1904 Queen's Blood

There was very little time to react, and even less time to comprehend what was happening.

However, Sunny still managed to recognize the drop of dark blood, and guess what it represented.

He had seen something similar once, a long time ago.

Back then, he and a group of survivors of the Battle of the Black Skull had been desperately trying to escape from the Skinwalker, lost in the white dunes of the Nightmare Desert. Sadly, the vessels of the Great abomination still managed to catch up with them.

Some of the survivors chose to split up, but most stayed together. It was then that Morgan summoned a swarm of flying swords — now, Sunny knew that those were swords forged by her father.

Seishan, meanwhile, had summoned a drop of blood almost identical to the one hovering in the air between Moonveil's fingers right now.

Sunny had been running for his life, so he did not see what the eerie drop of blood actually accomplished. He just remembered a strange feeling of awe, and that the entire world was momentarily painted in shades of red when its vast and terrifying power was unleashed.

He could make a conjecture, though.

Considering that Anvil had bestowed the swords — conduits of his power — to Morgan before sending her to Antarctica, wasn't it reasonable to assume that Ki Song had bestowed something to her daughter, as well?

If so, then the drop of blood was a vessel of a Sovereign's power.

...Which did not mean anything good for Sunny, Nephis, and the rest of the Saints of the Sword Domain.

‘Damn it!'

It was already too late by the time Sunny realized that Revel was scheming something.

The crimson drop swirled in the air...

And then exploded into a tidal wave of red light.

Sunny stumbled back, momentarily dazed by a crushing force of tyrannical presence. It was as if a cold, penetrating gaze of someone's vast and unfathomably powerful conscience brushed past him, making his very soul shiver in fear.

The flood of crimson light rushed at them like a raging wave of blood, submerging the world in a red radiance. He tried to raise a wall of shadows in its path, but the ethereal light simply passed through it... a moment later, the wall crumbled, the shadows forming it destroyed.

Neph's figure ignited with a blinding radiance of her own. Her pure light seemed to hold the blood tide back for a few moments, but was then overpowered and painted red.

Sunny steeled himself, knowing that he would have to withstand the power of a Sovereign a heartbeat later.

Just before the wave of ethereal blood reached them, though...

A ghostly visage of interlocking shields shimmered in the air around the remnants of the conquest force, enveloping them like a dome. The flood of crimson light collided with it and parted, flowing past them on both sides. Looking back, Sunny saw the sorry figure of Saint Rivalen of Aegis Rose slumping against the wall near the gates of the Citadel.

'The insufferable fool is alive, after all...'

He allowed himself to feel relieved for a short moment, then turned his attention back to the dire situation.

From what Sunny could remember, the power Seishan had unleashed in the Nightmare Desert receded after a few moments. But then again, she had been a mere Master back then — perhaps a Saint would be able to channel the power of a Supreme better.

He took a step closer to Nephis and commanded Fiend to move forward, shielding the group from the rush of red light.

Sadly, Sunny was right — a few moments passed, and then a few more. The bloody radiance drowning the world did not dim.

The force field created by Rivalen, however, seemed to be weakening.

The ghostly shields had become invisible after manifesting for a second, but Sunny could practically hear them bending under the pressure, ready to succumb to it.

The shield wall protecting them from the power of Ki Song was slowly becoming covered by a net of cracks. Or maybe it was rusting, slowly dissolving into red dust.

'At best, I can escape by using Shadow Step.‘

He could take Nephis with him. Maybe Roan, as well... but Sunny had never carried several Transcendent beings with him through the shadows. He wasn't sure that he would be able to save the rest.

Meaning that he would have to leave at least some of the Saints of the Sword Army behind. Who would he abandon? Jest? Rivalen? Helie?

...Luckily, in the end, he did not have to make that choice.

Eventually, after a dozen seconds or so, the red radiance enveloping the world finally dimmed. It dissipated slowly, and then disappeared altogether.

The vast hall was plunged into dim darkness once again, illuminated by the orange glow of the burning ceiling and the light of several luminous Memories. Sunny‘s eyes widened.

The hall... was empty.

As Rivalen slumped on the floor and the other Saints drew hoarse breaths, he looked around and then extended his shadow sense outward.

He did not sense anything.

Revel and her sisters were gone. So were the Saint of Sorrow and the Reflections. Even the Transcendent corpses reanimated by the authority of Queen Song were nowhere to be seen.

They have fled.

The battle was over, ending just as unexpectedly as it had started.

Sunny let out a sigh.

He did not even know what kind of a sigh it was — was it a sigh of relief, or a sigh of disappointment?

In any case, now that the battle was finished...

They had to deal with its consequences before thinking about anything else. "They're gone."

Nephis did not respond immediately, looking up, at the sea of flames raging above them. Her expression was somber.

Sunny lingered for a moment.

"Can you put the fires out?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Perhaps. But the Citadel is already damaged too severely... it's on the verge of breaking apart. By the time I suppress all the flames, it would have collapsed already."

Sir Jest assumed his human form — thankfully — wiped the blood off his face, and said in a wry tone:

"Suffering a fire in the middle of a lake... inside a dried up bone. How ironic." He looked around, as if searching for something, then asked:

"So, what do we do, my lady?"

Nephis walked over to where Rivalen was laying on the floor and kneeled beside him, placing her hands on his bloodied body.

"...It doesn't matter if the Citadel collapses. We just need to preserve the Gateway. As long as the Gateway survives, the stronghold can be rebuilt around it."

That was true.

Of course, it depended entirely on how the Spell had fashioned this particular Gateway. There were some that existed in and of itself, like the altar of the Sanctuary of Noctis. However, there were also some that drew power from the structure around them, like the Gateway in the Crimson Spire.

They had no choice but to try, though. Otherwise, the entire expedition would be a complete failure.

Grimacing as a soft white radiance enveloped her hands, Nephis looked at Sunny and said:

"We must locate the Gateway first."

He nodded, and then stepped into the shadows to go find it.

In truth, Sunny did not care that much about Anvil claiming another Citadel in Godgrave. Now that the battle was over, his mind was preoccupied by other issues.

Namely, all the revelations he had achieved while fighting Lightslayer, and all the boons he had received…