2005. Strength in Numbers

“...Who will stop me?”

This simple sentence that Nephis had spoken hid many meanings and carried plenty of weight.

Although very few people knew her well enough to understand the true burden of these words, they were a proclamation of who she was – and how unyielding her will was, as well. It was her defiant challenge to the world, calling the world to come and try to stop her... if it dared.

But, at the same time, there was a far more obvious meaning to what Nephs had said.

First, she was hinting that Seishan and the Saints of Song had no choice but to fight her – because once Nephis entered the battle and unleashed her flames upon the Song Army, only they would be able to contend against her.

At the same time, she was also telling Seishan something else. It was that no one could prevent her from entering the battle... except for two people.

Anvil of Valor and Ki Song, the Sovereigns of humanity.

By joining the battle, Nephis was going directly against their will. However, she was so powerful that no one except for the person who had given the order or his adversary could punish her for breaking it.

That would require the Sovereigns to interfere personally, though, thus escalating the battle even further and inevitably resulting in a direct clash between them – because if one of them moved, the other would not remain still.

The two Supremes, however, were not willing to fight each other just yet.

It was that even if there was someone who could stop her, there was no one who would.

That she could break the will of the Sovereigns with impunity, and nobody could do anything about it.

...It was a powerful message to send.

But not an unwelcome one, as far as Seishan was concerned – for one simple reason.

It was that what Nephis had proposed – stop the bloodshed and decide the outcome of the battle with a clash between only the Saints of both armies – favored the Song Domain greatly.

There were many more Saints in the Song Army, after all.

They had already held an advantage in that regard at the very start of the war, and their advantage only became greater after Morgan's departure and the battle at Vanishing Lake.

The situation had worsened even further since then.

Three expeditions had been sent into the depths of Godgrave to conquer its remaining Citadels. Revel and her First Royal Legion had gone into the darkness of the Spine Ocean, accompanied by Moonveil... while a punitive expedition had set out from the camp of the Sword Army to destroy them.

Considering how powerful the daughters of Ki Song were, that expedition numbered seven Saints.

Additionally, Summer Knight was heading south with two Saints accompanying him, while the Queen of Worms had given up on conquering the Femur Citadel, thus sending no one.

So, in the end...

The Song Army, which had only lost one Transcendent champion since the start of the war, could muster forty-six Saints in this battle. The Sword Army, meanwhile, could only muster twenty-four... twenty-three, really, considering that Saint Tyris was too important for Anvil to risk losing her.

In short... Seishan had no less than twice as many Saints to accompany her into battle as Nephis had.

What reason did she have to refuse?

‘Ah... it's going to be a long day.’

Still embracing Rain as a shadow, Sunny sent her a mental message:

[That is your cue to get the hell away.]

His sister flinched, then helped Tamar stand up and rushed away from where Changing Star and the Lost Princess of Song were facing each other.

All around her, the warriors of the Song Army were following suit, receding like a tide. A vast open space was opening between the two retreating armies, painted by blood and littered with mangled corpses.

Sunny let out a mental sigh and shifted most of his focus to the Lord of Shadows.

The fighting at the center of the battlefront might have stopped, but on the flanks, the Awakened were still clashing and killing each other. Sunny headed for the left flank, where both armies were in great disarray.

His entrance was far less spectacular than Neph's.

Sunny simply rose from the shadows amidst the slaughter, silently and without drawing any attention.

Suddenly, a fearsome figure in black onyx armor was standing among the desperately fighting soldiers, darkness nestling in the gaping abyss of its demonic eyes.

His long white hair – a permanent fixture whenever he wore either of his masks now – was moving slightly in the wind.

A few soldiers noticed him and staggered away in fright, some of them falling to the ground. But that was all.

Sunny sighed.

‘No, this won't do... it won't do at all…’

And as he did, the shadows across the battlefield stirred.

Suddenly, the world shuddered, and a towering black wall soared from the ground into the sky, sending countless Awakened flying. It seemed to be made from obsidian, its surface rough and uneven, almost absorbing the light.

The great wall stretched for several kilometers, effectively cutting the left flank of the battlefield in two.

The Sword Army had remained on one side of the great wall of obsidian, separated from the Song Army by its tenebrous width.

Of course, there were stragglers left on both sides – but no one was in the mood to swarm them and bring them down.

Just like at the center, before, the battle suddenly and abruptly came to a halt. Everyone was staring at the vast expanse of black obsidian in fear and shock.

...And at Sunny, too.

It was quite a spectacular way to leave a strong impression.

He nodded in satisfaction.

‘That's better.’

Just at that moment, a Master from the Sword Army finally recognized him.

Falling to one knee, the young man looked up with awe and terror in his trembling eyes.

“L-lord Shadow! Sir!”

Sunny stared at him silently for a few moments.

‘Well... I'll be damned.’

It was his old friend – young Master Tristan of Aegis Rose. Rivalen's son.

Somehow, the fool was still alive.

Sunny smiled faintly behind the mask and looked away.

“Retreat. This is the King's command.”

The young Master opened his eyes wide, then bowed and dashed away, shouting orders.

Soon, the Sword Army started to pull back.

Sunny allowed the obsidian wall to crumble into a tide of shadows – the damn thing was consuming too much essence – and watched the Song Army retreat. The stragglers were already hurrying to catch up with their retreating comrades.

The real mess was about to start.