

VILLAIN 211

Chapter 211: Frey Starlight vs Snow Lionheart (1)

World Arena.

The thunderous roar of the crowd shook the colossal arena ... citizens from across the Empire gathered, their excitement palpable for the most prestigious tournament's grand finale.

Energetic music blared through the speakers, while scenes of past battles replayed on the massive screens ... each moment highlighting the brilliance of the two warriors about to clash:

Frey Starlight vs. Snow Lionheart.

This final felt more like a storybook clash than a mere competition.

A battle between a hero and a villain, drawn in broad, unmistakable strokes.

Both fighters had carved their legends into the tournament with traits that fit those archetypes perfectly.

No one had seen this final coming.

From the moment the brackets were drawn, the world had expected a duel between Daemon Valerion and Snow Lionheart.

They had guessed half right.

The anomaly ... the unexpected miracle ... was Frey.

His rise to the finals felt surreal, a series of victories stitched together by sheer, stubborn will.

And yet, here he was.

The stands overflowed to capacity.

Every seat taken, every eye focused on the battlefield.

Even students from the senior divisions had come to witness the peak of the Empire's youngest generation.

Among them, Ellen White lounged comfortably, an impressive mountain of snacks cradled in her arms.

"It's about time," she said, smirking.

As if answering her, the sky-bound screens flashed:

Countdown to the finals — five minutes.

Five minutes until everything would be decided.

Meanwhile, in the Empire's vast betting circles, the tension was electric ... the stakes had soared to heights unseen.

Despite the excitement, no one could deny the disparity between the finalists.

Even a child could see it:

Snow Lionheart was on another level entirely.

Current Rank: One stood at the peak of Rank B, while the other lingered at the top of Rank C.

Elements: One was a monster who commanded them all; the other wielded only darkness.

Dueling Skill: One had reached the fifth level, while the other stood at the fourth.

Combat Style: It was the only category where people sensed a close match .. Frey's technique was no joke ... but even that was far from enough.

No matter how many possibilities they imagined, the crowd could only see one victor ... And his name is Snow Lionheart.

In the Starlight Family's section...

Carmen sat beside Ada, both silent as they watched the preparations unfold.

Ada's face was carved with anxiety.

"His opponent is Snow Lionheart," she whispered bitterly.

The final boss.

The Empire's shining champion.

Knowing her brother's stubbornness, Ada couldn't shake the dread coiling in her chest.

Could Frey even survive this battle, let alone win?

Carmen, usually quick to offer sharp remarks, said nothing.

Even she hesitated this time.

Frey had shown them many miracles.

He had revealed hidden depths and secrets few could have imagined.

And yet, despite everything...

Could he really stand against this?

After witnessing Snow Lionheart in the earlier rounds, Carmen realized something chilling ... she hadn't felt this kind of overwhelming presence since Abraham Starlight himself.

The very memory left her rattled.

Thus, she couldn't choose a side, couldn't even summon a prayer of hope.

The betting closed.

Snow Lionheart 99% — Frey Starlight 1%.

The numbers were brutal.

That 1% wasn't faith.

It was madness.

"It's time."

Ivar's voice echoed across the arena, carrying an air of solemnity.

And at once, all attention turned to the center of the battlefield.

...

...

...

-Frey Starlight's POV-

The light at the end of the tunnel.

That was what I had been chasing all this time .. a single, thin thread of light.

And now, I stood before the end of that tunnel.

I walked forward slowly, the brightness growing until it overwhelmed me, drowning me under the spotlight above and the thunderous roar of the crowd.

For a moment, I simply stared at the arena around me.

The stage had been magically expanded since the last time, giving us a vast battlefield to unleash our strength.

The crowd was at the peak of its excitement.

They cheered wildly, their eyes all focused on the figure standing at the far end of the arena.

Clad in his white armor adorned with gold.

"Snow Lionheart."

They screamed his name.

I moved forward as well.

His golden, vibrant eyes met mine — the dead, black eyes that mirrored no life at all.

We were reflected in each other's gaze.

He looked serious, with none of his usual easygoing demeanor.

Snow Lionheart wouldn't accept defeat today.

That much was painfully clear.

Standing between us, Ivar Valerion wasted no time.

I could feel my heart pounding violently with every slight movement the Headmaster made as he prepared to give the signal to start.

All my skills ..

Everything ..

To the absolute limit!

Tension flooded through me.

I was ready to pounce the very moment the signal was given.

But I froze when the golden-eyed youth suddenly spoke.

"Frey, before we begin... can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"What does it mean to you? This match... the whole Victorid?"

I hadn't expected that question at all.

But I answered plainly.

"It means everything to me."

"I see. That's why you fought so desperately to reach this point."

Snow drew his slender sword, gripping it firmly in his right hand.

I mirrored him, drawing my own blade.

"We're alike, Frey Starlight."

Those words, coming from him...

"Alike? In what way exactly?"

I neither denied it nor agreed — I simply replied vaguely to the hero who continued speaking words I hadn't anticipated.

"Both of us... neither of us can afford to lose today."

With a faint smile, I gathered my dark aura.

"You're right."

He too had his reasons ... perhaps even deeper than mine ... for why he couldn't afford to lose.

I knew that.

Even when it came to the sheer will to win, Snow wasn't inferior to me in any way.

But even so... I would win, no matter the cost.

"Begin!!"

The signal was given.

It was the beginning of the end.

"Ascension."

Hawk Eyes. Phantom Steps at maximum output.

I drew out as much of my SSS rank Dark Aura as I could.

I lunged at him with everything I had.

Unleashing the strongest strikes from my Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow.

And with frightening precision — he moved too.

Wielding Starlight Aura, the very element once famed among the Starlight family itself.

We clashed in an instant.

The moment our blades collided, sparks exploded outward violently.

I could feel the overwhelming weight of his sword pressing against mine.

With Ascension, which crushed all emotions and allowed me to fight at my peak, my violet-glowing eyes sought even the slightest gap, attacking from every angle imaginable.

Each deceptive strike ...which should have been impossible to predict ... was blocked, deflected cleanly one after another.

Boom!

The first heavy collision sent shockwaves throughout the arena as Snow deflected my sword.

Boom!

He read through every feint I attempted, parrying each one with ease.

Boom!

Another explosion erupted as Dark Aura collided violently with Starlight Aura, my assault crushed under a superior force.

The impacts rang out repeatedly, both of us moving so fast that only afterimages were left ... even though we hadn't budged from our spots.

We were locked in a whirlwind of swords, every clash sending arcs of fire into the air from the sheer force of friction.

The fire ignited fiercely around us, almost without us even realizing it.

It was terrifying.

Terrifying beyond belief.

This was my full power.

The absolute peak I could reach without Balerion.

Waves of relentless darkness, cutting arcs from my sword ..

Everything was blocked with flawless precision.

Chapter 212: Frey Starlight vs Snow Lionheart (2)

Snow Lionheart's expression hadn't changed since the beginning.

His golden eyes caught everything.

I lost count of how many times our swords had clashed by now.

Even though he did nothing but defend...

I couldn't move Snow a single step.

We were locked in a tug-of-war between Dark Aura and Starlight Aura.

But it seemed like my opponent had finally grown tired of simply defending.

It happened when I barely caught it—

Snow's sword, almost piercing straight through my head.

If not for Hawk Eyes, that attack would've ended me right there.

I managed to evade, but felt the sting of blood trailing down my cheek.

Even while using Hawk Eyes to slow time for a fraction of a second...

I still couldn't avoid getting wounded?

Snow began to counterattack.

With the Starlight trait, he launched devastating lightning strikes.

Strikes that forcibly pushed me back.

In a single second, Snow succeeded where I had failed all this time ...

He drove me several meters backward with just a few casual swings of his sword.

Then that youth unleashed a barrage of lightning bolts.

I barely dodged by pushing Phantom Steps to their limits.

"Void Step!"

Just when I thought I was the faster one, he appeared right in front of me.

The distance between us was erased in an instant ..

His sword, blazing with Starlight Aura, enlarged rapidly before my eyes.

With a desperate counter from my sword, infused with Dark Aura, I blocked his strike ... Yet I was sent flying.

