1972 Private Conversation

Rain took a sip of coffee, hiding her face behind the tin cup.

She had heard it too!

After all, the humming had come from her own shadow.

'What is this fool doing?!'

Feeling pins and needles, she gulped down the scalding coffee and forced out a smile.

"Well, anyway. I'll go take a walk... I mean, visit the baths. Thank you kindly, Fleur, the coffee was delicious!"

She had to get away from her companions as quickly as possible, in case her teacher was planning to start whistling or actually break into a song.

Rain was truly flabbergasted. He had always been flawlessly cautious when around other people... what could have made him commit such a ridiculous mistake?

Putting the cup down, she stood up, stretched one more time, and headed away from their small cluster of tents.

"Wait, Rani! Aren't you going to eat breakfast?"

Rain waved a hand and answered Tamar in a carefree tone:

"Later! I'm not very hungry."

'Damnation...'

She needed to find somewhere private to talk to her teacher. Sadly, privacy was not very common in the crowded camp of the Song Army... still, she knew a place or two.

In fact, many soldiers did, since everyone needed privacy from time to time, for one reason or another — some as innocent as simply wanting to be alone, some a bit more salacious.

The place Rain had chosen was situated at the back of a large warehouse where the building materials were stored, not far from the towering Dream Gate. Now that the walls of the camp had been built, and the Queen was here, making damaging them a tall task for the Nightmare Creatures inhabiting Godgrave, very few people visited the warehouse, let alone walked around it.

She knew this place well.

Squeezing into a narrow space between the wall of the warehouse and a neat pile of stone slabs unloaded behind it, she leaned her back against one of them and closed her eyes for a moment.

Then, she looked at her shadow angrily and hissed:

"Hey! What was that?!"

Her shadow remained silent for a bit.

Then, it answered in an absentminded tone:

"Huh? What was what?"

Rain opened her mouth, losing the ability to talk for a second.

"The humming! Why the hell were you humming before?"

A second shadow emerged from her own and scratched the back of its head.

"...Was I humming? Oh... sorry. It must have been because I'm in a really good mood."

'He finally lost what little remained of his mind!'

Rain didn't even know what to say.

Her teacher, meanwhile, assumed a human form, leaning on the wall of the warehouse across from her. He did indeed seem to be in a strangely good mood, with a subtle smile on his lips and a distant look in his eyes.

Rain had not seen him in the flesh for a long time, so being face-to-face once again warmed her heart. Still, she tried to maintain a stern expression.

He couldn't be so careless again!

Her teacher, meanwhile, gave her a long look.

"Right. Since we are already here, I actually wanted to talk to you about something."

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Well... good."

He smiled.

"What, did you miss me?"

She raised her chin a little and looked at him with disdain.

"As if!"

...That was a lie. She had, indeed, missed him quite a bit. They had not seen each other in a long while, after all.

Her teacher laughed.

"How heartless. So, you didn't really want to see me..."

He let out a sigh and shook his head sadly.

"And here I was, all excited to show you all the wonderful new Memories I prepared for you..."

Rain eyes glistened. Taking a step forward, she grabbed his arm and looked at him with an expression of utter devotion.

"Teacher! Your student missed you so much! My heart ached so terribly at being unable to see you that I couldn't sleep at all... so I just counted days and hours, finding solace in the memories of how benevolent and amazing you are..."

He stared at her for a second, then laughed.

"That's better."

Then, he fell silent.

Rain waited for a few moments.

And for a few moments more.

Eventually, she spoke:

"Teacher... so, about those Memories?"

He grinned.

"Sure, I'll give it to you. But... not here. There's something else we need to do, so let's go somewhere more private!"

Rain wanted to say that there weren't really any places more secluded than this one in the army camp, and that going outside unnoticed would not be easy...

But at that moment, her teacher fell into the shadows.

And pulled her with him.

A moment later, they were somewhere else, surrounded by darkness and the damp, suffocating smell of the jungle.

Everywhere around them, the vermilion jungle sprawled. Rain's nostrils were assaulted by countless smells, and her ears were assaulted by countless sounds. The rustle of leaves, the hum of abominable insects, the distant footsteps of dreadful predators...

They were in the middle of the jungle, surrounded by darkness. That could only mean one thing...

Rain's eyes widened, and she suddenly felt cold. Her hair stood on end.

"Teacher! Did... did you bring me to the Hollows?!"

Of course, she had kept her voice to a barely audible whisper.

He just nodded calmly, as if it was not even worthy of being mentioned.

"Yes. But don't worry... there are no Cursed Nightmare Creatures nearby. Only the Great Ones."

Rain shuddered.

'You bastard! What do you mean, "only" the Great Ones?!'

Pulling her along, her teacher walked between the ancient trees and entered a small clearing. There... somehow... Rain saw a familiar brick cottage.

She was too dazed to even bother wondering what it was doing in the Hollows.

This time, she was led to a back door — Rain was pretty sure that it had not existed the last time she saw the cottage, but now, it was undeniably there.

Inside was a vast chamber filled with darkness. And in the middle of that darkness... lay a towering mountain of items.

There were pieces of broken wagons, piles of precious mystical materials, bags of flour and rice, crates of arrows with arrowheads forged from sorcerous steel, barrels filled with unknown liquids, slabs of building stone... and so much more.

There was a very familiar symbol burned into the wooden crates, as well.

...The crest of the Royal Clan Song.

Rain froze.

Raising a shaking hand, she pointed at the mountain of supplies and asked in a small voice:

"Teacher... w—what is that?"

But she knew what it was. It was the supply caravan of the Song Army... what was left of it. He glanced at the supplies briefly and shrugged.

"That? The supplies meant for the Song Army, of course."

Rain nodded.

'Right.'

As if that explained anything!

She struggled to speak for a moment.

"But what are they doing here?"

Her teacher sighed.

"Well, I thought that it would be a real shame to just burn them all or toss them into the Sea of Ash. So, I commandeered them instead. Oh, but don't tell anyone... officially, all these supplies were destroyed..."

Feeling like she was losing her mind, Rain took a deep breath, and then whispred loudly:

"But why do you have them?! It was the Lord of Shadows who attacked the caravan! That scary bastard!"

The monster whom even Princess Revel couldn't defeat.

Her teacher stared at Rain with a surprised expression.

Then, he scratched his nose.

"…Wait, you really didn't know?"

What was she supposed to know?! Rain silently shook her head.

He coughed.

"It's because I am the Lord of Shadows!"

Noticing Rain's dumbfounded expression, her teacher smiled pleasantly.

"Just think about it... anyone claiming to be the Lord of Shadow would be claiming to be the lord of me. And even if there was a fool crazy enough to do something like that, I would have probably sent them to see the Shadow Realm real quick... to dissuade them…"