2081 Fragments of War (18)

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

Western First Rib… was a place that held great significance to the war, at the moment.

That was, of course, because it was where the lesser of the Two Crossings was located.

There were two paths to the West Collarbone Plain — the last bastion of the Song Army in Godgrave — from the Breastbone Reach, which was now controlled entirely by the King of Swords.

The one in the north connected the titanic breastbone directly to the right collarbone of the dead deity, and was called the Greater Stronghold. However, there was a second path further south, via the right first rib. That was where the Lesser Stronghold was located, and where Sunny had spent the last few weeks.

He studied the King of Swords for a few moments.

Why would Anvil want to go there through the Hollows? It seemed like a futile endeavor. Unless…

Sunny spoke evenly:

"The optimal path depends on who is meant to walk it."

His impassive voice resounded in the underground chamber like a sinister promise.

Anvil answered him calmly:

"Saints first. Then, after a safe pathway is cleared, Awakened soldiers. Large numbers of them."

That… could only mean one thing.

'...Crazy.'

Sunny suppressed the desire to shake his head in bewilderment.

He had expected that the King of Swords would send his Saints into battle to prevent the senseless loss of life among the Awakened soldiers — the Saints of the Sword Army had already proven their superiority, after all. And although each of them was more valuable to the power of the Sovereign than countless warriors of lesser Ranks, continuing the siege seemed pointless otherwise.

However, Anvil had a different plan.

He seemed to want to march the Awakened soldiers across the Hollows, cross from the breastbone of the dead deity to the titanic first rib beneath the surface, and bypass the Lesses Stronghold entirely — perhaps to attack it from the rear, perhaps to invade West Collarbone Plain directly.

It was a daring maneuver, and one that could work… if not for the fact that marching Awakened warriors through the Hollows was similar to giving them a death sentence. The Hollows were just too dangerous for anyone weaker than a Saint to survive.

No, even Saints could easily die here.

On the other hand… it was not entirely impossible. After all, Seishan had led her entire expedition force below the surface to conquer the Collarbone Citadel. However, she had done it out of necessity, having been left with no other choice. Even then, too many of Rain's comrades had perished during the relatively short march to the Citadel.

The great Hollow beneath the Breastbone Reach was much more vast, and much more dangerous as well. Worse than that, the distance between Vanishing Lake and the potential crossing to the First Rib was many times greater than what Seishan and her soldiers had traversed.

However…

Anvil had not asked Sunny to list all the reasons why this idea was crazy. He had simply asked him to point out the best possible route.

Crazy plans worked, sometimes. Sunny, of all people, had no right to say otherwise.

It was just that he had to, this time.

He sighed, then shook his head.

"It won't work."

The King of Swords simply considered him in silence.

Eventually, it was Jest who spoke, chuckling quietly.

"Goodness gracious, is the indomitable Lord of Shadows actually wary of something?"

Sunny stared at him from behind his mask for a few moments, then spoke impassively:

"I am. We can cleave through the jungle, slaughter the ancient horrors populating it, and even eradicate the Great Nightmare Creatures that haunt this land. However, the problem lies here."

He pointed to a particular point on the map — one that did not lay directly in the path leading to the Western First Rib, but was somewhat close to it.

"Here, the jungle hides the ruins of a sprawling city. I've been to these ruins once, and had to escape. They are guarded by a swarm of especially lethal Great abominations — not just solitary predators, but a small army of them."

His words caused a heavy silence to settle in the chamber. Over the months of fighting in Godgrave, the Saints of both armies had somewhat grown used to the idea of facing Great Nightmare Creatures in battle. Rare as encounters with such terrifying beings had been in the past, they were not something that Transcendent warriors of humanity could not win.

But fighting a group of Great Nightmare Creatures, let alone a large one, still seemed like outright suicide.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Much worse than that, they are able to exist as a group because these Great abominations are not independent beings. Instead, they serve a Cursed Tyrant… whose name is Condemnation. Condemnation dwells in the ruins, and its sphere of influence overlaps with any viable route to the First Rib."

The already heavy silence had turned grave.

Until it was broken by Saint Jest, who chuckled once again. Only, this time, his chuckle seemed a little nervous.

"Condemnation, is it? Why, there's definitely a dirty joke somewhere here. Well, maybe joke is too strong of a word… but a dirty pun, definitely!"

He opened his mouth to share said pun, but grew quiet after Anvil glanced at him without any amusement.

The old man coughed.

"Or, you know, maybe there isn't. For once."

The King of Swords looked away from Jest and turned his heavy attention back to Sunny.

"There is no other route?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"There are ones that are much longer. They would take us into the hunting grounds of other Cursed Ones, though… perhaps not as terrifying as Condemnation, but the added length of the journey would make up for the difference."

Anvil looked at the map calmly.

"A Cursed Tyrant…"

He remained silent for a while, and then shrugged indifferently.

"Then we will kill Condemnation."

Sensing the shock his words caused to the gathered Saints, he looked at them calmly.

"I will lead the subjugation force myself. And cut this creature down myself, as well."