I rolled violently across the ground, struggling to catch my breath.

"Void Step!"

But my opponent had no intention of giving me even a second to recover.

He was already right on top of me.

From his blade, Snow unleashed a tempest of raging fire combined with destructive lightning.

Those devastating attacks overwhelmed me ..

I barely avoided them, thanks to Ascension and Hawk Eyes.

Slash !

But I was too slow.

Far too slow.

His sword pierced into my left side.

I stumbled back immediately, feeling the burning crater left by Snow's strike.

I hadn't even seen him coming.

"Void Step!"

Again ...

He was already in front of me, raising his sword and channeling a monstrous surge of aura, cutting vertically with brutal force.

Boom!

I barely managed to block it with my sword, shrouded in Dark Aura ..

But I couldn't withstand the force.

I was blasted away.

I struggled just to breathe.

"Void Step!"

Ascension burned my mind, searching desperately for a way ..

A way to deal with this monster who kept closing the distance.

But it was useless.

Unleashing a terrifying mix of fire, lightning, wind, all wrapped in Starlight Aura...

Snow Lionheart crushed me ..And shattered the entire arena in the process.

I wasn't even trying to hit him anymore.

All I could do...

Was desperately prevent him from landing a finishing blow.

Everyone watched in stunned silence.

At the disaster unfolding before them ..

At the natural calamity that Snow tried so fiercely to drown me in.

Without even realizing it, I found my body riddled with wounds left by his blade.

Stab marks.

Slash marks.

I didn't even know when I had lost so much blood...

I felt my eyes bleeding ..

The heavy price of forcing Hawk Eyes to their maximum limit.

The red veins inside my vision barely kept up with him.

My body was screaming at me, warning me that I was stepping into the abyss.

I could feel the heat radiating from my left hand.

Balerion was begging me to unleash him and strike back at my opponent.

But I couldn't.

"Not this time, my friend."

This was a battle I had to finish with my own strength.

Snow didn't stop.

To the point where he now unleashed attacks through all six of his elements ..

Light, Star, Fire, Lightning, Water, Ice, Darkness, Shadow.

Everything.

The attacks came from every direction.

My blood continued to stain the ground.

That sword of his... it hurt more than anything else.

After a relentless barrage of one-sided attacks, Snow Lionheart finally stopped and stared at me.

There I lay, amidst the wreckage, in a pool of red.

The audience watched in stunned silence.

The difference in raw power... was truly overwhelming.

Lying there, Snow Lionheart gazed down at me with the same unreadable face.

"Get up. You will, won't you?"

He stood, perfect, without a single visible injury.

"No matter how much I wound you, you'll get back on your feet. I know this won't be enough to finish you."

Answering his call, I rose again, gripping my sword with as much strength as I could muster.

"Come, Frey Starlight. No matter how many times you stand, no matter how many times you fight back, I will crush you again and again... until you can no longer rise."

No matter how strong the will that had carried me this far,

he was telling me ..

It would not save me.

Snow Lionheart gathered a monstrous amount of aura.

"First Sword: Mountain Severer."

That devastating blow came crashing toward me.

In response, I struck with a vertical slash, managing to split the attack in half.

Barely.

I staggered back several steps.

But before I could fully catch my breath, he was already readying the next strike.

"Second Sword: Sky Severer."

This time, he unleashed an even larger wave.

I had no choice but to retaliate—

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Black Meteor!"

White and black collided once again.

His force was clearly superior, but I held my ground with everything I had.

As the shockwave faded ..

my eyes widened at what I saw.

Snow raised his sword again, summoning an even greater surge of energy.

"Third Sword: Void Severer."

"—Damn it!!"

Once again, the strike overwhelmed me.

After barely enduring the explosive force,

I found my entire left arm soaked in blood.

Star Aura was still burning through my flesh.

Drenched in filth, drowning in agony.

Snow raised his sword once more.

"That power..."

The crowd could hardly breathe, marveling at the monstrous aura being gathered.

It was the same move that had felled Ghost Umbra.

But this time, it was unleashed through a real sword ..

"Fourth Sword:"

Knowing what was coming,

I unleashed everything.

My strongest attack ..

the strongest strike I could produce with my own combat style.

I begged my battered body to endure just a little longer,

to draw out just enough aura.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow!"

A luminous surge of Star Aura clashed against a darkness that sought to swallow even the brightest light.

"Worldbreaker !"

"Infinite Darkness!"

BOOOOM!!!

A deafening explosion tore through the world.

At a terrifying pace,

the light devoured the darkness ..

his attack completely eclipsing mine.

The darkness I summoned shrank to a tiny speck inside the ocean of radiant aura that swallowed the entire arena.

The protective barriers barely contained the blast, but even beyond them, everyone could feel the power unleashed.

As for me ..

I was trapped inside that storm.

Seconds passed.

The overwhelming light finally faded.

Snow Lionheart gazed forward in silence.

"..."

Before him, my broken body lay crumpled against the far wall.

He started walking toward me.

Each of his footsteps echoed in my ears.

"Get up," he said coldly.

"You can still fight, can't you?"

I wasn't eliminated.

That meant... I had managed to withstand the strike, somehow, despite the terrifying amount of damage I took.

Snow Lionheart knew it too.

I spat out blood.

A lot of it.

Seeing all that blood pooling on the ground...

I laughed.

I laughed so much, truly.

Chapter 213 Frey Starlight vs Snow Lionheart (3)

"Ahh"

Father, Mother...

Did you ever imagine your son would end up coughing up this much blood?

If you were here right now,

I wonder ... what kind of expressions would you show me?

Would you grieve for me?

Would you cry for me?

I was suffering.

I was terrified.

"I'm afraid.."

The fact I could still laugh even after all the beating I'd taken ..

it revealed just how much I had changed from the person I once was.

Father, Mother, if you could see me now...

Would you even recognize me as your son?

Even I no longer clearly remember the man I was two years ago.

What I had become wasn't that foolish writer who once penned some dumb novel,

nor was I truly Frey Starlight.

I was merely a third existence, lost on a path with no return.

I stood once more, stepping toward Snow,

leaving bloody footprints behind me.

There were too many things weighing on my mind.

Far too many.

But the one thing I knew for certain ..

was that I missed them.

So much that it felt like my soul was being torn apart, every single day.

"Snow Lionheart... you have no idea how much I envy you."

My perfect self ...

The version of me that could fight no matter the circumstances,

stand back up no matter how hard life crushed him.

You ..

The hero who embodied everything I once wished to become.

"I can never be like you."

I had already made a vow to myself.

If I lost here, I would kill myself immediately.

Suicide sounded almost too easy for the person I was now.

There was no turning back anymore.

That bridge had long been burned—

It was victory or death.

Snow didn't understand a single word I said.

"What the hell are you rambling about?"

Maybe he thought I'd gone mad from all the beating.

But my mind was sharper than ever,

with Ascension forcing me to maintain my sanity, to endure.

I lunged at Snow Lionheart with my sword, shrouded in darkness aura.

I couldn't win like this.

I didn't have enough.

I didn't even know what exactly I was trying to do anymore.

But I decided to throw everything aside ...

to focus solely on that one piece of advice the system had given me.

To attempt reaching a strength I didn't yet understand.

"Look into the mirror, and understand the reflection."

"You are my reflection, Snow."

I looked at him.

Our swords clashed instantly, locking us into a fierce, relentless exchange,

the sound of steel clashing filling the air.

Every blow pushed my battered body further beyond its limits.

But I had made my decision.

I would solve this mystery ...

The enigma called Snow Lionheart ..

or I would die trying !!

Boom!

Boom!

BOOM!

From every clash of swords, blood spilled.

Snow Lionheart frowned in confusion as he saw his opponent completely change his fighting style.

He flung me away once.

Then twice.

Then three times.

Yet I still swung my sword again, my eyes wide open, locked solely onto him.

"Snow..."

Snow Lionheart...

"I can't see anything in this world."

Everything was swallowed in blackness.

"In all that darkness... you're the only thing I see."

You are everything I see.

Snow...

"Snow!!!"

Snow Lionheart's eyes widened as his opponent revealed a completely different style of combat while fending him off.

My defense had grown fragile.

My attacks became utterly chaotic.

