

## **VILLAIN 148**

Chapter 148 The Shadow Puppeteer

Closing my laptop, I left the room.

I would be leaving the Starlight Estate soon.

I needed to finish my preparations before departing.

As I walked, I began noticing something peculiar—something that had been happening ever since I woke up...

"Hey."

I called out to the woman standing by the window.

She had been smoking a moment ago but tossed her cigarette the instant she saw me.

"Lord Frey... How may I be of service?"

Pretending like nothing happened, huh?

But I wouldn't blame her—I had learned to move silently, something I was forced to master during my days in the Nightmare Lands. At this point, I no longer walked like a normal person at all.

"Your name was Frederica or something like that, wasn't it?"

"That's correct."

It seemed she was the oldest one here.

"Tell me... why is there no one else here?"

I was sure the estate had plenty of servants...

Yet, for some reason, I hadn't seen anyone else.

"Forgive my impudence, Lord Frey. I assumed my services alone would be enough to satisfy you. My sincerest apologies."

Was she avoiding my question?

"That's not what I said, Frederica... I asked why there's no one else."

A heavy silence followed.

The old maid had been bowing to me for some time now..."

"May this humble servant speak freely, Lord Frey?"

What's with this absurd medieval-style treatment...

"Go ahead, speak your mind."

"As you command."

The elderly maid, Frederica, took her time, as if she had been waiting for this very moment.

"The reason I am the only one here, Lord Frey, is because everyone else is afraid of you."

"Afraid?"

I asked, puzzled.

But Frederica continued swiftly,

"You've started to show signs of maturity... that strange pressure surrounding you at all times, an intent born from your desire for destruction... That serious expression and those black eyes, which feel as if they are stripping me bare every time you look at me."

Hey, hey...

Is this old woman crossing the line?

Does she not fear for her life just because she's old?

As a finishing touch to her words, Frederica lifted her head, staring directly into my face.

"And I must mention that white hair of yours... My lord, everyone here still sees you as the same person you were before you left. The servants don't know what has happened in your life since you were gone, so to them, you're just the same Frey—only far more terrifying. That's why they all try to stay away from your bad side."

Ah... my hair.

I had completely forgotten how much my appearance had changed.

To them, I must look like some kind of terrifying demonic prince now.

I played with a strand of my hair for a moment, eyeing its striking white color.

It had grown quite long...

Should I cut it soon?

But setting that aside for now—

I turned my attention back to Frederica with a smirk.

"Tell me, Frederica, since everyone is afraid of me... why aren't you?"

She had piqued my interest slightly.

The old maid didn't flinch in the slightest and answered calmly,

"Forgive my rudeness, Lord Frey, but I have been by your side since the moment you first opened your eyes in this world."

"I can tell the difference at a glance... You are not the same Frey I once knew. And besides, I am merely an old woman, so I know you would never desire my body."

"Pfft—"

I laughed unintentionally. Perhaps for the first time in a long while.

"What an insolent old hag... but fine."

I took a step closer and reached out my hand.

She flinched for a second, but my hand went straight to her pocket—where she had stashed her cigarettes.

I pulled one out and placed it between her lips before walking away.

"Keep up the good work, Frederica."

...

After leaving the old maid behind, I was about to immerse myself in my own affairs.

But then Ada appeared, surprising me, making me realize that something had happened.

And what a pleasant surprise it was.

"Carmen has woken up."

That wild woman had been unconscious ever since she was struck by Godfrey.

To be honest, her injuries had been worse than mine... He had practically crushed her skull.

Luckily, she was still alive.

Previously, Ada and I had agreed not to discuss what had happened in the Moonlight Family until Carmen regained consciousness.

And now... that moment had finally arrived.

...

"Ah, damn it... My head hurts like hell. I need a damn cigarette."

Sitting in a rather unladylike manner, bandages wrapped around her head and various parts of her body, Carmen was as lively as ever.

"You're already thinking about smoking the moment you open your eyes?"

