2094 Fragments of War (31)

The motionless Nightmare Creatures around them were not dead…

However, they weren't really alive, either.

There was no vile darkness permeating their souls anymore, because the dead had no souls. But there was something.

A strange, almost imperceptible impression of foreign essence hidden deep within the towering carcasses, binding them like puppeteer's strings.

Sunny felt a cold chill run down his spine.

'These are… Queen's pilgrims.'

The siege of the Greater Crossing was such a bloody and arduous endeavor for many reasons, and the fearsome fortifications built by the Song Army on the other side of the chasm was merely one of them.

Terrain was another, but just as importantly, it was the issue of Domain boundaries.

The Sword Domain and the Song Domain were clashing above the dark chasm, just like the two great armies were. Anvil controlled one side of the crossing, while Ki Song controlled the other — as a result, the attacking soldiers had to leave the support of their King behind and enter the hostile Domain when assaulting the Song stronghold.

The defenders, in turn, could not freely counterattack the camp of the Sword Army, because they would have to leave the Song Domain to do so.

It was the reason why the soldiers of the Sword Army could give their fallen comrades a proper burial here in the camp instead of having to destroy the bodies immediately, and why there were not that many guards watching over the field hospital.

The Queen could not raise the dead outside the boundary of her Domain. She could not even send her pilgrims across the chasm…

Only, as it turned out, she could.

Sunny looked at the carcasses of the Nightmare Creature while hiding his apprehension.

'How the hell…'

Some of these abominations had been slain in the Hollows, while most were either Beastmaster's thralls or ash dwellers.

Or so everyone had thought.

But it was clear to Sunny now that it had all been a ploy. All Nightmare Creatures around him, except those from the Hollows, had not been slain by the soldiers of the Sword Army.

Instead, they had been slain by the enemy, raised as puppets, sent across the chasm, and then commanded to play dead after sustaining enough damage to make their supposed deaths look believable.

And now, they were all here, in the heart of the Sword Army camp, waiting… for something. While no one was the wiser.

'Which bastards?!'

For a moment, Sunny felt a searing anger. Sure… it was hard to distinguish a pilgrim from a dead body. They were genuinely dead, after all. But somebody, at least, had to note that the Spell did not announce the kill after delivering a supposedly fatal blow to these creatures.

Granted, the battlefield was a terrible and hectic place, so most soldiers did not pay a lot of attention to the whispers of the Spell during the dreadful clashes with the enemy.

'What now, then?'

Trying to maintain a polite exterior, Sunny tensed inwardly.

He felt more annoyed than troubled, but it was still an issue.

Master Sunless was supposed to be weak and harmless, so he could at best raise the alarm and reveal the insidious infiltration… but then he would have to explain how he was able to detect something that so many other people had missed.

And Sunny really did not wish to share the fact that his eyes had inherited wondrous abilities from Weaver, the Demon of Fate.

'That is not even the real problem.'

The real problem was the intention of the Queen.

Sure, a bunch of powerful pilgrims could deal some damage if they went on a rampage in the depths of the enemy camp. But in the grand scheme of things, that damage would be insignificant.

So why had she gone to such lengths to deliver her puppets to the material storage of the Sword Army?

The answer was right in front of Sunny.

It was Saint Tyris.

She said that she had been coming here regularly in search of suitable materials to armor the flying Echoes. So, her presence here was predictable, and could be exploited.

The pilgrims had not been sent here to sabotage the camp of the Sword Army.

They had been sent here to kill Sky Tide.

...Sunny had just stumbled into an assassination plot.

Which was why he had to get her out immediately — while preserving his facade of a harmless and unassuming Master Sunless.

'Wonderful.'

Noticing a hint of hesitation in Sky Tide's eyes, Sunny put on his most charming smile and said pleasantly:

"I will be happy to give you a private tour of my collection, Lady Tyris. I am sure we can discover something… worthwhile, together."

He had no idea when the pilgrims were going to attack, so there was no time to waste. Saint Tyris already expressed that her search here in the material storage had been fruitless — so, hopefully, she would take him up on his offer.

…However, to Sunny's astonishment, the reaction to his highly pragmatic suggestion was not at all what he expected.

One of the Knights of Valor standing behind Saint Tyris glared at him with contempt, and then uttered quietly through gritted teeth:

"Despicable…"

Another shook his head.

"Damn womanizer."

Hearing those words, the warriors of the White Feather clan pierced him with furious gazes and whispered among each other:

"So he wants to give our lady a private tour, huh?"

"So the rumors are true… he really is that kind of scumbag."

"I told you I saw him bothering Lady Cassia while Changing Star's was away. Ah, I really want to erase that sleazy smile off his face..."

