2006. The Real Mess

Sunny was on the left flank of the battlefield, while Nephis was in the center.

The right flank, meanwhile...

[Cassie?]

There were a few moments of silence, and then the blind seer's voice resounded in his mind.

[I've arrived.]

Indeed... today's battle was so important and terribly skewed in favor of the enemy that even Song of the Fallen, the Seneschal of the Great Clan Valor – someone who was not supposed to appear on a battlefield often, serving her King and Domain in other ways – had no choice but to enter the fray.

In fact, every Saint of the Sword Army was either already here or on their way – except for Sky Tide, who had been ordered to remain with the King of Swords in the rear.

Their enemies were already here, too. As the tide of Song soldiers receded, dozens of motionless figures were revealed, standing apart from each other across the expansive battlefield.

Sunny felt a strange mixture of somber wariness and anticipation.

Each Saint was a force to be reckoned with... and the enemy had twice as many Saints as his side.

There were the puppets of the Queen, as well. There was also the horde of Nightmare Creatures enthralled by Beastmaster…

And he had not forgotten that there were still three of Mordret's Reflections left intact, somewhere out there.

The odds did not seem very promising for the Sword Saints.

‘How many will die?’

Sunny suddenly felt a chill.

It was hard to kill a Saint, and even harder to prevent one from escaping should they wish to flee. Those who had reached Transcendence also possessed an incredible wealth of martial experience – they would know when to continue the fight and when to retreat.

...Still, Saints were going to die today.

Countless soldiers would be spared from the cold embrace of death, but death would not remain unfed.

It was just that the souls it swallowed would be far more nourishing and potent.

Of course, the number of the fallen would be infinitely smaller...

But not the significance.

In fact, the two Domains would sustain far more damage if a handful of Saints were killed than if a myriad of Awakened died.

That was because only Saints could claim Citadels, thus expanding a Sovereign's Domain over vast territories. Currently, there were more Saints in the world than there were conquered Citadels – but not by much.

If enough Transcendent champions were killed today, some of the strongholds of humanity in the Dream Realm would be left without masters. And therefore...

The Domains would shrink, losing some of their overall power... a directly opposite result to what the Sovereigns had wanted to achieve by fighting over land in Godgrave.

The Domains would grow weaker.

...Was that part of Neph's calculation, as well?

It surely was.

‘How devious.’

Sunny should know... after all, he had come up with the plan himself.

In the end, her enthralling display of grace and noble virtue had not just empowered her nascent Domain, but would also lay the groundwork for weakening the Domains of her enemies.

Sunny smiled sadly behind the mask.

He felt a little dirty.

Neither of them really wanted to see Saints die – each Saint was a treasure of humanity, after all. So, usually, they would not take steps to ensure the loss of Transcendent lives.

However, the situation was different today, because these lives were weighed against the lives of countless Awakened and Ascended warriors. Those were a treasure of humanity, too – both as they were, and due to their unrealized potential.

So, in a zero-sum, the conspirators were justified to choose the sacrifice that would further their goals more. And on a purely human level... it felt less shameful, to sacrifice a few for the benefit of many. Especially if they themselves would be risking their lives side by side with those few.

But still, Sunny did not feel good about the situation.

He had no doubt that Nephis would not be feeling very pleasant at the moment, either – if she was still capable of feeling anything, having been numbed to emotions by the pain of her Flaw.

...The Saints themselves were going to be troubled, too – those who survived, of course. The loss of life among the soldiers was already painful enough, considering that White Feather had not been the only clan to send its warriors into battle. But dying and killing their former friends and comrades personally was both far more visceral and far more poignant an experience.

And as the loyalty the Saints had for the Sovereigns diminished and their discontent grew, no matter how little, Neph's position would improve further still.

Because the doubts the people fighting for the two great armies felt were only useless in the lack of an alternative to the iron rule of the two Sovereigns.

If an alternative did present itself one day in the future, though...

Well.

No matter how unpleasant it was, Nephis had made a brilliant move.

There would be consequences later, without doubt. Anvil would definitely not be happy with her defiance... but those were problems for the future.

Now, all Nephis, Sunny, and Cassie had to do... was actually survive the battle and make sure that the overwhelming advantage of the Song Domain did not lead to a wholesale slaughter of the Sword Saints.

‘They have twice as many... hell…’

Sunny was not alone on the left flank of the battlefield. A few other Saints had joined him, as well – now, what remained was to see which strategy the Song Domain would choose.

They could just send two Saints of Song to fight each individual Sword Saint. Of course, that was unlikely – after all, they knew how powerful Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows were. They also knew about Saint, Fiend, and Serpent.

Cassie might give them an unpleasant surprise, but in the grand scheme of things, her presence on the battlefield was not too impactful.

Sunny could see Saint Rivalen in the distance. He had assumed his Transcendent form, squaring against a single Saint of the Song Domain – the giant reptile with powerful legs and strangely short arms that Rain had seen tearing Nightmare Creatures apart in the Hollows.

On the other side, Helie was facing a Saint who had chosen to maintain a human form.

And a little further away, there was Roan.

...Also faced by a single opponent.

Sunny suddenly felt a bad premonition.

‘Just... how high is their opinion of me?’

Looking straight ahead, he lowered his head slightly.

‘One, two, three…’

The darkness nestling in the eyes of Weaver's mask stirred slightly.

...Apparently, it was extremely high.

Because there were thirteen enemy Saints moving to surround him in a wide half-circle.