2020 : One Man’s Greed

Soon after the first rumbling call of the war horn, another one resounded, rolling across the battlefield like a tidal wave. Sunny was momentarily impressed by the logistical preparations that had been undertaken to wage this war… after all, it was not easy to drown out the deafening clamor of a Transcendent battle.

Which meant that both armies had prepared tools capable of delivering the commands to hundreds of thousands of clashing soldiers in advance.

It wasn't that surprising, really. Both Valor and Song had rich experience subjugating wild regions of the Dream Realm, after all. They would have known how to signal to their troops when besieged by hordes of roaring Nightmare Creatures.

In any case…

He realized how tired he was by catching his mind wandering.

The sound of two horns told Sunny everything he needed to know, at the moment.

The first horn had come from the position of the Song Army… which meant that the battle was over, and that the Sword Army had delivered the enemy a crushing defeat.

The second horn had come from the direction of the towering Echo — perhaps it was no horn at all, but simply the bellow of the gargantuan creature. Its meaning was also quite clear.

The King of Swords was ordering them not to pursue.

With his expression hidden behind Weaver's Mask, Sunny let out a quiet sigh of relief.

Ki Song calling for retreat meant that the Saints of the Song Army were beaten despite their great numerical advantage. Anvil ordering his own Saints to stand down… probably meant that he did not wish to cross the Queen's bottom line just yet.

And that he was already satisfied with the result.

'...We've won, then.'

Sunny still couldn't quite believe it.

He knew that he had won, of course. He was also certain that Nephis would have demolished her share of enemies. Cassie would be alright, too… she always was.

But, still. Twenty-three Saints defeating twice as many enemy Transcendents sounded… implausible.

But the proof was impossible to deny.

Everywhere he looked, the remaining pilgrims were turning around and slowly heading away from the battlefield.

He could see a few battered Saints staggering away, as well.

Which brought him to a dilemma.

Still holding the tip of his odachi to Lonesome Howl's neck, Sunny stared at her through the eyes of Weaver's Mask.

…What was he supposed to do now that he had won?

The Jackal was dead. Beastmaster and the Ceres were unconscious. Siord and the Saint of Sorrow were too terribly wounded to mount any resistance. Silent Stalker was on the ground, three of his incarnations standing above her with weapons drawn and ready to strike.

Lonesome Howl was on her knees, at his mercy.

She was not moving, just staring at him from below with defeat, fear, and bitter fury burning in her wild eyes. Her face was pale and bloodied, and she was gritting her teeth to suppress a pained groan.

'Am I meant to just let them go?'

It seemed quite unfair, to let his prey walk free. Nothing was going to stop these Saints from recovering and joining the next battle, after all…

At the same time, Sunny could not very well take them prisoner. How was he supposed to imprison Saints? Even if he tied them up and locked them in the Nameless Temple, they could simply flee back to the waking world. No amount of chains and locks could stop them.

He was certain that Anvil could. The King of Swords had imprisoned Orum, after all… so, there was some kind of runic prison already established here in Godgrave.

But did Sunny really want to give the Sovereign hostages of royal blood?

No way. If he did, he would be responsible for whatever atrocity Anvil decided to perpetrate toward the prisoners.

So, Sunny only had two choices.

Either finish the defeated Saints right here and now… or let them go.

And he had not kept them alive only to slaughter them once the battle was over.

Of course… Lonesome Howl and the rest of the Saints of Song must have thought differently.

Judging by their gazes, they seemed to be under the illusion that Sunny was some kind of unholy monster.

No, really… did they have to look so petrified?

'All that after I went out of my way to be gentle…'

Shaking his head mentally, Sunny sighed, then retracted his odachi and pointed in the direction of the distant Song Army.

When he spoke, his voice was cold and indifferent:

"...Leave."

Lonesome Howl stared at him, her bloodied face growing even paler.

Strangely enough, she made no motion to rise from her knees.

Instead, she gritted her teeth even tighter, and then spat:

"Why… are you letting us go?"

Sunny looked down at her, feeling perplexed.

He would have already been running in her shoes.

Still, he had to come up with an answer…

Blaming everything on Nephis again would be unwise — the King of Swords could very well be listening, after all, and learning that his daughter had secretly ordered his most powerful fighter to spare the enemy elites could very well cause dire problems down the line.

And after today, there would be no question of who the most powerful member of the Sword Army outside the royal family was, without a doubt.

So what was Sunny supposed to say?

...Luckily, this incarnation of his was wearing Weaver's Mask.

Eventually, he shrugged and answered evenly:

"I am just a hired blade. My pay is high, but not high enough to start a blood feud with the Queen of Song."

Meaning…

'You are a princess, and I am a simple mercenary. I'm not crazy enough and can't be bothered to kill Ki Song's daughters, thus giving her a reason to personally hunt me down!'

On second thought, that also implied that Sunny would actually be willing to do something like that if the pay was high enough.

He hoped that Lonesome Howl would miss that.

She stared at him for a few moments, then suddenly let out a bitter, hollow laugh.

"So that's the reason? I can't… I can't believe it. A hired blade! The outcome of the battle, the fate of the entire world… might just depend on something as base as one man's greed?"

Sunny looked at her silently for a while.

Then, he leaned his head back and laughed.

His laugh sounded eerie and sinister, rolling across the ravaged battlefield like a chilling wind.

"Why? Do you think that we are that different?"

Shaking his head, he looked at the kneeling princess and added with a hint of disdain in his calm, cold voice:

"No. The King of Valor, you mother, and I... we are exactly the same. It's just that they are greedy for more tasteless things."

With that, Sunny took a step back and dissolved into the shadows.

Lonesome Howl was left standing on her knees in solitude.

The echo of his sinister laughter, and of his piercing words, was still ringing in her ears.