2018 : Death Incarnate

Sunny had figured out that taking out Beastmaster would not be easy, so he employed a bit of subterfuge.

Allowing his shrinking Shell to crumble sooner than it would have otherwise, he used the resulting tide of shadows to send one of his incarnations away unnoticed.

His strength diminished, and the pressure on his mind increased as the shadow fled – not enough to break him, but enough to make his sway.

He used the Lord of Shadows to draw the attention of Lonesome Howl, Silent Stalker, Ceres, and Siord – just enough for the stealthy incarnation to reach Beastmaster. Then, he emerged from the shadows, manifested a sharp stiletto, and pressed it against his neck.s

At this point... he was actually unsure what to do.

Taking the beautiful enchantress hostage had seemed like a good idea before, but now that he was standing next to her, barely lucid under the assault of her Aspect, Sunny realized that she was far too dangerous to keep alive.

He hesitated for a moment, wanting to kill her, but knowing that her death would be too great of a loss. He really did not know what choice was the right one.

But there was no time to think, so he simply went with the option that was not irreversible.

If he really wanted to, he could always kill Beastmaster later. However, bringing her back from the dead seemed like a very troublesome task.

Pulling the blade of the stiletto away, he brought his heavy gauntlet down on the back of her head.

There was a heavy thud, and the bewitching Saint crumbled to the ground like a doll that had her strings cut.

Sunny looked at her with regret... then smiled naughtily behind his mask.

“...Look at that. Princess Beastmaster, groveling at my feet. Should I tell Rain?”

His smile did not linger for long, though. As it dimmed, he glanced in the direction of his haughty avatar.

Now, he just had to deal with the remaining four Saints.

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Lonesome Howl could smell it...

Victory.

Today, victory smelled of blood, senseless death, and regret. But its smell was nevertheless sweet.

The damned monster had finally run out of essence. His towering Transcendent form steadily diminished in size... at first. Then, the speed at which it mended itself slowed, finally coming to a halt. And a few moments ago, the onyx demon finally crumbled, turning into a tide of darkness.

Now, all that remained was a small, battered man.

The Lord of Shadows still looked formidable, though.

His fearsome armor was breached and broken in many places, and yet, there was not even a single drop of blood flowing from the breaches. It was as if there was no human body underneath at all... just more darkness, more shadow.

His cold and arrogant demeanor had not changed, either, despite the fact that five of them were surrounding him from all sides.

The Lord of Shadows still had some strength left.

But it was hopeless.

What can one man do against five Transcendent beings?

Without the size and mass of his demonic Transformation, he had no hope of facing all of them alone. Not today, at least.

Just a moment before they lunged forward to rip him apart, the Lord of Shadows suddenly spoke in his indifferent, cold voice:

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

His words seemed to indicate despair, but his tone was anything but desperate.

Suddenly, Lonesome Howl felt an ominous chill.

And then, her long ears flicked, the fur on her back standing on its end.

That was because she heard something that should have been impossible.

Another voice... coming from somewhere far behind.

Spinning around, she witnessed a scene that made her heart turn to ice.

Bin was falling to the ground, bright blood flowing down her back.

And there, above her... stood another figure clad in fearsome onyx armor, his white hair dancing in the wind.

He was almost exactly like the man standing calmly in front of her. Only his mask seemed subtly different, and slightly less eerie.

‘What…’

Why... why were there two of them?

“Don't bother... she's dead.”

His indifferent voice cut her like a blade.

Whipping her head back, Lonesome Howl stared at the Lord of Shadow... the original one... in stunned silence.

Then, she let out a terrible roar and lunged forward.

The other three – Silence, Siord, and Ceres – followed her with murderous determination.

It was just that...

As soon as they moved, the shadows of their enemy moved, as well. And a split second later, two more Lords of Shadows were standing side by side with the first one.

These ones wore onyx helmets with white plumes instead of the ferocious mask, darkness nestling in their visors... they looked eerily similar to the graceful Echo of the Lord of Shadows, one that commanded true darkness and had faced Revel at Vanishing Lake.

And just like that, their numerical advantage was gone.

Everything was gone.

Even as she threw her bleeding body at the enemy, Lonesome Howl couldn't help but shiver.

That Echo...

Was it an Echo of a human Saint?

Was that an Echo... of the Lord of Shadows himself?

Had he killed himself and risen from the dead like a vengeful wraith?

Or was it no Echo at all?

Were all of them -

– the Lord, the Knight, the Fiend, the Serpent – merely various forms that one dark creature took to pursue its sinister goals?

Lonesome Howl did not know.

But she suddenly felt fear.

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If Sunny knew what the princess of Song was thinking about, he would be amused.

And a little sad.

After all, he had hoped that people would stop confusing him with Saint – who was a woman! – after the memory of him was erased from the world.

However, he did not know, and had no time to care.

He still had four Saints to defeat.

Yes, the Saints of Song were wounded and running low on essence, while Sunny was relatively unscathed and had more essence than he could burn at the moment. And yes, they did not have the advantage of numbers anymore.

But he was not going to relax.

That was how people got killed – by allowing themselves to become arrogant when victory was already in sight.

Lonesome Howl and Silent Stalker were daughters of Ki Song, and they had to have a few deadly surprises left, without a doubt. Perhaps powerful Memories... perhaps more drops of their mother's blood.

Something was going to go wrong, for sure – or all of it.

His task was to win even if everything went wrong.

His three avatars clashed with Lonesome Howl, Ceres, and Siord. The fourth avatar, meanwhile, dashed forward to intercept Silent Stalker.

And as he fought with four bodies, making them move as one…

Something in his mind clicked.

Even consumed by the fervor of battle, Sunny couldn't help but smile.

It was all coming together.

His Transcendent Battle Art was finally going to be complete.