1785 Hermit Saint of Godgrave

"The Lord of Shadows?"

The porters shivered.

Night had fallen, and only the light of the bonfire illuminated the desolate plain. Flakes of ash danced in the air. Far away, the white phalanxes of the dead delty towered above the plain like mountains, and three pale moons were drowning in the darkness of the cold sky.

It was a perfect environment to tell a scary story.

Awakened Ray smiled faintly.

"Yes. The Lord of Shadows..."

Rain shifted a little to hear him better. She was haunted by an insufferable shadow, so of course, anything that had to do with shadows was of interest to her.

The young man took a deep breath, cradled a cup of fragrant tea in his hands, and continued:

"Out there in Godgrave, the sky is usually covered by clouds. When the veil of clouds is torn, blinding light pours from an incandescent white abyss, incinerating anything that moves. But... there is a place where light can never reach. A land that is forever shrouded in darkness, Out there in the darkness stands an ancient temple build of black stone, That is where the Lord of Shadows lives."

Rain stared at Awakened Ray incredulously.

‘...Is he an Idiot?'

The young man had good control of his voice, drawing the listeners into the scene he was describing. But... no, what was he doing? Were they in a theater? Why couldn't he just speak normally?

Awakened Fleur turned away, blushing from embarrassment. Tamar of Sorrow closed her eyes with a stoic expression.

The porters, though, seemed delighted and leaned forward a little, enjoying the story. Rain blinked a couple of times, then did the same, not wishing to stand out.

Awakened Ray continued:

"The Lord of Shadows... is believed to be a reclusive Saint, but nobody knows for sure where he comes from. Nobody even knows if he is a human, really. He always wears a suit of black armor, and wears a fearsome black mask. His voice is cold and insidious, and his powers are great beyond belief. He lives alone in the dark temple, surrounded only by the devils who serve him."

The young man took a deep breath and then said quietly, allowing his voice to tremble a little.

"It's true, I've been to the temple, and saw those devils myself. One is a living statue of a beautiful female knight. One is a towering hellspawn forged from black metal, One is an enormous serpent whose body envelops the entire temple, its scales like polished onyx, However, none of them are as frightening as the Lord of Shadows himself. His mask is carved from black wood in the image of an ancient fiend, and looking into its eyes... is like looking into the abyss itself."

He shivered and shook his head.

"I thought that I'd die right there and then, looking at him. However, the Lord of Shadow just stared at me for a while, unmoving, and then said in a voice that lacked all human emotion... 'I've decided not to kill you, Dreamer Ray' As if he needed a reason to allow someone to live, instead of a reason to take someone's life."

Rain secretly threw a glance at her own shadow.

How come that Lord of Shadows lived in a palatial temple and had a bunch of powerful minions serving him, while her teacher did not even have a place to stay?

Was her teacher a bum among shadows?

'Unfair...'

One of the porters asked in a trembling voice:

"But, Awakened Ray, sir... how did you end up in that evil temple?"

Ray opened his mouth to answer, but it was Fleur who spoke first... perhaps afraid that he'll say something nonsensical.

"The Spell sent us three to Godgrave, We found a place to hide and send Ray to scout a path of escape, maybe find someone to rescue us... he stumbled into the territory of the Lord of Shadows of accident, and was brought to the Citadel by one of the Lord's Echoes."

Tamar nodded.

"Actually, the Lord of Shadows rescued several Sleepers last year, as well. That is where most of what is known about him comes from - from what those Sleepers sald after being sent to the Song Domain. Well, we were actually lucky. I don't know if he would have gone out of his way to find me and Fleur, but there was someone else at the temple when Ray arrived."

Ray stared at his two companions with resentment, indignant that they had spoiled his theatrical retelling of their first venture into the Dream Realm. Then, he sighed and nodded.

"Yes. If I was alone... the Lord of Shadows might have sent me back on my own, or even disposed of me to avoid inconvenience. He's a bit... sinister, to say the least. Luckily, at the time, Changing Star and a cohort of Fire Keepers were taking shelter in the temple. They were on a mission in Godgrave, but took time to risk themselves and rescue Fleur and Tamar. Lady Nephis even persuaded the Lord of Shadows to help. If anyone can convince an eccentric powerhouse like him, it's her."

Tamar sighed.