Blow after blow landed harder, and harder.

Snow continued to spill my blood.

"What are you trying to achieve with this?! Frey Starlight?!"

Slash!!

With a swift strike, I felt his sword pierce deep into my abdomen, causing my intestines to spill out.

With my right hand, I grabbed those guts, forcing them back into place, clutching the wound tight, while swinging my sword with my left.

"Get back inside, damn it!"

The pain was on a level of its own.

My bloodied vision...

That searing agony...

Even with Ascension activated, it barely kept me sane.

In that miserable state, I continued attacking, staring at Snow with wild, unblinking eyes, making me look like a madman.

At some point, I could no longer hear anything.

There was only Snow, dancing with me in the darkness.

I wondered .. how was I still conscious?

One hand holding my gut, the other wielding my blade.

Still trapped in a whirlwind of swords against Snow.

So many emotions flooded through me.

Among them... nostalgia.

And a familiar feeling.

Something kept me from falling.

Something pushed me forward.

I remembered those moments when the statues dragged me deep inside the Shadows sect .

How I stayed conscious even when all I wished for was death.

I felt submerged .. my body moved on its own.

Maybe it was because my opponent was Snow Lionheart.

That extension of myself, the one I knew everything about.

Every movement.

Every breath.

Every glance.

I knew it all about that man.

The more I focused on him, the farther away my body drifted...

BOOOM!

BOOOOM!!!

Our swords clashed, faster and faster.

Snow Lionheart unleashed his full strength, desperate not to remain trapped in such a maddening battle.

But I endured.

Everyone watched, disbelieving what was unfolding before their eyes.

Shrouded in swirling darkness, I felt my head burning.

We were still there—Snow and I, locked in the abyss.

But his strikes...

His patterns...

Somehow... they became crystal clear to me.

Everyone saw it ..

When I no longer merely blocked Snow's attacks, but began to counter them too.

Wielding my sword with just a single hand...

In that thick darkness, I barely caught a glimpse ..

I barely heard it ...

The laughter, the screaming, the roaring cries ..

Seven dark figures danced wildly around us.

They shrieked with abandon, they laughed uncontrollably, they spun around me in pure joy.

Perhaps it was because my opponent was Snow, of all people, that I was able to achieve something I had never reached against anyone else.

Because I knew everything about that young man who was, in a way, an extension of myself...

I was able to reach it ...the level required for it.

My sword became faster, stronger.

With a bloody smile, I howled along with them as my body danced .

Above the system screen, the display flickered, burning in new letters, engraving something unprecedented:

Shadow Adaptation: 1/7

Core Attribute: Darkness >>> Shadow

Darkness slowly engulfed all the elements my opponent had unleashed.

My body launched counterattacks against his abilities as my shadow vanished from the ground.

I felt my strength double, with my own shadow reinforcing my battered body.

My senses sharpened to an unbelievable degree.

I could see it now ...so clearly.

I laughed maniacally.

"I can see it, you bastards!!!"

The black flame atop my sword dimmed, transforming into something closer to a shadow ... just a faint, dark sheen on the blade's surface.

It looked simple... yet it held overwhelming strength and speed.

"Faster!"

I had to strike faster!

The crowd watched in awe as I fought Snow amidst the swirling flames, both of us moving so closely it was as if we were fused together.

Snow Lionheart stared at me in disbelief.

And who could blame him?

His opponent .. who had been utterly overwhelmed just moments ago .. was now fighting him evenly.

Every move he made, it was as if I had foreseen it, responding with perfect counters.

We exchanged thousands of blows ..every single one parried perfectly.

Logic had long since abandoned the battlefield.

And after countless exchanges of blood and steel..

For the first time, blood splattered.

Real blood.

Snow retreated with a void Step, his hand instinctively reaching for the shallow wound on his shoulder.

A simple cut... but I had hit him.

Though the Vermithor within him had already begun healing the injury, but the blood staining his palm was undeniable.

With an unmatched smile, Snow's aura exploded in dazzling colors as he looked at me.

"You really did it, Frey Starlight!"

Even I didn't fully understand what was happening anymore.

Caught up in a wave of pure hysteria, I screamed at him:

"Come at me, Snow Lionheart! Let's keep fighting!"

Chapter 214 The End of One Journey, The Birth of Another

Both of us charged at each other.

I merged with my shadow, shrouded in a dark glow, while Snow shone brilliantly in the light.

We clashed, sending thousands of black and white streaks slicing through the air, colliding violently.

Each strike released a burst of fiery sparks, setting the arena ablaze in a frenzied inferno.

The crowd could only watch as we battled within that hellfire.

"More!"

"MORE!"

Snow Lionheart unleashed everything he had.

Although I could block all his attacks perfectly thanks to the Shadow Adaptation, he still managed to land hits!

Even though I fought him evenly, even though I had found a way to counter him ...

He still broke through!

"SNOW!!"

I screamed, attacking even faster.

I unleashed a type of aura I had never used before.

My vision had turned completely red.

After pushing Hawk Eyes to their limits for too long, I was practically blind.

But even so ..

I could still see Snow Lionheart with absolute clarity.

We moved at impossible speeds, landing blow after blow upon each other.

My shadow, now fused with my body, dulled the damage I took.

Meanwhile, Vermithor inside Snow's body continued healing him, although the healing was no longer as effective.

At this level... I sweated blood instead of sweat.

Launching our strongest strikes at one another, both of us were hurled into the arena barriers.

And the moment our backs hit the walls—

We immediately launched ourselves forward, crashing into each other again.

When even our swords could no longer cut through the clash ...

We ended up headbutting each other, smashing forehead against forehead like two rabid beasts.

Snow Lionheart's face was now bloodied, twisted into a terrifying smile.

The same smile that had spread across my own lips.

We truly were—

"Two sides of the same coin."

The battle raged on.

The show continued.

I slashed him.

I punched him.

I headbutted him.

I no longer knew what I was even striking him with.

But Snow Lionheart wouldn't fall.

We were the same in that regard.

"More!"

If I wanted to defeat him, I had to push further ... hit harder !

"More!"

Snow roared as well.

His thoughts mirrored mine.

We had to crush each other with everything we had.

Frey wouldn't fall to this level of attack.

"More!"

Snow wasn't so weak as to lose here either.

"More blood!"

He wouldn't go down!

Neither would I!

More blood.

More filth.

More madness.

Somehow, it felt like we could hear each other's thoughts.

The endless exchange of blows went on and on.

The audience couldn't comprehend what they were witnessing.

And the only clear thought left in their minds ...

Was that Frey Starlight, somehow, had erased it.

He had erased that massive gap that once separated him from his opponent.

After that relentless storm of strikes ..

Torn bodies.

Spilled intestines.

Half-severed arms.

Bloodied faces.

One with golden eyes burning brightly,

And one whose eyes shone with a radiant violet glow.

We stared at each other, gasping for air.

I had no idea how I was still standing.

That shadow wrapped around my body was somehow holding me up ...

As if telling me:

"Do not fall now."

I had gained a power I didn't fully understand, but even that wasn't enough to bring him down.

The flames around us raged so fiercely they reached the skies.

Amidst those roaring fires, Snow Lionheart's body began to glow.

"You're truly incredible, Frey Starlight."

My eyes widened as I saw that light.

Snow stood there, inside a strange circle—

A magic circle etched with incomprehensible runes, spinning violently around him.

"Be proud of yourself,"

"You're the first who ever made me bring out everything."

The hidden strength he had kept sealed away ...

The power that Ghost once longed to witness ...

I saw Snow's six elemental powers converge into a single force.

I witnessed the birth of his greatest weapon, much earlier than it should have come.

It was...

"The Grand Cosmic Formation..."

I muttered hoarsely, almost unable to believe what I was seeing.

It was the very skill that had once inspired me to create my own ultimate skill—Ignition.

By fusing all his elements into a single force,

He was like a nuclear reactor melting everything together into one devastating blow.

A single strike ...

Snow Lionheart was now forging his own explosion, his ultimate attack:

The Grand Cosmic Formation.

A skill he was never supposed to acquire this early...

And yet here it was, unfolding before my eyes.

Above Snow's sword, an aura of countless colors manifested ...

