1974. Lost Time

Rain hesitated, trying to formulate her question better.

"I mean... are you a human? A spirit? Some strange apparition that enjoys cooking, terrifying vast armies of Awakened, and educating young maidens? And don't you dare say that you are just a shadow! What does that even mean?"

Her teacher stared at her for a few moments.

"Well... a shadow is the dark area that appears when an object blocks the source of light..."

Rain clenched her fists.

"That's not what I was asking!”

He laughed, then commanded the shadows to rise from the floor and manifest into another - much less comfortable, from the looks of it - chair.

Sitting down, her teacher shrugged.

"What are you even talking about? I am just a human Saint."

Rain shook her head energetically.

"No! I've met Saints, and there are no human Saints like you. You never sleep, never eat, live in the shadows, and go around slaying Skinwalker vessels as if they were children. You even know how to guide a person to Awakening without infecting them with the Spell. And that is just one-seventh of you!"

He hesitated for a little while.

"Well, alright. I'm not... just... a human Saint. I am quite special, as far as human Saints go."

Leaning back, he smiled.

"In fact, there is no one else like me. As far as I know, there are two other Transcendent humans who can rival my power. However, I am unique even among them... because I am not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell anymore."

Rain blinked.

'A Saint... who is not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell?'

Anymore?

How was that possible?

Noticing her confused expression, her teacher chuckled.

"It's a long story - a story that spans thousands of years, actually, so forgive me if I don't go into detail. Suffice it to say, I met a very loathsome Cursed Terror in my Third Nightmare... and here I am."

He hesitated, and then added.

"My original body is someplace else. Unlike this incarnation, it does eat, sleep, and perform all the things that humans tend to do. The version of me that has been following you around, meanwhile, is one of my shadows. That is why I sometimes seem a bit weird, compared to normal humans."

Rain studied him silently.

'So that's how it is!'

She felt satisfied, because things were finally starting to make sense…

But, strangely enough... she also felt a little betrayed. Because her teacher had an entire other life - several of them, actually - that she knew nothing about.

Suddenly, something occurred to her.

"Teacher... if you are a human, then what is your name?"

He coughed.

"My name? Huh... well, if you must know, my name is Sunless. But people usually call me Sunny."

Rain stared at her for a few moments.

Then, she leaned back and laughed.

The laughter came on its own, and although she had tried, she failed to contain it.

"Oh... oh, sorry! It's just funny. Because people used to call me Rainy."

Sunny and Rainy... they were quite a pair, weren't they?

'No... I just can't call Teacher that way!'

Rain felt a strange warmth spread in her chest after finally learning his name. But, at the same time, it was very strange, to think about calling her teacher by such a mundane and human name she could at least imagine calling him Sunless, but "Sunny"...

'Nope. No way!'

Even if he really was a human, he had not deserved to be treated like one!

After everything he had put her through…

Rain spend some time in silence, digesting the earth - shattering revelations that had befallen her out of nowhere.

'He's the damn Lord of Shadows!'

Eventually, another thought suddenly flashed in her mind, and her expression changed.

'We are quite a pair?'

Now that she knew about the many incarnations of her teacher, she could understand why he was ruling a Citadel in Godgrave and serving the King of Swords. She could also understand why he had positioned himself close to Lady Nephis.

She could even understand why he would run a restaurant, somewhat.

In fact, out of all the lives her teacher had mentioned, only one wasn't making any sense.

This one. The life in which he followed a random mundane girl around, taught her how to survive and thrive in the dire world, and guided her on the Path of Ascension.

Why was this tremendously powerful Saint, someone who clearly aimed to exert influence on the flow of history, was wasting his time with her?

Rain was no one special. She was hardworking and talented, yes, but so were countless other people.

In fact...

Hadn't their first ever encounter been strange, to begin with?

Because even back then, in the nameless convenience store in NQSC, her teacher had already known her name.

Rain raised her head and looked at him intently.

"Teacher..."

He smiled faintly.

"Yes? Are you ready to take a look at those Memories? I've worked really hard on them, you know!"

Usually, Rain would have been mesmerized by the promise of receiving new Memories, but today, she did not even spare them a second thought.

Instead, she asked:

"Why did you offer to teach me?"

He stared at her silently for a few moments.

Then, her teacher scoffed.

"Haven't I told you? It's because I am your long - lost brother."

Rain sighed.

"And I told you that I would have remembered having a brother."

He studied her for a while without saying a word.

Then, he shrugged nonchalantly.

"Weren't you adopted?"

Rain nodded slowly, not knowing what that had to do with anything.

'Wait...'

Her teacher smiled.

"Well, I was your brother before that. There... you have my permission to drop the 'teacher' and start calling me 'older brother' instead."

Rain froze.

'Before... that?'

She had no memories from before she was adopted. After all, that happened when she was very young - three years old, at best.

Her parents had never made a secret of the fact that she was not their biological child, and had never treated her differently because of that. That was why Rain had never really felt a need to learn where she had come from...

However, she had tried to find out eventually. Her parents helped her, and her dad even pulled some strings at work.

But there was nothing to learn. There was no robust centralized database that contained the records of every person living in the outskirts - in fact, many of them had no digital trace whatsoever. They weren't citizens, and so, the government did not care to waste manpower on keeping records of them.

All they found out was that Rain's parents were both deceased, her mother passing away last due to illness - even that was only a rumor an orphanage worker heard from the person who had worked there before him.

And that was all.

She had been a little disappointed to have learned nothing, but not too much.

So why... why did Rain feel like she was forgetting something?

It was as if she had just thought about it, but the thought slipped away.

Looking at her teacher, she asked evenly:

"If you are really my brother... then where have you been? Where have you been all this time?"

His smile dimmed a little.

Strangely, Rain found it hard to focus on what he was about to say.

Her teacher lingered for a few moments, then looked away.

"Rotting in the outskirts, at first. And then... well. I can't really tell you, and you should not ask."

Rain looked at him, stunned.

He was not joking. He had not been joking, from the start.

She felt... some strange, inexplicable emotion rising in her heart.

She thought that she had never cared about her original family and about her past. But now, it seemed that she had been wrong.

Or maybe she had simply forgotten.

Looking at the young man sitting in front of her...

The familiar, insufferable, whimsical, caring, strong, funny, unreliable, dependable man who had been her companion, confidant, teacher, and protector for the last four years...

Rain took a shaky breath.

Then, she said tentatively:

"B... brother?"