1971 Rumor Mill

Rain was stirred awake by the blaring of a war horn. Opening her eyes to a stark darkness, she sighed and pulled a piece of cloth off her face —the cloth was nothing more than one of her shirts rolled to resemble a blindfold, which she used to block out the light.

Almost every soldier in Godgrave had been forced to seek out darkness in some way or another. The perpetual radiance of the murderous sky was both oppressive and a source of constant fear, but most of all, it was exhausting. It was bright almost everywhere one went, which made sleep elusive. So, they had learned ways to cope with the hateful absence of darkness and night.

Rain's way was on the primitive side, but it still let her sleep in peace. Which was why she was quite unhappy to have been awoken so early.

'What the hell is going on...'

She would have been hurriedly summoning her battle Memories before, but now that the Queen was with them, the camp of the Song Army was much safer. It was highly unlikely that there was immediate danger, so Rain took her time.

Yawning, she stretched, then summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud and climbed out of her tent as soon as the soft grey fabric covered her pale skin. A wave of heat assaulted her outside, and Rain saw that the camp was boiling with strange activity.

The soldiers were rushing, the hideous thralls were being saddled, and the pilgrims were moving silently between the tents. Far in the distance, the main gates of the camp were opening slowly.

Rain studied the commotion somberly.

"Good morning."

Turning around, she saw Tamar standing with her arms crossed a few steps away. Beside her, Ray and Fleur were starting a fire to prepare food.

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"Is it morning?"

The young Legacy shrugged.

"I might as well be. Does it matter?"

Rain failed to suppress another yawn and shook her head.

Walking to the fire pit, she asked:

"What is going on?"

Ray, who had been trying to fire up the kindling with a mundane flint, looked up at her in surprise.

"You haven't heard?"

Rain stared at him for a moment, then took the flint from his hands and ignited the kindling on the first try.

"How would I have heard anything while asleep?"

Everything had been fine yesterday.

A corner of Tamar's mouth curled upward a little. She took a seat near the fire and summoned a spacial storage Memory... which had been the source of endless envy for Rain ever since the Legacy girl received it from the Saint of Sorrow.

Taking out their provisions and a can of powdered coffee — another luxury item — Tamar handed them to Fleur and spoke:

"The news reached the camp a few hours ago —there was another clash with the forces of the Sword Domain. Congratulations. You slept through the second human battle of this war."

Rain froze for a moment, feeling a cold shiver travel down her spine. Her mood was instantly spoiled.

She sighed.

"Oh yeah? Was it on the crossing to the Breastbone Reach?"

That was where the first major battleground of the Realm War would be, and where the Seventh Legion would be marching for in a few days.

Tamar slowly shook her head, her expression turning a bit dark.

"No. It happened near the crossing from the Right Arm to the Collarbone Plain, behind us. A supply caravan was attacked... by the Lord of Shadows."

Now that was concerning news.

Rain threw a sidelong glance at her shadow, wondering how her teacher felt about someone wielding a similar authority launching an attack on the Song Army.

There was a lot of talk about the Lord of Shadows in the camp these days, painting him to be some kind of a monster. Well, it wasn't that uncalled-for — after all, he had crossed blades with Princess Revel and lived to tell the tale.

No one would have been surprised if someone like Changing Star or Morgan of Valor had done the same, but for an entirely unknown Saint to prove himself capable of facing the First Princess in battle was a disturbing revelation. Added to the sinister reputation and mysterious nature of the Lord of Shadows, wild rumors about him were bound to spread.

The situation was not helped by the fact that very few people in the Song camp had ever seen him, like her cohort members had.

Rain suddenly felt tense.

"...How did the Lord of Shadows and his troops manage to reach our rear without being noticed?"

Ray shivered.

"That's the thing. There were no troops... the madman attacked the caravan alone."

The young man seemed stuck somewhere between terror and awe.

"And it wasn't a harassment attack, either. He actually obliterated the entire caravan. Alone."

Rain froze.

She had seen these supply caravans entering the camp. They were not an easy target... far from it, actually. Each was guarded by hundreds of Awakened warriors, several cohorts of Masters, scores of powerful thralls — many of them of the Corrupted Rank — and now escorted by the Queen's pilgrims.

One Saint obliterated them all? How was that possible?

...Were the rumors about the Lord of Shadows not as exaggerated as she had thought?

Both the rumors about his frightening power and the rumors about him being a monster.

Fleur placed a coffee pot on the fire and sighed.

"That is not the strangest part, though."

Rain glanced at her.

"It isn't?"

The delicate girl nodded, her expression strangely similar to one of relief.

"The Lord of Shadow did not just destroy the caravan. For some reason, he spared every human guarding it. He killed the thralls and the pilgrims, but left the soldiers alive."

Tamar's subtle smile widened a little.

"Don't we know the reason? He said it himself. It was because Lady Changing Star had asked him to be merciful."

She seemed strangely cheerful despite the slap dealt to the Song Army.

Rain, meanwhile, was a little dumbfounded.

She could easily believe that Lady Nephis had asked the sellsword Saint to be merciful. She could even believe that the Lord of Shadows would actually listen to her...

But subduing so many warriors? Not killing them, but defeating them without taking a single life?

Just how terrifying did one's power have to be to achieve a feat like that?

She felt both disturbed and relieved. Relieved because her fellow soldiers had been spared, and disturbed because the nebulous figure of the Lord of Shadows seemed even more frightening now.

What would happen on the day the enemy decided not to stay his blade?

Ray cursed quietly.

"I told you all that he was a scary bastard. The first time I saw him... gods. He said... Dreamer Ray, I've decided not to kill you! As if killing me was the default option! If not for Lady Nephis, I would have probably died right there and then."

Fleur looked at him scornfully.

"But he saved our lives, in the end. Show some gratitude."

Ray spared her an apologetic smile.

Tamar sighed, took the cup of fragrant coffee that Fleur offered her, and said:

"In any case, the remnants of the caravan are still on the Right Arm. They are alive, but many are wounded — so, the army is sending a rescue force to bring them back. We'll know more once they reach the camp."

Then, her expression changed, and she looked around in confusion.

"But... what was that noise?"

Rain scratched the back of her head, receiving her own cup of coffee.

"What noise? I didn't hear anything."

She was lying through her teeth, though.

She did hear it.

'What the hell?!'

Tamar frowned.

"I am sure I heard something. Sounded like... humming?"