An array that represented all of his elements.

The pressure alone buried me deeper into the ground.

"Thank you, Frey Starlight ... for showing me the path."

Snow Lionheart raised his sword high,

And the entire world gazed up at that brilliant, blazing blade in sheer awe.

Snow Lionheart's smile gradually shifted the moment he saw my body beginning to crack, violet lines surfacing across my skin as that devastating aura flooded into my sword.

I, too, burned with a radiant violet glow, standing against his brilliance—

Two luminous stars, poised to collide.

"Frey, you..."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you, Snow Lionheart."

Without you, I would have never reached this point.

Both of us raised our swords high.

Unlike me, Snow's attack had no side effects.

In other words ... if I failed now, it would be over.

The sea of SSS ranked aura crushed my aura pathways until they burst, as I forced every ounce of strength from within me.

The crowd stared in pure disbelief at what was unfolding.

Ivar Valerion shouted as a wave of fear swept through everyone ...

"The barriers won't withstand this level of power!"

But who cared anymore?

Our eyes saw nothing but each other.

And in a single moment ..

Everything exploded.

"Ignition."

Like two nuclear reactors ...

We both unleashed everything.

A deafening explosion shook the heavens, light and darkness swallowing one another.

The entire arena quaked violently as the barriers barely held under the impact.

The mages struggled desperately to contain it.

Inside the arena ... everything was obliterated.

Amidst the white and black chaos ..

Snow and I vanished.

In that instant, I prayed with all my heart ..

That this would be enough.

In utter shock, with wide eyes and gaping mouths, the entire world watched.

Phoenix Sunlight stared at the nuclear eruption before him.

It was much weaker than the one he had seen that day ..

Yet somehow,

It felt exactly the same.

Everyone's minds went blank.

Could first-year students truly unleash something like this?

The audience sweated profusely in their seats, shaken to their core by the earthquake of the blast.

Waiting breathlessly to see the outcome of the catastrophe.

And at last .. the result came.

The arena had become a giant crater.

Everyone saw what had happened.

I felt my shattered body buried deep within the broken wall.

My sword had exploded into fragments after triggering Ignition.

My aura pathways had burst again, and my body had reached its absolute limit.

I didn't even know why I was still alive, with my intestines spilling out before me.

But I didn't care about the pain.

I was only searching ..

For him.

Snow Lionheart.

What happened to him?

And then .. I found my answer.

His sword was buried deep into the ground,

While he crawled slowly toward it.

Bloodied, just like me ..

His once white hair now stained a deep crimson.

But he was still conscious.

"Seriously?!"

Even Ignition hadn't been enough...

That's how monstrous he truly was ..

until the very end.

...

...

...

Snow Lionheart continued to crawl toward his sword.

He had to fight.

He couldn't fall .. no matter what it cost.

He stretched his hand toward the hilt, desperate to continue.

His injuries were grave ..

Even Vermithor couldn't heal him unless he expelled it from his body.

He knew that.

He knew he had to grab his sword and keep fighting ..

But his hand never reached the hilt.

Instead,

It touched the chest of the bloodied figure standing above him ..

The man whose entrails dragged behind him on the ground.

Hardly a single place on his body remained unscathed.

Yet he stood... and came at him again.

One draped in white.

The other cloaked in black.

Frey Starlight suddenly dropped to his knees, wrapping his arms around Snow's battered frame.

Through the blood and grime that stained them both, Frey whispered hoarsely:

"That's enough... Hero."

With the last ounce of his strength, Frey's left hand seized Snow's sword and dragged it to the ground.

"Your journey has just begun, But mine..."

Summoning the final flicker of his consciousness, Frey drove the sword toward Snow's chest.

"My journey... ends here."

That thrust ..

A hollow stab without aura or strength behind it ..

Yet it was enough.

The entire world heard it loud and clear.

[Critical Hit!]

Snow Lionheart's golden eyes flew wide open, staring at the blood-soaked youth before him.

A reel of memories flashed before Snow's mind ..

All his struggles, all the vows he had sworn.

He had vowed never to lose—no matter the cost.

Yet, in the end,

his awareness slowly sank... into darkness.

Silence fell.

The entire world froze.

Snow collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

And Frey, barely clinging to consciousness, fell to his knees beside him, staring up at the sky.

Above them, the colossal screens displayed the words he had longed to see with all his heart ...

Words crowning a journey of relentless suffering, brutal battles, and incomparable agony.

Ada Starlight stared at her brother.

At that blood-soaked, sweat-drenched face ..

A face that shed something else as well.

Tears.

And a smile of pure release.

A face she had never seen before.

A face carrying emotions she would never truly understand.

And then, only moments later,

Frey collapsed beside Snow, unconscious.

At the heart of a crater of ruin ..

Before the stunned eyes of a world that had just witnessed a miracle of madness ..

everything ended with those simple, unforgettable words:

Winner of the Victoriad: Frey Starlight.

...

...

...

A.N :

The Victoriad Tournament has come to an end, but the arc itself is far from over.

With this battle, we now open the door to the next step that will determine the fate of Frey Starlight ... the true beginning of the story and the climax of the first volume.

These extra 4 chapters are a token of gratitude for the gift received today.

Thank you all, and I hope you continue to enjoy the novel.

Chapter 215 The Death of Light

It was over.

The grandest event had come to an end, shaking the very foundation of the Empire to its core.

Several figures leapt into the massive crater, rushing toward the two young men lying motionless at its center.

Both of them were in a dire state...

especially Frey Starlight, who could barely breathe.

Meanwhile, the audience was still frozen in shock.

"Did the hero... really lose?"

To whom? Frey Starlight?

Many simply couldn't accept it.

The blessed hero, hailed as the most gifted prodigy in history, had fallen ...even after unleashing all his power.

And the shame of House Starlight ..the one once branded a black stain upon their noble legacy .. had achieved the impossible before their very eyes.

The crowd grew more and more agitated.

"There must be some trick!"

"He must have cheated!"

"There's no way his strength could have risen that much in such a short time!"

The unrest snowballed with every word, a single whisper of doubt enough to ignite an uproar of resentment.

Even unconscious, Frey Starlight found no mercy.

Not even the towering figures among them knew exactly how Frey had done it ..

but to accuse him of cheating?

That was nothing but slander.

How could someone so "insignificant" deceive the eyes of the giants themselves if he had truly cheated?

In truth, their accusations were an unconscious insult to their own pride.

Phoenix Sunlight seethed, struggling to contain his anger as he listened to their pitiful cries.

"Bastards..."

"Save your breath,"

Iris Sunlight said, resting his chin in his hand as he continued to watch Frey below with ever-glowing eyes.

"Their anger... it's nothing but proof of their own weakness. A reminder of just how pathetic this world truly is."

With a detached tone, Iris went on:

"Frey Starlight is a being apart from the rest.

Despite coming from a strong lineage, his talent was far inferior to that of his opponents."

"To see him defeat monsters who were deemed invincible—to witness a miracle with no equal—"

"Of course they can't accept it.

Because if they did, they'd have no choice but to admit they themselves are nothing more than failures."

Most people surrender before the battle even begins.

They comfort themselves with cheap excuses:

"Life was unfair,"

"I wasn't talented enough."

They fed those lies to their own souls—to soothe the sting of their own cowardice.

But now?

Frey Starlight, with nothing but meager talent, had crossed the chasm they couldn't even fathom ... through blood, and through steel.

Of course they wouldn't acknowledge him.

Acknowledging Frey would be like driving a dagger into their own hearts.

And so, Frey Starlight ...

"Even while unconscious... you must endure this too."

What a miserable, cruel reality.

Phoenix Sunlight said nothing.

He knew that Iris was right.

Every word had struck painfully deep.

Even after all that agony ...

All Frey received was scorn and hatred.

There was no justice in this world.

...

...

...

Frey Starlight's victory carried devastating consequences.

Consequences so vast they had yet to be fully understood.

The Church—those who had pinned all their hopes on their promised hero—stared in disbelief.

Joseph Blatter, his glowing eyes dark and cold, glared down at Frey from his seat.

The chosen hero ..the bearer of Vermithor ...

Had fallen.

Everything had been shattered.

