2013 : Devil and the Seven Saints

‘This is much better…’

Towering above the battlefield as the giant version of the Shadowspawn Shell, Sunny smiled darkly in the embrace of shadows.

His human body was still the most natural, and therefore the most effective form he could summon – in most battles, at least. But when he was outnumbered, the special traits of the Shadowspawn Shell truly shone.

Sunny had been pressed to contend against the seven Saints of Song, but now, his task was easier. He could keep his enemies at bay better with his four hands, sharp claws, and long tail.

His only regret was that Weaver's Mask prevented him from using his sharp fangs, too.

‘Let us continue, then…’

The Saints of Song renewed their assault, and Sunny lunged forward to face them.

The world became consumed by an unending cannonade of roaring thunderclaps, blinding flashes, and violent quakes. Clouds of dust and debris rose into the air, and gargantuan figures moved within them, clashing with terrifying and furious force.

Their calamitous confrontation seemed unimaginably ferocious and primal, devoid of all reason except for bloodlust and murderous frenzy... in fact, that was how most of the Awakened witnessing the battle probably saw it.

After all, in their minds, beings of such size and power were akin to dreadful Nightmare Creatures, and Nightmare Creatures were not known for their technique and meticulousness.

However, in truth, the furious battle was nothing but technical and meticulous. Yes, it was awesome and fierce. But behind the veil of frenzied determination and bestial might, every Saint fighting the Lord of Shadows was using their keen intellect, cold regard, and sophisticated battle art to fight and keep surviving the deadly cadence of the titanic clash.

Nothing less could suffice in this terrible battle, while power and refined control were only antithetical to each other in the hands of amateurs.

When true masters fought, fury and calculation served to augment each other, fusing to create a devastating and flawlessly precise storm of destruction.

...Needless to say, Sunny himself was no different. It was just that his insight, skill, and finesse were even more sublime and daunting.

The battle... was not in any way an easy one for him. In fact, it was the opposite – it was one of the most dire and dangerous battles he had experienced since conquering the Third Nightmare.

Yes, he was making it look easy, even going so far as to laugh in the face of the devastating onslaught of potentially fatal attacks. But it was mostly to mislead and intimidate his enemies, not because he was truly relaxed in the middle of this chilling confrontation and taking it easy.

In truth, Saints were still Saints, and there were three bearers of a divine lineage among his enemies right now. Each attack directed at him had the potential to heavily damage his Shell, or even rip his soul to shreds directly – especially considering that Silent Stalker seemed to somehow know exactly where to aim, and relayed that information to the rest of the Song Saints promptly.

Even when he shifted the location of his incarnation within the Shell, her attacks continued to follow it without error.

Sunny could probably withstand a blow or two, but his luck could just as easily run out. He was in the situation where one mistake could mean – would mean – death… once again.

It was a familiar and almost nostalgic feeling, and therefore, he already knew what he needed to do.

He simply did not allow himself to make mistakes.

There was one great advantage he had in that regard, as well as one great disadvantage.

His advantage was, of course, Shadow Dance. Sunny had already seen most of the seven Saints fight at one point or another. He had faced some of them at Vanishing Lake, and had observed the others during the Seventh Legion's dreadful march to the Collarbone Citadel.

So, it did not take him long to get the initial grasp of their battle arts. Armed with that knowledge, he was largely able to predict what they were going to do, even if the details of how they were going to go about it still remained murky for some of the seven Saints.

There was no need to say how knowing your enemy's next move was a boon in any battle, and especially a battle like this one, where he was forced to be on the defensive against a superior number of foes.

His disadvantage, meanwhile... was Beastmaster.

Not only did Sunny not know much about her, but her Aspect was also incredibly insidious. His mind was still burdened by her tantalizing influence, and although the hex had not managed to entrance him completely, it still served to slow and weaken him.

That was not the only power Beastmaster had unleashed, either. Her second one was perhaps even more diabolical.

Her Awakened Ability allowed the mesmerizing Saint to mislead one's senses, causing the bedevilled victim to experience all kinds of illusions... or rather, it would be more appropriate to call them hallucinations, since they only existed inside the victim's mind.

These illusions were chillingly lifelike and nearly indistinguishable from reality, affecting every sense at the same time. Sunny's formidable resistance against mental attacks still granted him a degree of protection, seemingly limiting what Beastmaster could make him believe – for example, she could not convince Sunny that Ki Song herself suddenly descended on the battlefield to kill him.

However, she could manipulate things that he already subconsciously believed were both possible and probable, creating phantom versions of herself and the other Saints of Song to confuse him.

At some point, Sunny could see Lonesome Howl lunging at him from the right, but at the same time, he saw an indistinguishable copy of her lunging at him from the left – both growling, making the ground shake, and raising powerful gales of hurricane wind with their passing. At another, he could see the towering Jackal attack him with a downward slash, while at the same time performing a horizontal swipe.

The hallucinations were faithful enough to make him feel pain when the illusory enemies wounded him. More than that, Beastmaster's skill was even refined enough to recreate the mystical presence that Saints usually emanated.

Luckily...

They had one telling flaw.

Since she was constructing them consciously, the illusions could only possess traits that Beastmaster created consciously. And while she was a true artist as far as driving people mad went, she could only create what she knew.

Beastmaster knew how an illusion was supposed to look, smell, sound, feel, and taste, and she even knew how to falsify a Transcendent presence. However, she did not possess shadow sense, nor did she know that shadow sense existed.

For that reason, the shadows of the illusory enemies she sent to confuse Sunny were subtly inconsistent and wrong. They looked right, and even felt right as far as their shape and depth went. But they were not shadows that living beings cast – instead, they were all akin to shadows cast by inanimate objects.

So, Sunny had to ignore most of his senses and only rely on shadow sense to discern which enemies were real, and which ones were fake.

That allowed him to navigate the battle and survive the barrage of real attacks…

Sadly, it did not save him from the illusory pain.

And it hurt a lot.

Slowed down and weakened, constantly confused between what was real and unreal, Sunny stubbornly persisted in his fight against the seven Saints of Song. He managed to push them back from time to time, even.

Still...

It was such a draining and unpleasant battle. Appalling, really.

He would much rather fight Revel again... or someone like King Daeron, even.

Gritting his teeth behind Weaver's Mask, Sunny briefly threw a glance in the direction where Beastmaster was standing, spinning her sling once again.

She was just as bewitching and breathtaking as ever.

...He really wanted to kill someone today.