1969 Summoned Demon

Master Karna of the Maharana Clan observed the white slopes of the dead god's arm with a somber expression. The abominable jungle was gone, and the caravan was far above the Sea of Ash now. The crossing to the Collarbone Plain was close, so the most dangerous part of the journey was almost behind them.

Yet still, he felt ill at ease.

Perhaps it was because of the radiant clouds above, or because of how desolate the landscape was. Perhaps it was for no reason at all, and he was simply tense because of the heavy responsibility of protecting the caravan.

Although not a grizzled veteran, he was experienced enough to know that the last stretch of a journey was often the most perilous — for no other reason than the fact that people tended to abandon caution once the final destination was already in sight.

His cousin, Saint Dar, had taught him that. We ought to stay alert.

He turned back to look at the caravan. The sight alleviated his worry, somewhat.

There were more than a hundred heavy wagons being pulled across the crude road, each loaded with precious supplies. Which meant that there were at least a hundred ferocious, towering beasts pulling them — Beastmaster's thralls, most of them at least equal to him in Rank.

Some of the enthralled Nightmare Creatures had come from the various regions of the Song Domain, some had been subjugated by the Queen's daughter here in Godgrave. They alone were a fearsome force, making the caravan akin to a moving fortress.

But the thralls weren't the only ones defending it.

There were Awakened warriors, as well — two hundred of them. There were a dozen Masters like him. There were also powerful Echoes, and, most importantly of all...

The pilgrims were escorting the caravan, walking silently at its flanks. Although the walking dead made Karna unease, they were the heralds of the Queen. As such, they were the best shield he could have hoped for.

The caravan had already experienced several battles on the way to Godgrave, obliterating swarms of Nightmare Creatures lured by the smell of human souls. Each time, the abominations were easily eradicated before reaching the wagons — so, it was hard to imagine that something could threaten him and his soldiers.

'We are already so close...'

Unless a demon climbed out of hell to destroy them, they would make it to the warcamp unscathed.

"Karna!"

The shout of a fellow Master made him flinch and turn around.

He did not need to know what they were warning him about. He could already see.

Out there in front of them, in the distance, a dark figure was standing on the sun-bleached surface of the ancient bone. It had appeared out of nowhere like an apparition, for there had been no one and nothing ahead just a few short moments ago.

'A... a pilgrim? Was someone sent to meet us?'

Feeling a chill creep up his spine, Karna narrowed his eyes.

He saw a fearsome armor that seemed to be carved out of polished black onyx. A frightening mask that resembled the face of a fierce demon, crowned by three twisting horns. The apparition

was motionless, looking down. Its long white hair was moving slightly in the wind, like strands of a silken spiderweb.

But then, as if sensing Karna's gaze, the demon looked up, revealing two pools of darkness where the mask's eyes should have been.

Karna trembled.

For a moment, he really believed that his careless thought had summoned a devil from the depths of hell to feast on their souls.

But then, he forcefully composed himself.

"It... it's him."

The Lord of Shadows.

The sellsword Saint who had faced Dark Dancer Revel and survived.

The news of the battle at Vanishing Lake had spread through the Song Army swiftly. Although the daughters of the Queen had ultimately failed to capture the Citadel, they still managed to escape unscathed after killing seven Saints of the Sword Domain.

Karna wasn't particularly happy to know that those great warriors had perished, but he knew that it was a triumphant victory that would save the lives of countless soldiers like him in the future.

Regardless, one of the most extraordinary details about the battle of Vanishing Lakes was the clash between the Lightslayer and the Lord of Shadows. He had not shown his strength before, but now, there was no one in Godgrave who did not know about it, and was not wary of him.

Although very few people in the Song Domain had ever seen him, rumors about the sinister fiend hired by the wicked King of Swords were both abundant and frightening.

Some said that he was a madman whose Flaw demanded that he revel in bloodshed and slaughter. Some said that he was the last surviving member of a fallen clan, sworn to vengeance against all of humanity. Some said that he was a loathsome killer who had escaped to the Dream Realm many years ago to save himself from being pursued by the Soul Reaper.

Some even said that he was no human at all, but instead a Nightmare Creature masquerading as one. The original vessel of the Skinwalker, perhaps, or of something even more terrifying.

In any case, all the rumors agreed on one thing —that the Lord of Shadows was immensely powerful and utterly ruthless.

Karna gritted his teeth.

Still... he was merely one man.

Even if the Lord of Shadows was a Saint, he was facing an entire army alone. There were two hundred Awakened warriors, two cohorts of Masters, and a hundred enthralled Nightmare Creatures — many of them of the Corrupted Rank — facing him.

There were also the pilgrims.

No matter how powerful, one man could not defeat an army.

Turning to his comrades, Karna opened his mouth, wanting to bolster their spirits and give the command to attack...

But then, he froze.

Something was wrong about the world. Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

Looking down, he felt icy claws grasp his heart.

'...What?'

The closest person to him was a fellow Master — a quiet woman who was a retainer of the royal clan. Everything about her was familiar, except for one thing.

For some reason, the woman had two shadows. Karna had two shadows, as well.

He stared at the shadows in horror, trying to understand where the extra ones had come from, and what their appearance meant.

Then, he saw two crimson flames igniting in the depths of his own shadow.

...That was the last thing Karna saw.

Because in the next moment, the world was suddenly consumed by impenetrable darkness.