1993 : Attrition

Far below, the battle seemed to be hanging in a fragile balance.

The battle lines were twisted and broken, and in some places, all pretense of order had been lost. Countless Awakened warriors were intertwined in a chaotic melee there, having forgotten all about discipline and battle formations. Blood was spilling on the ground, and a litany of desperate voices was drowning in the deafening clangor of steel.

In other places, stalwart officers were still maintaining a semblance of control. The forces of the Sword Army were pushing the forces of Song on the left flank of the grand formation, while its right flank was being pushed back instead. In the center, a furious tug of war was boiling, with neither side managing to gain ground.

At first glance, the soldiers of the Sword Domain were in a better position.

That had been true throughout the war. The warriors of the Song Domain did not lack courage, determination, or martial prowess… in fact, Sunny had often been stunned by their tenacious resolve. Their powers and tactics were often strange, insidious, and wild, bringing with them a sense of lethal peril.

They were chillingly fearless in the face of death, and viciously ruthless when they needed to be.

And yet, they were simply no match for the soldiers of the Sword Army.

The army of the Sword Domain was better equipped, better trained, and better able to maintain discipline in dire situations. Even if each individual warrior fighting under the banner of the King of Swords was not more powerful than the warriors of Song, together, they made for a much tougher and deadlier force.

It was partially because Clan Valor and its vassals had been in power for much longer than Clan Song, and therefore possessed a much richer martial tradition. The core of the Sword Army had been forged in the successive subjugation campaigns that brought vast regions of the Dream Realm under human control, after all, and while Ki Song had led a historic conquest of her own, its scope and length did not compare.

It was also because the Awakened of the Sword Domain had always been more militant, and their martial culture had always leaned more in the direction of organized warfare. The Valor family had inherited the lineage of War God, and therefore, the region under its control was influenced in subtle ways to fit that legacy.

…But mostly, it was because of the King of Swords.

His authority was everywhere, enveloping the Sword Army like an invisible veil. The soldiers were not just fighting for his Domain — they were parts of his domain and, therefore, its conduits.

Sunny had noticed the subtle effect of Anvil's authority during that first battle at the eastern edge of the Collarbone Plain. Those who carried it would not magically become stronger or more powerful, but the efficacy of their joint actions would be greater, their cooperation would be more seamless, and their battle spirit would become more indomitable.

It was an authority to make armies triumph.

And that was why the soldiers of Song were desperately outmatched in this war.

Even now, they were suffering on the battlefield.

The waves of Song warriors were breaking against the steel bulwark of the Sword Army forces, paying a heavy price for each assault.

Despite the dire havoc of the battle, their enemy still maintained a high measure of martial discipline — the forward units endured the attacks for as long as they could, then rolled back to make space for fresh troops. When it was time to push, they marched forward as a single being. When the defensive lines were broken and the warriors of the Sword Domain were pushed back, they promptly received reinforcements.

For every soldier of the Sword Army that fell, two enemies died.

Sunny sighed.

It did not matter, in the end.

The seeming advantage of the Sword Army… was merely an illusion. Anyone with a bit of insight could tell that things were actually going quite badly for their side.

That was because the Queen of Worms was exerting her influence on the battlefield, as well.

And hers was a power no less dreadful than that of the King of Swords.

What did it matter if fewer warriors of the Sword Army were dying? In the end, all of those who were killed — no matter the side — simply rose again, becoming members of the legion of the dead.

That had been true throughout the war, as well.

Yes, the Sword Army was stronger. And yes, it had held the advantage from the beginning, winning much more battles than it was losing, and suffering far fewer casualties than the enemy.

But it was still a road to certain defeat.

As the losses of both sides mounted, only one side was actually becoming weaker… the side Sunny was fighting for. The Song Army, meanwhile, was losing Awakened warriors, but its numbers never truly diminished.

On the contrary, they continued to grow.

Because it did not matter to whom the dead had been loyal once — the Queen of Worms did not discriminate between the fallen of her own army or that of the enemy, embracing all with equal grace.

It was a chilling sight, to see a comrade with whom you had been fighting side by side a minute ago, and whose death you were mourning, rise from the ground and aim their empty gaze at you, determined to extinguish your own life, in turn.

It was as if the Sword Army was waging war against death itself.

The longer the war continued, the more soldiers the Sword Domain lost, and the greater the army of the Song Domain became. And the wider gap there between the two was, the more casualties the Sword Army suffered as a result, thus creating a harrowing cycle.

Despite its superiority, they were destined to lose this war of attrition.

…The same situation, albeit on a smaller scale, was currently taking place on the battlefield Sunny was observing.

Something had to change soon, or they were going to suffer a bitter defeat… which could very well become irreparable, swinging the balance of power in favor of the Song Domain too much.

He glanced at the King of Swords, wondering what the fearsome Sovereign was thinking about.