The grand design that had taken so long to build...

was now in ruins.

The High priest grand vision ..to unite the Empire under the hero's rise ..was now crumbling before his very eyes.

Victory at the Victoriad would have solidified Snow's standing, rallying countless followers under his banner.

But that ugly ending... had destroyed everything.

The promised hero... had fallen to the disgrace of House Starlight.

No tale could surpass such a devastating narrative.

The priest struggled to contain his composure.

"If only he had used Vermithor..."

But that was impossible.

Flaming weapons were strictly forbidden in the Victoriad from the start.

"Just who is that boy... Frey Starlight?"

How could he fight like that?

How had he defeated their chosen hero?

Suddenly, Frey Starlight had become the center of every conversation.

And no one burned with more fury than the Church.

Many of them were shaken by the hero's defeat.

Some were outright enraged.

But amidst all the chaos, there was one woman ...only one, Who remained perfectly calm.

Saintess Eurasha.

Seated quietly behind the High priest, her face showed no emotion.

With a voice as serene as ever, she spoke:

"Why do you all wear such expressions now?"

Simultaneously, the three priest turned toward her, desperate for an explanation.

"Whether the hero wins or loses... it changes nothing,"

she said calmly.

Who ever claimed the hero would win every battle?

He was not a god.

"From the moment Snow Lionheart bore Vermithor, every action he took became part of the Lord of light will.

If he lost here, then there must be wisdom behind it."

The Lord of Light made no mistakes.

"There is a reason for this defeat. One way or another, blessings will follow."

That was her message:

Their god did not forsake them.

There was purpose even in loss.

Joseph Blatter remained silent, but he gestured toward one of the Archbishops seated below him.

"You."

"Your command, my lord?"

"Make sure everyone hears the Saintess's words."

"As you wish."

Joseph Blatter did not resemble a simple clergyman despite his robes.

He was more like a general .. a ruthless strategist orchestrating every detail.

Using the Saintess's words, he restored the congregation's faith, calming the chaos within the Church.

In the old priest eyes, Frey Starlight had already ascended to a high, undeniable rank.

As for their chosen hero... his time would come.

Snow Lionheart would fulfill his destiny when the right moment arrived.

The Church moved swiftly to stabilize itself.

The Archbishops carried the bulk of the burden;

They were the true pillars holding the Church together ...

while the Bishops were merely its public face and weapons of war.

Among the busiest was a young man with white hair, reading glasses, and a black robe.

He slipped away quietly amidst the chaos.

"Hey! Micah! Where are you going? We're not done here!"

One of the Archbishops shouted after him.

But Micah Starlight merely waved back with a lazy smile.

"Cover for me for a while. I spotted my family nearby."

With that mischievous grin, Micah Starlight strode off.

"I must go pay my respects."

The other Archbishops stared at him in disbelief.

But none dared complain.

He was, after all, their strongest Archbishop ..their greatest prodigy.

Even among equals, human beings were never truly the same.

Chapter 216: The Birth of Shadow

The Victoriad final had ended.

But it would not easily fade from the minds of those who had witnessed it.

That battle... had made everything else feel utterly meaningless.

And now, a cloud of questions loomed over the Empire ...

none larger than the mystery of the young man named Frey Starlight.

The future had become utterly unpredictable.

Maekar Valerion, the current Emperor, had seen everything with his own eyes.

"Khan, get in touch with Ivar as soon as possible. Tell him to come to me."

"Understood."

It was time to uncover the truth behind all this...

to find the real source of that overwhelming power.

Meanwhile, the current head of House Starlight wasn't sitting quietly.

She was running through the corridors, Carmen trailing close behind.

"Ada! There's no point in going now ...we won't be able to do anything!"

"..."

"Our family's healers are already taking care of him. There's no need to worry, for heaven's sake."

Ada didn't listen at all.

She simply kept running, rushing toward her brother.

Carmen sighed quietly, watching Ada disappear down the hallway.

"Young people are always so restless."

Carmen walked slowly, no longer bothering to chase after her.

After all, Frey was receiving treatment nearby.

While walking, she casually pulled out a luxurious cigar, igniting it with a flick of her fingers.

Hooof.

The elegant lady of House Starlight exhaled a cloud of smoke, leaning calmly against the wall.

She wore white trousers, a white shirt, and a black blazer, her hands covered with sleek gloves.

With that cigar in hand, she looked nothing short of striking ..powerful, composed.

She stared indifferently at the wall in front of her, lost deep in thought.

From time to time, people passed by: workers from the arena or lost spectators.

As she was about to finish her cigar,

she heard footsteps approaching.

Carmen immediately sensed the powerful aura radiating from the figure.

Yet she didn't bother to look.

After all, powerful warriors filled these stands by the hundreds.

But then the voice spoke ..

and her eyes snapped wide open.

"Still smoking as always, huh? You haven't changed a bit."

A familiar voice.

Carmen turned around, stunned ..

her face twisted in a frightening mixture of emotions.

Before her stood a young man, smiling,

his black eyes glowing faintly behind his reading glasses.

"Micah..."

"Why do you look so surprised? As if you've seen a ghost."

The young man walked casually toward her.

"How many years has it been?"

I don't even remember anymore..."

He had grown.

He had grown so much that Carmen was rendered speechless.

"It's been a while... Mother."

Micah was perfectly calm, in stark contrast to Carmen's shaken state.

No matter how one looked at it,

this didn't feel like a reunion between a mother and her long-lost son.

Their eyes locked in silence for a moment.

"You've gotten much stronger... SS- rank, huh? Congratulations."

Facing Micah's casual tone, Carmen finally snapped, raising her voice in frustration ..

"What are you doing here?"

"Hmm?"

Just doing my job.

I became a Bishop recently, after all."

"Why did you leave?!"

Carmen's voice trembled as she shouted.

"Why... did you abandon the family?"

At a time when House Starlight had been struggling,

their greatest talent had walked away ..

choosing instead to follow the Path of Light and join the Church.

It had been a devastating blow.

"Why did you abandon... us?"

Before the trembling Carmen,

Micah's smile widened with clear disdain in his glowing eyes.

"You can't even say it properly, can you?"

What you really want to ask is why I abandoned you, Mother."

He moved closer to her, his eyes sharp.

"But you can't say that.

Because people like you...

you don't even deserve the question."

Micah leaned in closer, his face mere inches from hers.

"How dare you even ask,

you who abandoned me when I couldn't even stand on my own two feet?

Know your place, you wretched old hag."

"..."

Carmen remained silent.

Because his words carved deep into her, dredging up memories she had buried long ago.

Micah resumed walking, his usual smile returning.

"But you'll always be my mother, won't you?

Even if you're nothing more than a filthy old hag."

He turned back one last time.

"So heed my warning ..

Leave House Starlight.

If you stay... death is all that awaits you."

With those parting words, Bishop Micah Starlight walked away.

Behind him, Carmen stood frozen in place,

shattered by meeting her only son after all those long, lonely years.

For the first time in a very, very long time,

she felt a true emptiness inside her heart.

And thus ...

the final day of the Victoriad came to a end,

marking the end of an era.

...

...

...

— Frey Starlight's Pov —

Darkness.

An endless, suffocating darkness.

I clutched my body tightly, overwhelmed by an unbearable emptiness.

I knew I was dreaming again.

I dreamt of my family, my world.. just like always.

But this time, they left.

They left without saying a word.

I tried to run after them ..

but it was useless.

They simply abandoned me, drowning alone in the void.

I had always wondered...

After everything I've gone through here,

am I truly worthy of returning to that place?

Am I, the version of myself who survived in this blood-soaked world,

still fit to call them family?

I was no longer the fragile writer I once was.

I knew it better than anyone ...

how much I had changed...

into the monster I had become.

Returning to my world, to my family, was the only thing I ever wanted.

I had yearned for it so desperately that I walked through hell itself.

But now...

I was terrified.

Terrified of what would happen if they saw what I had become.

Would they really...

accept this version of me as their son?

As their brother?

As their friend?

Who even was I anymore?

I ran.

And I ran, desperately chasing after the shadows.

Despite everything ..

I really, truly, desperately...

missed them.

