2023 The Shadow of Godgrave

People did not often see Saints fight… at least in the past.

Of course, the soldiers of the two great armies had witnessed their Transcendent generals clash with dreadful Nightmare Creatures countless times, by now. However, just like the rest of humanity, they had not been exposed to the chilling sight of demigods fighting each other.

Their ignorance had been destroyed today.

The calamitous battle between the great armies was unprecedented as far as the quantity of the Awakened soldiers involved was concerned. However, what followed next was different from all previous battles of human history in quality.

Even safely hidden away from the battlefield, the Awakened warriors had witnessed the awe and horror of a Transcendent battle in all its devastating and harrowing glory.

It was not surprising that the soldiers could not help but discuss it once the fighting stopped. Both camps were overflowing with hushed conversations, the Awakened from the different parts of the battle line sharing the stories of what they had seen.

The duels between individual Saints were already astounding enough.

But it were two clashes in particular that went beyond the realm of what humans had believed was possible.

Obviously, the name of Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan was on everyone's lips… after all, she had delivered all the soldiers from the hellish nightmare of the harrowing battle with her radiant light. Countless people owed their lives to her — some by benefit of retreating from the fight unscathed, and some quite literally, having been brought back from the brink of death by her soothing flames.

Therefore, the tale of Lady Nephis healing an entire army was spreading like a flame.

The story of her bringing the battle to a halt and sending the soldiers back to face the enemy in personal combat instead was spreading, as well.

And, of course, the story of her facing and defeating seven Saints in battle.

However, that last part was not being discussed that widely,despite how astonishing such a feat was.

It was partially because Changing Star was known for her impossible deeds, so one more did not stand out too much, and partially because the clash between Nephis and the Saints of Song had been mostly obscured by the blinding radiance of her flames, as well as billowing clouds of smoke.

Mostly, though…

It was because her stunning display of overbearing power was overshadowed by someone else.

The Lord of Shadows.

Unlike Nephis of the Immortal Flame, he had not established himself as one of the most talented warriors of humanity before. Sure, his reputation was fearsome, and plenty of soldiers had witnessed his dire strength during the war. Still, he had been considered to be merely at the top of the hierarchy of power among the Saints — like Summer Knight was.

Not as someone who existed entirely outside that hierarchy.

Not only had the Lord of Shadows astounded everyone by defeating seven of the most powerful Saints of the Song Army alone, but his abominable minions had also defeated another six… which meant that he had faced more enemy Transcendents than even Changing Star herself.

And unlike the valiant Lady of the Immortal Flame, the sellsword Saint was utterly ruthless, slaying six of them — more than any other Saint had during the battle.

And, therefore, in all of history.

More than that, the clash between the Lord of Shadows and the Saints of Song had been perfectly visible to countless observers on all sides. Countless people had seen the grotesque and frightening figure of the towering onyx demon rampaging in the onslaught of enemy attacks, evading them with chilling grace, and retaliating with ruthless cruelty in response.

Countless people had heard the echoes of his malevolent laughter, as well.

The soldiers of both armies were stunned, awed, horrified, and appalled. It was just that the soldiers of the Sword Army were mostly in awe, while the soldiers of the Song Army were mostly in the throes of horror.

Everyone, however, seemed to involuntary lower their voices when invoking the name of the Lord of Shadows.

"Have you heard? He severed the heads of Saint Ceres. He laughed while doing it!"

"I saw it. It was… terrifying. Is she alive?"

"Was that his Transcendent form? That dreadful demon? Or… is... is the human a Transcendent form of the demon, instead?"

"How do we even know that he is human behind that creepy mask? No one has seen his face!"

"They say that he split in four at the end of the battle, each incarnation wielding a deadly blade…"

"Wait, wait! That actually explains everything. We were all convinced that he possessed some kind of spatial Ability, right? And that was how he could seemingly be in several places at the same time. But he doesn't, there is no spatial Ability! He simply can manifest more… more of himself!"

"That would also explain why his eerie Echoes are so powerful. What if they aren't Echoes at all? What if those abominations are just his other bodies?"

"Gods… which body is the real one, then?"

"The serpent! That giant shadow serpent can shapeshift! That is how he can appear human!"

"So the real Lord of Shadows is a... a giant abomination?"

"No wonder he… it… was living in Godgrave alone…"

"Have you all lost your goddamn minds? The Lord of Shadows is a human Saint. He is just so powerful that it's just easier to believe that he is some kind of an ancient, sinister, dark being that had fed on the bone marrow of a dead god for thousands of years before being disturbed by us, foolish mortals, when we decided to invade his land… and which then emerged from the eternal darkness to take on the appearance of a man it consumed… anyway, what I am trying to say is that he is a human! D—definitely!"

"You… shut your mouth and never speak again. Okay?!"

"What?! I'm just saying!"

"I don't care what you're saying. The Lord of Shadows saved my life, and many more, during the march to Vanishing Lake. So I don't care whether he's a man or a snake.I'm just glad that he's on our side..."

Sunny would have been quite amused if he had heard these conversations. But he was busy recovering from the battle, and preoccupied by much more vital matters than eavesdropping on what the soldiers were saying to boot.

Unbeknownst to him, though, a different kind of conversation was taking place in the camp of the Song Army...