2014 : Fateful Choice

Sunny was appalled.

He might have been the most honest man in two worlds, but he was definitely not the kindest. Subjected to the ceaseless barrage of lethal attacks and battered by the enemy, reeling from Beastmaster's mental manipulation and intoxicated by the thrill of battle, he felt bloodlust slowly bloom in his heart.

His combat instinct had been nurtured by countless battles against Nightmare Creatures, after all – not humans. So, he rarely had to wonder whether to kill the enemy or not. His instincts were telling him to show no mercy and slaughter the Saints of Song in the fastest and most brutal manner.

But at the same time…

He did not really want to, or have a reason to. On the contrary, Sunny's ultimate goal required these people to remain alive. They had important roles to play in the aftermath of the war, helping humanity endure and face the dire challenges that lay ahead. He needed to give these Saints a reason to see Nephis as a potential ally, not kill them.

Take Beastmaster, for example…

Sure, she was insidious and chillingly powerful. But she was also the backbone of the entire Song Domain. Her thralls were currently besieging the Sword Saints on the battlefield, but in the time of peace, the same thralls were the foundation of the logistical infrastructure in the eastern reaches of the Dream Realm.

With her death, that infrastructure would be disrupted and set back by a decade. Delivering goods from the River of Tears to the inland cities would become many times harder, time-consuming, and dangerous. The same was true for large-scale construction.

So, no matter how frustrated and sickened Sunny felt because of having his mind played with, he ultimately wanted Song Eunbin to survive the battle.

The same went for the other six Saints that were trying to kill him with all their might - each and every one of them was a treasure that he could not really afford to lose. That alone made Sunny feel conflicted, making his reason and instincts clash with each other.

But also…

He was not even sure that he could afford to spare these people. Defeating an enemy while sparing them was much harder than simply killing the enemy, after all. And Sunny was barely managing to keep himself alive in this battle... mercy was a luxury that had a heavy price.

...It was strange.

This was not the first war Sunny had participated in, and definitely not his first battle. However, in the past, he had mostly experienced war from the point of view of a footsoldier. Even as an officer of the Evacuation Army, Sunny had only really needed to concern himself with achieving his objectives.

But now, he was powerful enough and influential enough to be one of the people responsible for setting the objectives. As such, his perspective of war had no choice but to change.

Because war wasn't simply something he had to survive anymore. Instead, it was also a tool to be used in order to attain what he desired.

‘How lofty…’

Something inside of him rebelled against the very idea. It was a cynical and revolting thing, to coldly and pragmatically seek benefit in the misery and deaths of countless people. Sunny felt as if he was becoming something that he hated the most.

Was this how the Sovereigns had started to lose their way, decades ago?

Would he become no different from those ghouls one day?

Surely, no…

But having experienced Master Orum's memories, Sunny knew that Ki Song and Anvil had not set out to become misguided tyrants, either.They had just lost their humanity, one little step at a time.

...Perhaps fortunately, he did not have much time to think.

All he had to do right now was fight.

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Lonesome Howl... was appalled.

In front of her eyes, some of the strongest warriors of the Song Domain were being toyed with by an impossible monster. She, a fierce huntress who had risen from the very bottom of humanity to its very peak by braving a sea of blood and dread, was being toyed with

The Lord of Shadows was too powerful.

His demonic body was both human-like and bestial in nature. It was gruesomely flexible and moved with tremendous speed – sometimes upright, sometimes falling to all fours like a ferocious predator. It also possessed dire might, and was encased in a nearly impenetrable onyx shell..

It could leap great distances and pummel the ground with enough force to make the rest of them lose balance. From time to time, it shaped sharp weapons from the shadows, using them to wound or keep Howl and her companions at bay. Those weapons were deadly, but relatively easy to break... and they seem to require a source of shadows to be created.

But the mercenary Saint himself was a source of shadows.

With his four hands, clawed feet, and deceptively perilous tail, the dark demon was managing to fight against a superior number of enemies on almost equal ground. His combat technique was beautifully refined and supremely adaptable... a Transcendent Battle Art in its truest sense, and an ingenious one at that – something that was supposed to require the resources of an entire clan to create, but was nevertheless in the possession of a lone wolf Saint.

...Worse still, there was something uncanny about how the Lord of Shadows fought. It was as if he always knew what they would do in advance. No matter how unpredictably Lonesome Howls and the other Saints attacked, no matter how flawless and instant their cooperation was, he was always ready to dodge, deflect, and block their blows.

And then punish them.

Even Beastmaster, her sister, seemed powerless to stop the infernal creature. Sure, her Aspect seemed to slow him down somewhat and sap his power, but not nearly enough to bring the Lord of Shadows to his knees.

However... worst of all was the fact that even when they succeeded, shattering his armor and dealing grievous wounds to his towering body...

Those wounds simply healed, and the enemy acted as if nothing had happened.

It was as if he was immortal, while Lonesome Howl herself was already battered and in agony, her black fur soaked with blood.

Her companions were the same.

It was truly... astounding.

They were Saints. And she was not just any Saint, at that – she was a princess of the Song Domain. The blood of Beast God flowed in her veins. She had hunted numerous powerful abominations, conquered three Nightmares, and honed her mind and skill to forge them into a deadly weapon.

The rest of them were the same.

And yet, seven Saints were barely managing to contend against a completely unknown warrior – thirteen Saints, really, if she counted her brothers and sisters who were fighting his strange Echoes.

And that warrior was neither a scion of the Great Clan Valor nor a loyal vassal of the King of Swords. Instead, he was a mere mercenary that Changing Star had convinced to offer his services to her father's Domain

Another monster, akin to Changing Star herself and the Prince of Nothing.

And speaking of the Prince of Nothing...

Lonesome Howl growled as she threw her battered body into another lunge.

If only that bastard had handled the negotiations with Lord of Shadows better!

If only he had not failed to lure the hermit Saint to the cause of Song... then their Domain might have won the war, already.

How ironic it was, that the war to decide the fate of two worlds – the Realm War – could have been decided by the choice of a single man.

Lonesome Howl managed to distract the Lord of Shadows just long enough for Jack to strike his side with the crescent blade.

The onyx armor parted, and the inky flesh beneath was torn to shreds. A tide of darkness flowed from the terrible wound to the surface of the ancient bone.

...Of course, the wound closed a few moments later.

However, this time, Lonesome Howl noticed something strange.

Why... did it seem that the onyx demon was not as tall and towering as he had been before?

She waited for the enemy to receive another wound, and then, the red flames burning in her eyes surged.

‘I... I see!’

There was no mistake.

Every time the Lord of Shadow healed a wound... the size of his Transcendent form diminished by a small amount.

Almost as if he was using the shadows constituting his enormous body to mend the damage.

Which meant...

That he was not truly immortal, and that his power wasn't truly endless.

It was in limited supply, as well.

Lonesome Howl bared her fangs.

That... she could work with that...