2022 : Overwhelming Strength

The battle that would have cost humanity countless lives ended costing it… slightly less.

The losses among the Awakened soldiers were still quite severe, but at the same time, there weren't nearly as many deaths as there would have been if Nephis had not intervened, ordering the two great armies to retreat and provoking a clash between the Saints instead.

The final, titanic confrontation had decided the outcome of the battle…

It ended with a resounding victory for the Sword Domain.

Sunny somehow expected to be met by endless chants of glory once he returned to the camp of the Sword Army, but in reality, it was just as quiet and subdued as the camp of the defeated side.

That was because most of the soldiers had been brutalized by the unfathomable horror of the calamitous battle, and many of them had lost friends and companions to its hungry maw, as well.

The casualties among the soldiers were still being tallied, but everyone knew how many Saints had returned from the battlefield alive, already.

The results were… surprising.

At least to Sunny.

Four of the Saints of the Sword Army had died.

However, thirteen Saints of the Song Domain perished in return.

Six of them had been killed by Sunny and his Shadows. Three were killed by Old Man Jest. The rest had fallen in individual duels.

A… horrifying number.

Nephis had killed none.

Which was bitterly ironic. Sunny had always considered himself to be… the more humane of them two. In fact, in the past, he often felt that Neph's ambition and obsession were dragging him along into the depths where he would not have gone himself. But here he was, having slaughtered almost a full cohort of Transcendent champions, while she had shown restraint and mercy, killing nobody.

Granted, the Song Army had only sent seven Saints after her, as well as a swarm of thralls and pilgrims — while Sunny had technically faced thirteen of them, as well as three of Mordret's Reflections.

He did not know whether he should feel flattered, appalled, proud, or dejected.

That was not important at the moment, anyway.

What was important, though…

Made Sunny shiver.

Song had possessed an overwhelming advantage over the Sword Domain. And yet, their defeat was crushing. Even though Sunny and Nephis had played a vital role in the victory of the Sword Army, the fact remained.

Twenty-six Saints of Song fought against twenty-one Sword Saint, and most of them had lost. Relatively few of the defeated Saints had died, managing to retreat in time, but it was still a startling result.

A result that could mean only one thing…

The Saints of the Sword Army were simply stronger.

And this, in turn, revealed a rather disturbing truth to Sunny.

It shone light on the previously inscrutable demeanor of Anvil, the King of Swords.

From the very beginning… well, maybe from the day Mordret had annihilated the House of Night… the Sovereign of Valor was confusing Sunny with his indifference, inaction, and passive nonchalance.

The Queen of Worms seemed to outplay her enemy on every turn. Her strategies were more elaborate, her ingenious schemes more impactful, her grasp of the battle theater more worthy of a Supreme.

In fact, as time had gone by, the strategic position of the Sword Army started to look more and more hopeless. The enemy was winning virtually on all fronts.

It was to the point that one had no choice but to start doubting which of the two Supremes had inherited the lineage of War God. Wasn't Valor supposed to display a genius of all things having to do with warfare instead of Song?

But the answer to that imbalance was now both evident and undeniable.

It was as if Anvil had told the world today:

"Look and despair. It doesn't matter how cunning, wise, and valiant you are. The most ingenious stratagems are pointless in the face of overwhelming strength."

Anvil had not been bothered by the successes of the Song Domain, because he possessed the only thing he needed to win this war.

A better army, and more deadly champions.

It was a cruel and disheartening lesson.

The bleak reality of this brutal truth was not what unnerved Sunny, though.

Rather, it was the fact that Anvil only possessed overwhelming force because of Nephis and Sunny himself.

Which meant that he had included their strength into his calculations…

Which, in turn, meant that he understood what they were capable of far better than Sunny had assumed.

In fact…

He truly felt a chill run down his spine when thinking about how the battle had transpired.

The clash of the Transcendents only happened because Nephis had defied Anvil's order.

But it was precisely her defiance that had led to the crushing defeat of the Song Domain.

So…

Had the King of Swords calculated that she would disobey him, and even the precise manner in which she would express her disobedience?

He had to. Otherwise, his silent assent to Neph's defiance could hardly be explained.

…This was what frightened Sunny the most.

He looked in the direction of the gargantuan Echo, suddenly feeling tense and uncomfortable.

Almost afraid.

It was as if he was in the palm of Anvil's hand, ready to be crushed in an iron fist at any moment.

His face behind Weaver's Mask grew somber.

Countless humans were dead, including seventeen Saints — a dire loss for all humanity.

The fortunes of the Song Army were reversed in an instant. It had gone from holding a solid advantage to being hopelessly outmatched by the enemy in the span of one battle — not the least because Sunny and Nephis had revealed a large part of their true power.

The battle had put an end to Song's advance into the depths of the Breastbone Reach. On the contrary, they would have to retreat now, perhaps even being pushed all the way to the Collarbone Plain.

In the worst case, the main camp or even the sole Citadel of the Song army would be besieged before either Revel or Gilead completed their expeditions.

But for now, the tired, terrified soldiers needed to rest.

The wounded had to be treated, and the dead had to be burned.

Both army camps were abuzz with whispers and discussions of the dreadful battle.

And, of course, two people were mentioned more than all the rest.

Merciful Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan…

And the ruthless, terrifying Lord of Shadows.