1970 Fear of Shadows

Darkness had descended upon Godgrave, where the sun never set. Karna was both startled and, despite not wanting to admit it, scared. He had in his possession a Memory that granted him a night vision akin to that of a nocturnal predator, and yet, he suddenly found himself blind.

Which meant that the darkness surrounding him was not simply a vast shadow, but true darkness instead.

He could not see anything... but he could hear. There were plenty of sounds.

The roars of the enthralled Nightmare Creatures, the screaming human voices, the clangor of metal, the nauseating crunching of splitting flesh. It all happened in an instant, turning the peaceful melody of creaking wheels into a deafening clamor of battle.

'How can he...'

But there was no time to guess.

Snarling, Karna activated his Awakened Ability. In the next moment, he switched places with an Awakened warrior who had been guarding a wagon a few dozen meters behind.

There was still only darkness, so Karna switched places with another soldier, moving even further back.

'Come on, come on...'

Finally, he escaped into the light.

In front of him, the front of the caravan was swallowed by a pool of darkness. Behind him was chaos — everyone was startled by the unexpected attack, not knowing what was going on.

There was something different about the state of the caravan, as well.

Apart from those unfortunate souls caught in the pool of true darkness, the rest of the soldiers were alright. So were the thralls of Beastmaster.

However, the pilgrims — each and every one of them —were gone, replaced by tall bonfires. Someone, or something, had set them all aflame in these few short moments.

Karna paled a little and jumped onto the wagon, looking ahead, in the direction where the Lord of Shadows had been standing before.

He saw the sinister Saint almost instantly.

The Lord of Shadows was calmly walking down the bone slope, his steps graceful and unhurried. The back of a black odachi rested on his shoulder, and his white hair was fluttering in the wind.

There were still several hundred meters separating him from the caravan, but the madman was indeed intending to face them all alone.

Karna's eyes narrowed.

If so... he was going to oblige.

Raising his bow, he put some strength into his voice and bellowed:

"If s the Lord of Shadows! Brothers, with me... attack!"

And they did.

The warriors surged forward, the wagon drivers cut the Nightmare Creatures loose, allowing them to rush at the Valor's hired fiend in a murderous frenzy. Arrows streaked across the sky, and scores of Aspect Abilities were unleashed.

The sight of it was daunting.

However, in the next moment, Karna felt his mouth turning dry.

It was because countless shadows suddenly moved all around them, coming alive.

The light of day seemed dimmer now, the darkness deeper.

Some of the shadows shot from the ground, turning into needle-sharp spikes — they pierced the bodies of Beastmaster's thralls. Some turned into black chains that slithered across the ground, binding soldiers and pulling them down.

Some even turned into black hands, each with seven fingers that ended in sharp claws, blocking the Aspect Abilities.

Blood spilled on the white bone, a terrible cacophony of screams permeated the air, and several wagons were split apart by the unleashed violence.

Karna growled.

"Curse you!"

A Saint was a powerful existence, but not an invulnerable one. They still bled like humans, and could be killed by humans.

All it would take was one sword that struck true, one arrow that bypassed the enemy's onyx armor...

Nocking an arrow on the string of his bow, Karna activated both its enchantment and his Ascended Ability, then drew it and took aim.

'Come on!'

He was far inferior to Saint Dar in terms of archery. But he was still better and far more deadly than almost any other archer out there. And so...

Karna let his arrow loose.

It shot forward at terrible speed... and disappeared.

A split second later, though, it emerged out of nowhere mere meters away from the Lord of Shadows, ready to plunge into the eye of his fierce mask a split second later.

Its instantaneous arrival was both bizarre and insidious, and it left the enemy no time to react.

However...

Even though the Lord of Shadow could not have predicted what would happen, and had only a fraction of a second to move, he still did.

In the next moment, his hand shot upward and caught Karna's arrow, holding it a few centimeters away from his eye.

Karna staggered back.

'I—impossible...'

But a heartbeat later, the Lord of Shadows was suddenly standing in front of him.

'He...'

Karna's eyes widened.

He had followed the arrow back. Had he... stolen Karna's Ascended Ability?

Just like he had stolen Princess Revel's true darkness.

"He's here! Fight!"

The black odachi moved.

In the next few minutes, Karna witnessed a scene of pure horror.

The Lord of Shadows did not just look like a fiend... he was a fiend. The sinister Saint moved with the grace of a dancer and the ruthless precision of a butcher, his sword never resting and never failing to find its target. His white hair fluttered in the wind like ghostly silk.