Leaning against a window overlooking the palace garden, I commented on her words.

"Yeah, so what? A single cigarette is far more refreshing than all this crap wrapped around me."

Maybe I should've taken a few extra cigarettes from Frederica earlier...

"Welcome back, Carmen."

With a warm smile, Ada, who was seated in a chair, looked more relieved than she had been in a long time.

Carmen noticed this, and she nodded.

"To be honest... the main reason I survived was the vitality boost I gained after reaching SS- rank. If not for that, I'd have died at least ten times over in my previous state..."

I nodded briefly at her words.

"Glad to hear that."

"It's all thanks to you, Frey."

At that moment, both of them turned their gazes toward me.

I knew exactly what they wanted.

"You can speak now, boy. I've already isolated the area."

I let out a sigh and raised my hand slightly.

In that instant, glowing violet lines spread beneath my skin.

Carmen recognized them immediately. It was the same power I had infused into her body until now.

"Sorry... I swear I'm not hiding anything. But even I don't know where this power comes from."

That wasn't a lie.

After all, I was completely ignorant about the origins of this SSS-rank aura.

Although, I was almost certain it had some connection to the Dual Soul.

My response left the room in silence for a moment.

"I don't blame you, boy... What you have is a miracle."

Ada nodded in agreement, reinforcing Carmen's words.

"All statistics are supposed to align with overall strength. You should be C-rank, yet you possess an aura far beyond that."

Carmen continued as well.

"And your talent was only supposed to be A-rank."

It made no sense at all.

"Frey... are you some kind of demon in disguise or what?"

Hearing Carmen's question, I raised both hands in surrender.

"I'm just a weak human."

Then, my eyes shifted toward Ada.

She noticed it instantly and met my gaze.

Ada's behavior since I arrived in Winterfell had been too perfect.

Not to mention, she seemed to know far more than she should. I mean, even as the author, I had no idea about the library—so how did she?

Is this even my story to begin with?

"Ada..."

"I know."

She responded with a faint smile before I could even ask.

"You must have a lot of questions, Frey. And you too, Carmen."

Both Carmen and I nodded at the same time.

Ada's answer came swiftly.

"Simply put... I saw it."

I tilted my head.

"Saw what?"

Then came the shock.

"The future."

"What?"

My eyes widened with every word Ada spoke.

A mysterious man with glowing blue eyes—radiating an unnatural light, as if he wasn't human—appeared before her. He was dressed entirely in black, his face hidden beneath a black head cover.

He had manifested out of nowhere, inside the impenetrable Starlight Manor, and told Ada about the future.

No, he didn't just tell her—he used some kind of power to make her see it for herself.

"At first, I didn't believe what I saw... but it was terrifyingly real. A future where you died, Frey... where you were trapped under the influence of the Moonlight Curse."

Ada clenched her fists as she recalled what she had seen.

"I realized then that what I witnessed wasn't something I could ignore. That stranger told me not to try changing anything at the start, as even the smallest alteration could bring about an even worse fate."

"So, I didn't interfere until you were on the verge of death. Every move I made was part of a plan I devised after seeing that future."

Seeing the future allowed her to know about the library, the curse, and everything else.

That explained why Ada had been so well-prepared.

But to come up with such a plan after seeing the future just once...

Seriously?

"I'm sorry, Frey... You suffered a lot because I couldn't intervene earlier."

"Don't say that... I'm here thanks to you."

Those were the only words I could offer to comfort her.

Placing a hand on my chin, I couldn't stop myself from diving deeper into the matter. My head was about to explode.

There was an unknown entity lurking around me.

An entity... that knew the future?

And showed it to people.

And, on top of that, had a vested interest in me for reasons I couldn't comprehend.

"It wasn't me..."

I had never written about a character like this. I hadn't even considered such a concept.

Just what the hell was going on?

Could it be...

Wild thoughts began racing through my mind, one after another.

"What's happening in this world?"