2026: Escalation

"I think it is better if we assume the worst."

The worst being that Anvil had known all along about the irreconcilable hatred Nephis had harbored towards him and Ki Song, and was fully expecting her to try taking revenge on them at some point.

Perhaps he simply did not care, not even considering her a threat. Perhaps he did not mind making use of Nephis and her talents before eventually disposing of her.

In any case, today's events were bound to change things.

Cassie frowned.

"...Our timetable needs to be accelerated, then."

She was right.

They had to hurry, anyway.

Now that the Song Army had lost a decisive battle, it would be pushed back off the Breastbone Reach. The power of Ki Song's Domain would diminish, and Anvil would gain an advantage — which was a problem.

In truth, today's battle had brought another benefit to Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie… albeit quite a morbid one.

Even though they had hoped that far fewer Saints would perish, in the end, the actual number was quite high. Which meant that both Domains had grown weaker today — many Citadels stood without masters now, and there was no one left alive to claim them. So, in the final confrontation, both Anvil and Ki Song would not be as powerful as they had been the day before.

However, this loss had affected the Queen of Worms disproportionately. It was to the point where the King of Swords could very well decide to challenge her before the remaining Citadels in Godgrave were conquered, if given reason to believe that Revel's expedition would succeed.

So, the situation was both highly unstable and fraught with peril. They could not be cautious or patient anymore.

Worst of all… Sunny and Nephis were not anywhere close to figuring out how to attain Supremacy, still. There had been some progress, but nothing they could bet their lives on.

And with the pace of war suddenly changing, he was not sure that they would be able to solve the puzzle in time.

Fighting the Sovereigns as Saints it was, then?

Remembering the sight of the sea of swords falling from the sky, Sunny gritted his teeth.

Why did it matter, though?

There had been two opinions on how to kill the Sovereigns from the very start.

Nephis believed that the only way to defeat them was to become Supreme themselves.

While Sunny… Sunny believed more in the tried and tested method of waiting for the enemies to weaken each other, and then stabbing them in the back.

Now, their chances of attaining Supremacy in time seemed slim.

But on top of that, their element of surprise seemed to be gone, which meant that it would not be easy to strike the enemy in the back.

Things did not look good.

He sighed.

"I take it back. Things are way worse than what we assumed was the worst."

He needed to forge Neph's sword.

He needed to make the final preparations for the battle against the Sovereigns… luckily, Nightmare had been working hard all this time.

He also needed to learn what had happened to Rain during the battle.

And...

Cassie shifted slightly and faced him.

Her voice sounded grim:

"We'll have to have a conversation with Saint Jest soon."

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then nodded.

After that, Cassie seemed to struggle with something for a while.

Eventually, she turned to Nephis and said in a hesitant tone:

"There is a… countermeasure we can use to slow things down."

Nephis simply raised an eyebrow.

Cassie lingered for a bit before adding quietly:

"It's about our friends in a faraway place."

Hearing that, Sunny couldn't help but frown.

She was talking about Effie, Kai, and Jet, of course.

At the beginning of the war, the Song Domain had gained a tremendous advantage by unleashing Mordret upon the world. Therefore, to make sure that the Sovereigns thoroughly exhausted each other's power, a correction had to be made.

So, Jet had been tasked with subtly influencing the government when Morgan inevitably came knocking on the door. Then,she joined the Princess of War with Effie and Kai to hold the Prince of Nothing back... thus prevent him from conquering the Sword Domain while the King was waging war in the north.

They had been desperately defending Bastion all this time.

But now…

The situation was different.

Anvil had turned the tables on the Queen of Worms, and it was the Song Domain that seemed to be at a dire disadvantage.

So, if Bastion fell in Mordret's hands, the equilibrium could be restored.

It was just that they all knew what kind of monster Mordret was.

Sunny did not like the idea of surrendering Bastion to him one bit. In fact, he was vehemently against it.

Too many people he liked and valued were living there, on the shore of the beautiful lake.

However, in the end, it was up to Nephis.

So, he stared at her silently, wondering what decision she would make.

…And what he would do about that decision.

Nephis remained silent for a while, no human emotion visible in her cold, grey eyes.

He suddenly felt chilly despite the suffocating heat enveloping Godgrave.

Finally, Nephis glanced at him, frowning briefly at the sight of his mask, and shook her head.

"No. We won't be troubling our friends."

Sunny was both surprised and a bit relieved.

He had expected a ruthless and pragmatic answer, but Nephis seemed reluctant to surrender Bastion to Mordret, too.

He couldn't help but ask:

"Why?"

She looked at him impassively for a while, then smiled faintly.

"Because it would leave a bad taste in my mouth. I... dislike compromises."

With that, Nephis rose and inhaled deeply.

"Come. He will want to see us soon."

She had disobeyed the King's order.

And now, it was time to receive the punishment for her defiance.

Sunny hoped that it wouldn't be too harsh…

But, at the same time, he hoped that it would.

Because their web of deceit was not finished yet. One final performance remained.

The harsher Nephis was punished, the more indignant the people whom she had saved would feel.

And the more indignant they felt, the more her grasp on their hearts would tighten…