2017 : A Proper Backstab

Sunny knew that what stood between him and victory was Beastmaster.

She alone was the cause of most of his hardship in this calamitous battle. The enchantress was neither as ferocious as Lonesome Howl nor as perilous as Silent Stalker - in fact, in comparison, she was not much of a warrior. She was still a Saint, of course, and thus a deadly fighter. But one that was weaker than the rest of them in combat.

And yet, her power was the most terrifying.

Even Sunny was far from his usual self, despite his formidable mental fortitude. He was slower and weaker, barely managing to contend with the furious onslaught of attacks by the seven... five Saints, now.

All across the battlefield, devastating forces were being unleashed, and Transcendent blood was being spilled. Most of these warriors – the strength and pride of humanity – were faring worse than Sunny.

But he wasn't doing so well, either.

So, he had to eliminate Beastmaster soon.

The problem was that his enemies knew how important she was, too.

They never let him get close to her.

The enchantress herself moved around the battlefield with graceful steps, always remaining out of his reach. The other four Saints were like an impenetrable wall separating the two of them – no matter how dire their own situation was, they always made sure to guard the approach to Beastmaster well.

If Sunny dared to make her his target, he would have to sacrifice a lot to break through that wall. And by the time he reached where Beastmaster had been, she would have already moved away.

It was a stalemate.

But Sunny believed in his resourcefulness more than he despaired at the sight of the five enraged Saints.

He would have been quite happy if they had at least lost some of their discernment due to the rage... but his enemies remained in full control of themselves. It was worse than that, even.

They seem to be adapting to his ability to predict their movements. It was happening slowly, but undeniably – the Saints of Song were deconstructing the foundation of their battle strategy and assembling a new one on the fly.

The longer the battle dragged on, the more often Sunny found himself in situations where even knowing what the enemy would do could not save him from being harmed.

They simply built their assaults in a way that left him no way to escape. With five sources of peril, it was not too difficult to build a cage that Sunny could not break out of despite knowing where it bars were and would be.

His Shell continued to shrink, growing smaller faster and faster.

At the same time, the essence of the enemy Saints continued to dwindle.

And at some point…

The beautiful harpy let out a loud call and plummeted from the sky. This time, however, it was not to deliver a deadly attack or add momentum to one of her destructive javelins – instead, she landed on the battlefield in a whirlwind of wings and talons, and turned into an alluring woman a moment later.

Sadly, Sunny did not receive a chance to attack her in the short period of vulnerability caused by the transition... because he was paying for opening himself to an enemy attack, too.

His Shell was in rough shape, and he had stopped mending the damage dealt to it not long before – if he had continued, Lonesome Howl and Ceres would actually gain an advantage over him in terms of mass.

He had successfully pushed the three-headed canine back and sacrificed a piece of flesh to deliver the monstrous she-wolf another shallow cut. By now, her fur was just as much red as it was black, but the feral princess did not seem to have lost any of her dire power... the opposite, in fact.

Sunny failed to disengage fast enough, which left him open for a split second too long.

And in that split second, Silent Stalker's arrow hit him straight in the chest.

The internal frame of the Shadowspawn Shell had already been severely damaged, and this last blow seemed like the last drop.

The entire torso of the onyx demon exploded, turning into a wave of shadows. The shadows fell to the ground like black smoke, dissolving into nothingness. Behind the river of dissipating darkness, what remained of the fearsome creature crumbled, as well.

Leaving only a battered human figure laying on the ground.

Sunny grimaced, then rolled, dodging another arrow, and jumped to his feet.

The illusory pain that had been searing his mind was suddenly more unbearable. The tranquil presence blooming in his heart was suddenly more breathtaking, making it harder to resist its tender call.

‘Argh... dammit…’

His armor was cracked and broken, and his stance was hunched.

Nevertheless, he... the Lord of Shadows... did not look any less fearsome in his battered state.

If anything, he looked more dangerous than ever, like a beast who had been backed into a corner.

The enemies surrounded him, ready to attack. Now that Sunny was back to human form, he had to crane his neck to look at the giant figures of Lonesome Howl and Ceres... from this point of view, the two towering beasts looked quite terrifying.

The harpy, Siord, was ready to join the melee in her human form, too.

Somewhere behind him, Silent Stalker was drawing her bow.

And somewhere in front of him, behind the wall of three deadly Saints, Beastmaster was spinning her sling in the distance.

Things... did not look good for Sunny.

He grinned behind Weaver's Mask.

And spoke with a hint of cold contempt in his elusive voice:

“Gods. This... was not part of the plan.”

Lonesome Howl growled and leaned forward, ready to lunge at him in a hurricane of fangs and primal fury.

But almost at the same time…

A swift shadow that had stealthily fled when the Shadowspawn Shell turned into a tide of darkness finally reached its goal.

Another figure wearing the fearsome onyx armor rose from the shadows behind Beastmaster, not making any noise.

A moment later...

The cold blade of a black stiletto brushed against her neck, making the enchantress shiver.

She froze, unable to move.

And then, a cold voice resounded from behind her:

“I really can't believe... that I finally managed to do something like a proper assassin, for once in my goddamn life…”

With that, something slammed into the back of her head, and the world turned dark.