"The three of us could only hide. Even now that we have Awakened, we would not survive a day in Godgrave, But Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows, they willingly went into the depths of the abomination-Infested bones to save us. Because of it, they were surrounded by Great Nightmare Creatures."

She glanced at Fleur, hesitated for a moment, and added in a wistful tone:

"The Lord of Shadows took us and used some kind of movement ability to cross more than a hundred kilometers in a few seconds. Then, he threw us to the Fire Keepers and went back. We could only feel the ground shaking from time to time... but, eventually, both of them returned. Battered, but alive."

Everyone seemed shocked.

"They fought m-many Great abominations? And won?"

Tamar spared a joyless smile and nodded.

"In fact, many Saints can prevail in a battle against a Great Nightmare Creature of a lower Class. Several of them, though... it's like a death sentence. Only Changing Star and a few others are capable. The Lord of Shadows... even though I don't know who he is, his powers are at least equal to those of the most valiant Transcendents. He is without a doubt one of the most lethal warriors of this era."

She looked into the fire.

"Don't listen to Ray and his nonsense, though. The Lord of Shadows is just a Saint. People say that he is eccentric, and I can understand why - who would want to live in a Death Zone? Maybe he just hates people, or maybe it has something to do with his Flaw. In any case, the three of us owe him a debt of gratitude. We would have been dead if not for his strength."

Rain was deep in thought about the mysterious Saint... but the porters seemed to have forgotten about his existence already.

Instead, they leaned forward with glistening eyes.

"So... uh... Lady Tamar..."

Old Carel smiled excitedly.

"Did you say that you met Changing Star and the Fire Keepers?!"

The other porters were similarly excited.

"Wow! What is she like in real life? Is she as beautiful as in the recordings?"

"Was Lady Cassia there, as well?"

"Did you fly on the Chain Breaker?"

Rain rolled her eyes.

Then, unexpectedly, she opened her mouth and said in a tone of nonchalance:

"You guys, leave Lady Tamar alone. Also, if you want to know about Changing Star, just ask me. You might not know, but she taught me swordsmanship once. Oh... Nightingale gave me a few archery lessons, by the way. And I used to scold Saint Athena because she leaves dirty plates around the house... tsk, that slovenly woman..."

‘What the hell am I doing?’

Why was she spouting nonsense? That was not like her at all!

But... unexpectedly, it was also a bit fun.

‘Oh, no... teacher has corrupted me…’

The porters stared at her, then exploded with laughter.

"Right... so, Rani, what is Lady Changing Star like?"

"Are you sure that she taught you swordsmanship? Didn't you teach her, instead?"

"No one has seen that Shadow Lord without mask. Maybe it was Rani all along!"

Rain spared them a bright smile.

"...Well, have you ever seen me and the Lord of Shadows in the same room?"

There was another bout of laughter.

Some time later, the roasted meat was finished, and the members of the survey team went back to their tents. The three Awakened decided which one of them would guard the camp first and followed suit.

Rain spent several hours revolving her essence. Deep at nighth, she finally sprawled on her sleeping bag in total exhaustion.

She lingered for a while, then asked quietly:

"Hey, Teacher, Do you know about that Lord of Shadows?"

He remained silent for a while.

"Sure. I know him quite well. Why are you asking?"

Rain smiled in the darkness.

"No, no reason. It's just that... you are a shadow, and he's the Lord of Shadows. So, uh... is he like you superior?"

Her teacher's voice revealed a hint of indignation.

"Who, that clown? My superior? Ha! If I wanted to, I could erase him from existence with a thought."

She chuckled.

"But he has a huge temple and a bunch of powerful servants. He also seems close with Lady Nephis... didn't you say once that you're practically her boyfriend? Sorry, I don't mean to sound rude... but it seems more like he is her boyfriend, instead..."

Her teacher was appalled.

"I did say that. And, by the way... I am! I asked her on a date, and she agreed. She was delighted to agree, even! Who can resist my charm?"

Rain grinned.

"I'm just saying. That Lord of Shadows, he seems to know what's what. Won't the other shadows mock you for being an underachiever because of him? No temple, no servants, no beautiful Saintess hanging on your arm... ah, I pity my poor teacher... teacher is such an ascetic..."

Instead of an answer, a threatening grow! resounded from the darkness.