Stretching my hand out into the darkness,

I suddenly stumbled into a faint, misty light.

Startled, I jolted awake, gasping for breath.

Frantically, I reached out, trying to feel my surroundings.

I was lying on a bed ..

my eyes covered by a thick blindfold.

When I tore it off, I could barely see anything at all.

Pain shot through my skull.

My body was wrapped in bandages from head to toe.

Slowly, my hazy mind started to piece everything together.

I leapt up instinctively.

My vision was still blurry,

a side effect of pushing Ascension and Hawk Eyes beyond their limits for too long.

I was practically blind.

But none of that mattered.

"I won!"

I had won the Victoriad.

Those memories ..

that insane battle ..

they weren't a dream.

They were real.

I had done it.

"I did it!"

Two years of struggle.

Two years of agony.

My heart felt like it might explode inside my chest.

Immediately, I summoned my personal laptop from Balerion's storage tattoo,

my hands trembling as I held it.

I slumped to the floor, sweating so profusely it felt like I was about to lose my mind.

I opened the laptop.

"The answer..."

The answer I had waited so long to find.

The answer I had bled and suffered for.

The screen flickered on.

I couldn't see clearly ...

I had to press my face right up against it.

The Author Tools had vanished completely.

Only a few words remained on the screen.

Barely able to make them out, I read—

In bold letters across the interface:

Final Mission: Win the Victoriad (Completed)

Reward: 10,000 Achievement Points

System Question: The Author may now submit one question to the System Engineer, who must answer ... no matter what the question is.

Chapter 217: Ashes of Hope

-Frey starlight POV-

I clicked the question button without hesitation.

At that moment ..

I felt my very soul shudder, not just my body.

Anticipation, longing, fear...

All surging toward that unknown future.

The moment I clicked on the question option,

unexpected words appeared before me—stopping me in my tracks.

Free Advice:

-Think carefully before using your System Question. Who knows what the future holds? Regret may come too late.-

An overwhelming emptiness swallowed me.

A new tip appeared, alongside the usual Direct and Random advice ..

something I had never seen before.

The system was literally telling me not to use my System Question right now.

"Regret? Future?"

I clenched my fists tightly, struggling to contain the flood of emotions surging within me.

"Are you kidding me right now?"

You want me to hesitate?

Now, after everything?

After all the suffering?

Without thinking, I completely ignored the warning.

"To hell with you and your stupid advice."

I didn't want your bullshit.

I wanted an answer.

The path back to them.

Word for word, I typed the question that had haunted my mind for thousands ...no, millions ..of times.

"How can I return to my world?"

To my family.

To my life.

At that moment, it felt as if everything around me froze.

My entire world...

stopped.

Even time itself seemed to halt.

The screen went black ..everything vanished.

And from deep within the laptop, I could feel a presence awaken.

At that moment, I heard a voice.

His voice.

"So, you've used it in the end... the System Question... even though I warned you ... you would regret it."

His voice sounded mechanical ...

inhuman.

A voice I had never heard before.

And yet, for some reason,

every word he spoke stirred something deep within my being.

It was him.

He was the one behind everything that had happened to me until now.

I felt my head burning with rage.

I screamed.

"You bastard!"

I pressed my forehead against the screen.

"Fuck you! Burn in hell along with your damn advice!"

I screamed until my throat burned, cursing the entity on the other side of the screen.

I cursed.

And cursed.

And cursed again.

For a long, long time.

All while he simply listened in silence.

"Damn you... Just tell me..."

Tell me ..

"How do I go back to my world?"

I couldn't endure this anymore.

I couldn't fight anymore.

That thin thread of hope I clung to was no longer enough.

I had reached my limit.

I collapsed before the laptop, my body trembling.

"Please..."

"I'm begging you..."

With a trembling voice, I pleaded for an answer.

"Please... Tell me... How can I return to them?"

"To my world."

I choked out those words, swallowed by silence.

The silence stretched on.

A minute.

A minute that felt like it lasted an eternity.

Until, finally, the answer came.

"You can't."

Just those simple words.

And my mind went completely blank.

"Wh...at..."

I couldn't even form a proper word as he continued speaking ..

"You cannot return to a world you never left in the first place."

"What..."

"Writer. Author. Son. Riding in a car with his family that day, heading to work."

His words kept pouring out like a relentless machine.

"In the year 2026, on that night, humanity witnessed an unprecedented disaster ..

when gates appeared out of nowhere, unleashing hell and its horrors upon their world."

Those words hit me like a violent storm.

"That blinding light... was the light of the gate that opened before them, causing their car to crash and killing them all."

They died.

Your family died.

That's what he was saying...

"And now, more than 300 years later, here you are, reincarnated ..not as that 'writer' ..but as your true self, Frey Starlight."

The voice fell silent.

And with it, everything turned dark.

"No..."

Every fiber of my being trembled.

I could barely mutter the words.

"No..."

I had never left my world to begin with.

I had been there all along... just in the future.

That was the truth.

Tears fell from my eyes as I slumped to the ground, my face shadowed in despair.

I didn't even know what expression I was making at that moment.

Was I screaming?

Was I crying?

I didn't know.

There had been so many hints all along.

So many signs.

I punched the ground violently.

The floor shattered under my fists again and again.

If I had thought about it properly,

maybe I could have realized everything from the beginning.

But I didn't.

I chose to ignore it ...

to cling stubbornly to hope until the very end.

Two years...

Two years of suffering no normal human could have endured.

But the worst pain...

worse than all of it combined...

were those words.

They died.

They were dead.

All of them.

I heard a chilling scream.

A cry of deep anguish.

Like the roar of an ancient, enraged beast.

And eventually... I realized it was my own voice.

Those were my own tears.

The darkness thickened around me.

They died because of me.

Father...

The darkness grew even deeper.

Mother...

If I hadn't written that damn novel ..

My siblings...

If I hadn't created this cursed nightmare ..

All of them...

But no...

In the end...

"You're the one responsible!!!"

I screamed, lunging at the laptop with unbridled rage, hurling it through the wall.

That thing...

That engineer...

"You're the one responsible!"

I felt like I was about to explode.

I walked, shrouded in a storm of darkness.

My vision returned.

But I no longer cared about anything.

Everything was over now.

I found myself inside a hospital.

Inside the room I had just destroyed with my own hands.

As my consciousness slowly returned,

I saw the corpses of all the nurses and doctors sprawled around me.

I had killed them all.

But I didn't care.

Nothing mattered anymore.

With a dark, hollow face, I continued walking, smashing everything in my path.

At some point, guards began to swarm around me.

But I kept moving.

After unlocking the first phase of Shadow Adaptation ..

and with that strange aura enveloping me...

I was stronger.

Far stronger.

I shattered everything around me.

I cried tears of blood, mourning my miserable state.

They were dead.

Why had I fought all this time?

Why had I endured all that agony?

I didn't even know when it happened, but S-class guards had surrounded me tightly now, restraining my body with all their might ... yet I didn't even see them.

All I could see...

were their corpses.

The corpses of my family.

"Ah... it's pointless..."

Yes, it was pointless.

"There's no point in living anymore."

Everyone around me shuddered in fear as my body began to crack, purple lines spreading across it like dreadful scars.

Let's end this pathetic suffering.

The violent surge of aura intensified, and everyone nearby felt an overwhelming terror.

I saw Ada, Carmen...

and many others.

Many eyes were watching me.

But I no longer cared.

I closed my eyes, ready to detonate my body and put an end to everything.

I screamed:

"Ignition!"

...

...

...

As Frey Starlight's body cracked apart, unleashing a horrifying wave of aura, everyone around him was gripped by terror.

The fear of that young man.

Normally, Frey would unleash Ignition through detonating a weapon — not his own body.

His body was supposed to be merely a medium.

But now... that young man was about to explode himself.

This act unleashed the full force of an SSS-ranked aura domain.

Frey Starlight intended to blow himself up, ending his life ... and to drag this wretched world down with him.

The entire world trembled at that moment.

An explosion of that scale wouldn't just wipe out the Temple.

It would erase the entire capital, Belgrad, from the map.

Ada Starlight watched helplessly as her brother, swallowed by darkness, headed toward his own destruction.

And then, as if by some miracle, before the young man could explode ...

