, Sunny separated from the wall and approached the table.

The map on the table depicted Godgrave. It was quite a splendid feat of cartography, in fact, considering that it showed both the surface of the titanic skeleton and the complicated terrain of the Hollows — those parts of them that had been explored by the Sword Army, at least.

Vanishing Lake was situated in the central part of the great hollow beneath the Breastbone Reach, closer to its eastern side.

Anvil pointed to it, then moved his finger north-west.

"I want you to draw the optimal path to the Western First Rib."