1994 : Call to Arms

The writing was on the wall.

The Sword Army seemed to be prevailing against the enemy, for now, but as its losses mounted and the horde of the dead puppets grew… there was no escaping the eventual defeat.

If Sunny could see it, then Anvil could see it, as well.

And yet, the King of Swords was not doing anything. The only orders he gave were minor commands, like sending reserve units to reinforce the faltering sections of the battlefront or pulling back heavily battered battalions. His tactical prowess was immaculate, true, but that was hardly enough to remedy the situation.

At the moment, the Sovereign was simply watching the carnage silently, his steely eyes not revealing any emotion.

It was as if he was waiting for something, or maybe simply putting too much trust into his domineering authority.

His presence was, indeed, more suffocating than the sweltering heat.

Sunny scowled behind his mask.

'...He's not planning to obliterate both armies, is he?'

Out of the two Sovereigns, only Anvil possessed such an option… thanks to Saint Tyris, who could break the veil of clouds above the battlefield.

But no, that could not be true. Not because Anvil wasn't capable of implementing a monstrous strategy like that, but simply because Sky Tide would never agree to heed such a command.

She had a will of her own, after all, and had disobeyed the Sovereigns before. More than that, her own daughter was currently down there, somewhere, fighting on the frontline with other warriors of the White Feather clan. Even if Anvil threatened to cut Tyris down, she would simply invite him to try.

So… what then?

As if to answer these thoughts, the King suddenly turned away from the battlefield and looked at something. Sunny was confused for a moment, not knowing what he was looking at, but then realized that the answer was obvious.

Ignoring the people crowding around him, Anvil was gazing at Nephis, who stood some distance away.

He studied her for a few moments, and then asked evenly:

"What do you make of it?"

Sunny's scowl deepened.

Why was that bastard putting Nephis on the spot? Sure, she was technically his adopted daughter… but everyone knew that it was merely a charade to justify a political alliance. Even if it had not been, Anvil wasn't known for treating his children with warmth or attention.

Nephis seemed surprised by the question, as well… of course, to everyone except for Sunny, her expression would have looked just as calm and composed as ever.

She looked up at the King of Swords, remained silent for a few moments, and then shrugged.

"It's appalling."

Something unexpected happened in the next moment.

The King of Swords… smiled.

His smile was faint and cold, but it was undeniably there.

Anvil looked back to the battlefield.

"...I see that you are more like your mother than your father."

His voice was just as emotionless as ever, but there was a hint of something personal in it.

It almost sounded human.

Nephis frowned.

"In what way?"

Anvil did not respond for a few moments.

Eventually, he spoke in a detached tone:

"Your mother… cared about everyone. But your father only cared about himself, and that which was his."

He lingered for a moment, and then added quietly:

"Perhaps that was why she left before the rest of us."

The King of Swords then glanced at Nephis, his heavy gaze crushing into her with almost physical force.

"Since you are appalled by this slaughter, you must care about the soldiers below."

A corner of his mouth rose subtly once again.

"...Or do you simply consider them yours?"

Sunny felt a cold chill run down his spine.

Was that an innocent question? Or was it aimed to test Neph's loyalty to the Sword Domain?

Or…

Was this Anvil showing that he did not trust her at all?

Or was he hoping that he could?

In any case, something told Sunny that many things depended on how Nephis answered.

The rest of the Saint seemed perturbed by the strange conversation between the commander of the Sword Army and its most radiant champion, as well.

Nephis remained silent for a while, the wind playing with her silver hair.

Then, she sighed, stretched her neck with a tired expression, and walked over to the railing of the wide platform.

Jumping over them in one fluid motion, she landed on the steel skin of the enormous Echoe and took a few steps to the edge of its head. There, she turned around and looked at the Sovereign calmly.

He raised an eyebrow.

"What are you doing?"

Nephis shrugged.

"I am going down. I grew tired of standing here and doing nothing."

He considered her silently for a few moments.

"Haven't I forbidden my Saints to fight the enemy unless the enemy attacks first?"

Nephis met his heavy gaze expressionlessly.

"You did. You haven't forbidden us from entering the battlefield, though."

Anvil smiled for the third time in a single day.

This time, his smile was a little terrifying.

"And if your arrival provokes the enemy to attack you?"

Nephis just stared at him impassively.

After a few moments of silence, she said in an even tone:

"Then I will break them."

Anvil's chilling smile turned into an equally frightening sneer, but he did not stop her.

Witnessing this, some of the Saints present on the viewing platform moved, as well.

Roan gave his wife a brief look, then headed to the railing.

"I think I would like to stretch my leg, too."

Saint Helie, who had been standing by her lonesome on the opposite side of the platform from Sunny, glanced at Nephis and sighed.

"I am actually afraid of heights. Spending some time on the ground will be quite nice."

Rivalen of Aegis Rose stared at them in confusion.

"Ah, yes. Me too… I mean, I want to stretch my legs too, Your Majesty. Not that I am afraid of heights."

The rest of the Saints had begun moving, as well.

The King of Swords did not spare them a look, continuing to study the battlefield.

Sunny wasn't sure if that was because everything was going according to what the Sovereign had wanted, or if he simply did not mind.

Nephis did not wait for the Sword Saints. Summoning her wings, she leaped off the head of the gargantuan Echo and plummeted toward the battlefield like a falling star.

…Saint Jest, who had appeared next to Sunny at some point, let out a chuckle at the sight and shook his head.

"Young people are so hot-headed these days!"

Then, he looked at Sunny and grinned.

"What about you, Shadow? Are you joining the fun?"

Sunny turned his head and stared at the old man coldly.

When he answered, his arrogant voice carried a hint of displeasure.

"No way. Haven't I told you before?"

He lingered for a moment, and then added evenly:

"I am a pacifist."

With that, Sunny sighed, pushed himself off the railing, and turned into a shadow. The shadow disappeared from view a moment later, heading in the direction of the battlefield with stunning speed.

Jest scoffed and shook his head again.

"This kid… is such a terrible liar…"