The serpent tattoo on Frey's left arm blazed with a brilliant blue light.

The serpent coiled tightly around his body, and from that hand emerged a cursed, pitch-black sword.

The sword moved as if it had a will of its own, rising upward and forcefully absorbing all the explosive aura.

Balerion had devoured it all, pulling the death-bound aura high into the sky.

A towering column of ominous black aura shot into the heavens, piercing through the S ranked dome protecting the Temple .. shattering it like fragile glass .. and continued on, carving a massive hole through the clouds above.

The entire world witnessed that pillar.

Everyone in the Temple.

The citizens of Belgrad.

All stared in horror at that dreadful sight.

Those who had been at the Island Trial had seen it before.

Among them...

Phoenix Sunlight stared at the young man, rushing toward him.

Toward Frey Starlight.

The sword on his left hand had saved them, forcibly casting that black death away into the sky.

Slowly, the darkness dissipated.

And there he was ..

Frey, his body cracked and broken, his eyes lifeless... like an ancient, withered corpse.

Ada Starlight watched in silence... as her brother collapsed slowly to the ground.

That final expression he wore was forever burned into her memory.

The expression...

of someone who had lost everything.

The face...

of someone who had chosen death.

That...

was Frey Starlight.

Chapter 218: When Death Becomes a Mercy (1)

The light at the end of the tunnel... had finally gone out.

Leaving behind only darkness, and an unbearable emptiness within Frey Starlight's broken body.

The temple was thrown into complete chaos after the recent catastrophe, while efforts were made to cover up the incident as much as possible after the entire capital witnessed the enormous aura pillar that shattered the very sky itself.

As if the uproar from the Victoriad and its shocking finale hadn't been enough...

Ivar Valerion, dressed in his formal suit, moved with a contingent of soldiers toward a deep point within the temple.

After passing through many guards, Ivar began descending a long staircase leading to the underground floors.

Deeper and deeper he went, down into the temple's hidden layers beneath the earth.

Finally, he reached the lowest and deepest point.

There, in a massive underground hall, dozens of personnel were scattered about, busy operating all kinds of arcane machinery.

With a grim face, Ivar Valerion pushed through the crowd and approached a woman in her thirties sitting at the forefront.

"Report," he said curtly.

The woman stood and answered promptly:

"No change in his condition. He hasn't resisted at all... but he shows no willingness to cooperate either. It's like he's nothing more than a lifeless corpse. No matter what we do, he shows no reaction whatsoever."

"You're telling me... that all of you couldn't extract information from a seventeen-year-old boy?"

Ivar's voice sharpened with anger.

"You don't understand, sir. That boy ... his body is something I've never seen before," she replied, grimacing.

"What about magic? Did you attempt a memory search?"

Some sorcerers could force those weaker than themselves to speak everything they knew.

Yet even so, the woman's expression tightened further.

"We tried. It didn't work. He..."

She hesitated, then continued.

"He withstood it. No, he didn't even react to mind control spells at all."

As if their attempts hadn't even reached him.

Ivar heard enough.

"I'll handle it myself."

He pressed deeper inside.

Past a thick iron gate and into even darker depths.

There, behind massive steel bars, was a single chamber.

Chains .. massive, heavy chains ..writhed across the floor like serpents, all of them binding one man.

With disheveled white hair, a wrecked body, and eyes that held no trace of life.

Chained and shackled beyond imagination.

"Frey Starlight..."

The one responsible for the recent disaster.

Ivar stared at him, a hint of disbelief in his eyes.

Is this really the same boy?

He still remembered the day Frey had sat across from him, speaking to him, intriguing him, making him wonder what kind of future awaited this boy.

And yet this... was what it all led to.

Ivar felt a chill race down his spine.

The boy's face now looked terrifying. Madness lingered in those dead eyes.

"Frey Starlight, are you enjoying your stay here?"

Ivar stood before him, speaking.

"You really messed up this time, Frey."

You caused a disaster.

"Thirty eight people dead. Twenty-five women, thirteen men. Nurses. Guards. That's your kill count, Frey. Do you even understand what that means?"

A murderer.

Someone who had slaughtered the innocent with nothing but his bare hands.

"Ordinarily, I'd have you executed immediately. What you've done is more than enough to warrant it.

But tell me ...

Is this truly what you want to become, Frey Starlight?"

"..."

Frey didn't utter a single word.

Still staring vacantly at the ground, bound by chains.

"A murderer?"

Just another criminal who strangles his victims with his bare hands?"

Ivar's words didn't reach him.

In a flash, Ivar grabbed Frey's face roughly, forcing him to look up.

"Don't play games with me, Starlight. Do you really think you'll get away with claiming insanity?"

He squeezed Frey's face harshly.

"After killing all your victims...

you went ahead and unleashed that... thing."

Ivar Valerion was finally getting to the important points.

"Awakened at C+ rank... yet unleashed an SS rank attack that shattered the temple's dome in a single second..."

It was an event that defied all logic.

But the number of witnesses was far from small.

"What are you hiding, Frey Starlight?"

Ivar's hand struck Frey's face hard.

"A power like that... coming from someone with mere A rank talent."

Slap!

"A force that nearly obliterated the temple and not just killing thirty-eight people."

Slap!

"It could have wiped out thousands."

Slap!

Ivar slapped Frey's face repeatedly until the boy's cheek swelled, blood dripping endlessly from his mouth.

Yet those eyes never blinked, only further fueling Ivar's anger.

"At this level, you've risen to become a potential threat to the Empire itself. I should kill you right here with my own hands... yet I'm giving you a chance."

Holding Frey's bloodied face still, he continued:

"Think carefully before you answer. You won't just bring death upon yourself... your entire family will fall with you if you're condemned any further."

Ivar tried to force Frey into speaking.

"How did you unleash that attack? A demonic contract?!"

He roared, punching Frey again.

"Did you make a contract with the Ultras?"

Punch!

"Did you sell your body for cursed power?"

Punch!

"Only to turn around and slaughter your own kin?"

Punch!

"Answer me! What's your secret? What are you hiding?!"

There was no logical explanation.

No matter how he thought about it, the only answer that made sense was a demonic contract .. a pact of the highest, most insane level.

And yet even that possibility seemed absurd; Frey showed no signs, and even the Church hadn't detected anything.

The entire matter was an unfathomable mystery .. one only Frey himself knew the answer to.

"Speak!!"

"Have you truly sunk so low as to sell your soul for mere power?!"

Ivar couldn't get a single word out of the boy.

Until, suddenly, for the first time ... something changed.

"Hehehe... hehehehehehehehehehehehehehe..."

He laughed.

Frey laughed.

A broken, hollow laugh while staring blankly at Ivar, as if mourning everything.

"I tried to die."

Frey finally spoke.

"I wanted to die, hahaha... but even that choice was stolen from me."

"Not only did they take everything from me, they even robbed me of death itself... so what the hell am I supposed to do now?"

Frey laughed harder, while Ivar's frown deepened into a scowl.

"What the hell are you saying?"

"You should've let me do it."

Frey kept laughing uncontrollably.

"You should've let me erase this damned world. Now, you'll all live long enough to see hell alongside me! What a damn ending!"

"What the..."

"You're all going to die anyway!"

What was he even saying?

"Every last one of you... but I'm the only one who can't."

Frey Starlight clenched his teeth and screamed:

"IGNITION!"

But nothing happened.

"You see? The cursed snake binds my body."

"Shut that damned mouth of yours."

With a brutal punch, Frey's head snapped backward, swinging back and forth.

Yet even then, he kept laughing .. groaning and chuckling like a madman.

"There's no point anymore... it's already over."

"I said SHUT UP!"

Ivar pulled out a muzzle and strapped it onto Frey's face, forcibly silencing him.

Even with the muzzle in place, Frey continued to laugh and moan in broken, eerie sounds.

While Ivar Valerion couldn't fully comprehend what was happening.

What could have possibly driven that boy to such madness?

And what exactly had he been ranting about earlier?

Ivar eventually lost hope in the boy, leaving him behind.

As soon as he returned to the massive hall, Ivar let out a helpless sigh.

How had that boy managed to get under his skin like this? How had his body trembled with such insanity?