Sunny's eyes widened.

Sky Tide's gaze, meanwhile, turned even colder than usual.

He shuddered.

"N—no… I did not mean…"

However, Sunny did not get the opportunity to finish the sentence.

Because at that moment, the pilgrims moved.

All he could do was send a mental cry to Cassie:

[Cassie! Get Nephis to the material storage in the northern camp, now!]

In the next moment, Saint Tyris shifted her gaze past him, her strange vertical pupils turning into two narrow stills.

Then, reaching forward, she grabbed Sunny by the shoulder and pulled him back.

Something crashed into the wooden floor behind him, sending splinters flying in all directions.

Sky Tide shielded Sunny from the enemy and barked:

"Ascended Sunless, escape immediately! The rest of you, prepare for battle!"

Her retinue was slow to react, still failing to understand what was happening.

But the carcasses of powerful Nightmare Creatures all around them were already moving, rising from the ground to launch an attack.

Sunny's eyes widened, and he grew pale as a ghost.

As the pilgrims lunged at Sky Tide and her bodyguards from all sides…

He fumbled for a moment, then took off running.

Sadly, in his panic, Sunny ran in the wrong direction.

Worse than that, he even managed to trip over his own feet…

And collided with Saint Tyris, sending them both flying to the ground.

Just as they landed on the wooden floor, Sunny finding himself laying atop the dazed Saint, something dark and incredibly sharp whistled above his head.

"Oh, oh gods! S—sorry!"

He awkwardly tried to extricate himself from the matriarch of the White Feather clan, but was thrown back down when something crashed into his back.

"Aargh!"

Luckily, the blow did not seem to be too powerful… the clumsy enchanter remained alive, at least. There was some blood flowing out of the wound, but not a lot of it.

Saint Tyris caught Sunny before he could fall on her… again… and unceremoniously tossed him aside, in the direction of the butchery — where there were no moving Nightmare Creatures, and he therefore had the best chance to survive.

Her sword had finally manifested itself into reality, so she instantly slashed at the giant claw flying at her, and severed it from the chitinous limb.

Her bodyguards were already holding their weapons, as well, throwing themselves into the fight.

Sadly, they were hopelessly outnumbered, and caught by surprise on top of that.

But Sunny had finished summoning a Memory too

To the surprise of those who could see him, it was not a sword, a spear, or a weapon of any kind.

Instead, it was a beautiful silver bell.

Laying on the floor, the enchanter raised a hand and rang the bell with a horrified expression on his handsome face.

…In the next moment, the roof of the material storage exploded, and a radiant figure plummeted into the mass of abominations like a star, surrounded by a whirlwind of white flames.

Soon after that, Knights of Valor flooded through the gate of the warehouse, having followed the mysterious, melodious ringing.

The battle was fierce, but short.

Before too long, the pilgrims of the Queen that had infiltrated the camp were completely obliterated.

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By the end of the day, a stunning rumor spread throughout the great army of the Sword Domain.

The Queen of Worms had sent assassins to eliminate Sky Tide of White Feather… and they came dangerously close to succeeding in their vile task.

Luckily, Changing Star arrived in the nick of time to rescue Saint Tyris.

That was not the most astonishing part, though…

The most astonishing part was that the assassins only failed because of a young enchanter who had happened to be near Sky Tide at the time.

According to the workers who had witnessed the scene, Master Sunless — the Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers and an infamous playboy — bravely threw himself between Saint Tyris and the attacking Nightmare Creatures, shielding her with his own body from a rain of deadly blows.

His flesh was pierced, and his blood was spilled, but thanks to that, Sky Tide remained unscathed.

More than that, even while bleeding to death, the enchanter managed to raise the alarm — which was why everyone in the northern siege camp heard the melodious ringing of a bell, and why Lady Nephis managed to arrive on time.

The soldiers shuddered at the thought of what would have happened if the brave enchanter had not been there.

The loss of Saint Tyris would have been a devastating blow to the entire army. After all, it was only thanks to her that the soldiers could fight without fearing turning to ash under the merciless light of the incandescent white sky.

"Damn… I was wrong about that Sir Sunless."

"You know, it takes a rare kind of man to shield a stranger from death with his own body."

"Anyone can die uselessly, you fool… it's the fact that he managed to call for help and saved everyone that is impressive. That's a Knight Commander for you."

"I hope that mongrel is alright. Well, of course he is — Lady Nephis was there, after all."

"Oh, yes. I heard she had healed him moments before he passed away… also that the enchanted bell was her gift to him, and that she comes running every time he rings it... lucky bastard!"

The rumors continued to spread, growing more and more exaggerated with each retelling.

And that…

Was how Sunny became a hero of the Sword Army.