The attacks of the Awakened warriors either missed him entirely or were deflected by the polished surface of the onyx armor, not leaving even a scratch on it. The Nightmare Creatures —terrifying monsters that had once threatened the lives of the champions of the Song Army — fell to the ground one after another, their bodies severed and horribly mangled by the black sword.

The Lord of Shadows moved in the storm of blood like an omen of death, the gaze of his fierce mask remaining utterly indifferent, utterly cold... utterly devoid of mercy.

But the demon was not without emotion.

What frightened Karna the most... was that he could faintly hear the sinister Saint humming an upbeat tune as he slaughtered Corrupted abominations and bathed in their blood.

The sick bastard... was enjoying the harrowing massacre.

Karna had been wrong.

That thing could not be a human.

It had to not be a human — otherwise, there would be nothing sane left in the world.

At some point, the Lord of Shadows seemed to have grown tired of pretending to be a person and shed his human disguise, turning into a towering devil with four mighty arms and a frightening crown of horns. His already terrifying strength exploded, and he continued his macabre dance of death, tearing a path of carnage and destruction across the caravan.

Nothing could stop him.

One second, he was in one place, gruesomely tearing a powerful Nightmare Creature apart. Next second, he was somehow a hundred meters away, throwing a Master to the ground with a heavy blow of his onyx gauntlet.

And throughout all of this, the darkness continued to flow. The shadows continued to move. The black chains rattled as they imprisoned their prey, and blood flowed like a river.

Karna was... appalled.

But his indignation did not save him.

In the end, his enchanted bow was cut in half, his sword was shattered, and he was thrown to his knees, the black chains binding his limbs.

The battle was over.

Shaking, Karna looked around.

The darkness was gone. The burning pilgrims had turned to ash. The thralls of Beastmaster were all eviscerated, laying in bloody piles on the ground. The Awakened warriors were all bound by chains, many of them unconscious...

They were utterly defeated.

And the lone creature that had defeated them had not even shed a single drop of blood.

Karna let out a desperate growl.

"Curse you! Curse you, you demon!"

His voice was the only thing breaking the silence, apart from the groans of the wounded soldiers.

No... there was another sound.

The Lord of Shadows was still humming joyfully, as if today was the best day of his life.

The terrifying demon of darkness had assumed his human form once again, observing the battlefield with a strange sense of satisfaction, like a demented artist looking at a painted canvas.

But then...

Something was not right.

Karna looked around once more, trying to understand where the sense of incongruity he felt had come from.

After a while, a slight shudder ran through his body.

The pilgrims had been destroyed, and the thralls had been slaughtered. However, the humans...

Many were wounded, and many were bleeding. However, their wounds were shallow, and their bleeding was light.

And none of them were dead.

They were knocked out, bound by the black

chains, and immobilized. But they were alive.

Karna gasped, feeling both relieved and suffocated. He felt bitter.

Because he knew...

That keeping an enemy alive in a battle was much harder than killing them. The Lord of Shadows, that fiend... had not even shown them his true power. His true malevolence, his true ability to sow death were still unknown.

How could that be?

How had Princess Revel survived meeting this horror?

"Why..."

His whisper was quiet, but the dark apparition seemed to have heard him.

The Lord of Shadow turned the chilling gaze of his lightless eyes in Karna's direction. Knowing that there was no sense in trying to avoid attention anymore, Karna gritted his teeth.

"Why did you spare us?!"

The fiend stared at him silently for a while, then chuckled.

His voice was cold and arrogant:

"...Because Changing Star asked me to show mercy today.."

The Lord of Shadow grew quiet for a moment, then let out a regretful sigh.

"If s such a shame. Usually, I love nothing more than slaying humans. How unfortunate... ah, I'm in a terrible mood."

With that, he continued to hum his lively tune and walked away.

Karna heard terrifying sounds coming from somewhere behind, but he could not turn around. It was as if something enormous was feasting, scraping the ancient bones with countless metal feet as it moved.

After some time — and eternity, perhaps — the sounds grew quiet.

Then, the black chains binding him dissolved into a tide of shadows.

He was free.

Standing up, Karna turned and looked around.

All around him, the wounded soldiers were swaying as they rose from the ground.

But the caravan itself was gone. The wagons had disappeared without a trace, most likely utterly destroyed and swallowed by some abominable being.

All that remained were the corpses of the slain Nightmare Creatures, and the blood painting the surface of Godgrave red.

And fear.

Fear of meeting the Lord of Shadows on a day when that dreadful demon was not held back by the mercy of Lady Changing Star.