Just... what exactly was he?

Chapter 219: When Death Becomes a Mercy (2)

The director returned to the woman who had remained monitoring the situation.

"You didn't get anything out of him either, huh."

Ivar, clearly irritated, stood in front of the screens monitoring Frey.

"What information do we have so far?"

The woman beside him adjusted her glasses, then calmly began summarizing the conclusions they had reached.

"First, it's not a demonic contract. Saintess Yorasha was present that day due to her duty of accompanying the hero, and she detected no trace of demonic aura."

The only logical explanation had already been ruled out.

"Second, we still don't know the actual amount of aura the boy released. But there is no doubt that his attack reached SS rank."

An attack only a handful of individuals across the Empire could ever replicate.

From a mere C+ rank boy.

"Third, based on some of the footage captured from the incident, a black sword could be seen attached to his hand. After cross-referencing it with our archives, we found something similar recorded over 300 years ago..."

The woman paused, clearly aware of how insane it all sounded, but continued anyway:

"That sword is suspected to be the SS rank weapon, Black Dread : Balerion, once wielded by one of the strongest humans in history. It had gone missing... until it appeared in that boy's hand."

Ivar's eyes widened at what he was hearing.

"One of the legendary swords."

And one of the most enigmatic ones too.

Perhaps this was the only piece that made even a little bit of sense in the chaos that happened.

But even with Balerion...

"This is still impossible. Even aided by a blazing weapon like that, how could someone with mere A-rank talent unleash such an overwhelming aura?!"

Ivar ruffled his hair in frustration, feeling a headache pounding at his temples.

But the woman beside him stared at him for a moment longer before speaking up.

"Sir... there's something else you should know."

"What now?!"

Ivar braced himself, expecting even more madness, but the revelations weren't over yet.

"After repeated examinations, the result regarding his talent turned out to be completely different from what we were initially told."

"What?"

"It's S."

She took a deep breath and repeated more clearly:

"His talent is S."

Ivar was stunned.

"Did he tamper with the talent test?"

It seemed like the most reasonable explanation.

But the woman shook her head firmly.

"I thought so at first too... but take a look at this."

She placed a black crystal orb beside them and connected several wires to it, projecting a wealth of data onto the screen.

"This is the same orb Frey Starlight used when he first took his talent evaluation upon entering the Temple. Fortunately, it still retains a trace of his aura."

Upon analyzing the residual aura, the results were undeniable.

"No matter how many times I tested it... the result was A."

"But now, it has become S."

The woman turned toward the frozen Ivar, frowning deeply.

"Sir, unless there's something crucial we missed, we may be facing an unprecedented situation in the Empire's history."

Ivar, completely stunned, muttered under his breath:

"An Awakened... capable of raising his own talent."

He knew how crazy the words sounded, but what if it was true?

A being capable of breaking through his innate limits ... able to keep growing endlessly stronger.

The very thought sent chills down Ivar's spine, forcing him to lean against the wall for support.

Wouldn't that mean Frey Starlight... was a monster whose growth had no limits?

The possibilities were terrifying.

How were they supposed to handle someone like him?

Frey's recent behavior had already proven he was a danger to them all.

Then, should that monster be killed now, before he could grow any stronger?

But the Starlight family was putting immense pressure in his favor... if Ivar killed him, one of the Great Houses would turn against them.

At a time when they were on the verge of war against the Ultras.

Suddenly, Ivar grasped the true weight of the situation.

"His life... or his death."

Ivar Valerion closed his eyes heavily.

"Which one is the right choice?"

That dilemma... was escalated to Emperor Maekar Valerion himself on that very day.

The heads of the noble houses.

The leaders of the Church.

The great figures of the Empire.

Each had their own opinion on this unprecedented matter.

When Ivar asked his elder brother Maekar for his view, the Emperor, leaning casually on his throne, answered simply, making the matter seem almost trivial.

"His value... will determine his fate."

Whether he would become a blessing to the Empire ..

Or its greatest curse.

Maekar showed no intention of intervening directly in the matter.

Instead, he left the decision entirely in the hands of the Empire's major powers.

The odds were not in Frey's favor.

After grasping the situation, the Church was the first to call for his execution... mourning the innocent dead and fearing the catastrophes Frey Starlight might unleash in the future.

The Moonlight Family initially refrained from giving a clear stance, but they leaned toward opposing Frey as well.

The major guilds and most of the influential forces within the Empire voted overwhelmingly for his execution.

The only ones supporting him were his family ..

The Starlights alone.

For days, Ada Starlight fought to protect her brother, standing firmly against the tidal wave demanding his death.

She used everything at her disposal as the Lord of a Great House.

But fear ruled the hearts of many ... fear of what they had witnessed that day.

Some saw this as an opportunity to eliminate him.

Some simply wanted to destroy him before he grew even stronger.

Countless powers banded together, aiming to bring his head.

And behind the scenes, hidden hands moved ..

Guided by none other than Prince Aegon Valerion.

He masterfully orchestrated everything from the shadows, and Ada found herself completely cornered.

At first, she resisted well, but as soon as she clashed with the Prince's hidden forces, she realized just how outmatched she was ..

Terrified, unable even to grasp who her true enemy was.

At this stage, inside the Starlight Family's main estate, Ada clutched her head in despair, desperately searching for a way out.

At this rate... she would be forced to watch her brother's head fall before her eyes.

Just imagining it made her feel as if her entire world was collapsing around her.

"What do I do?"

How could she save him?

How could she pull him out of this catastrophe?

Frey had crossed a forbidden line this time...

His situation was catastrophic.

Ada's mind went blank as despair overtook her.

At this pace, he would really die.

When she finally lost all hope, the door suddenly swung open, and a powerful voice echoed through the room.

"What are you doing, Lord Starlight? Is this really the time to crumble when we've only just begun?"

Turning her head ...

Ada found an old man with a fiery beard standing there with a confident smile, wearing a luxurious suit.

Behind him stood Phoenix, radiating his usual brilliance.

"You..."

When had they arrived?

Ada's mind raced to remember...she had tried to seek their help multiple times, inviting them to side with her, but the Sunlight Family had remained neutral until now.

Why had they appeared now, of all times?

"Stand up, Ada Starlight.

A Lord does not fall so easily."

"Why... why have you come?"

Ada asked with a blank face, her heart no longer daring to hope for anything.

The old Sunlight elder clasped his hands together, giving a brief glance first at Phoenix, then back at Ada.

"I heard everything... about your brother."

How he had become a monster whose limits no one could predict.

And how the world now wanted him dead.

"Everyone treats Frey Starlight as a monster destined to bring destruction."

And that idea was entirely reasonable...

after all, he had already proven it once.

The old Iris Sunlight stared at the girl before him, memories surfacing of a man who once stood tall before him...

"People fear the monsters they don't understand."

They despise them... they wish for their death, simply because they cannot comprehend them."

There had once been a monster like that.

A monster called Abraham Starlight.

Iris Sunlight ...acknowledged as the strongest among the Great Houses...had once fought alongside that man.

It was not the Emperor who led the final war.

Nor any of the other great leaders.

It was Abraham.

The man who once fought the Four Lords of the Ultras alone.

The man who defeated Emperor Maekar Valerion in a one-on-one duel.

The man who slew the human demon, Dragoth.

Abraham Starlight had been the monster that no one could understand.

"Frey Starlight is still a boy, not even eighteen yet...

merely a budding seed showing terrifying potential...

potential that will one day cast a shadow over everyone around him."

Iris closed his eyes for a moment before continuing.

"He's still just a child.

And it's our duty, as the older generation, to support and guide him...not destroy him."

Such talents were meant to lead the Empire into the future.

Just like Abraham Starlight once had.

Frey Starlight would one day rise to that same level.

"And with the Empire on the verge of an all-out war...

on what grounds could we afford to cast aside a talent that might determine the very fate of the future?"

Ada listened silently to Iris's words, unable to fully grasp the gravity of what he was saying.

Meanwhile, Phoenix nodded in satisfaction.

"You've said it so perfectly, Uncle... there's nothing I could add."

Phoenix then declared proudly:

"The Sunlight Family will stand with the Starlight."

Those words were what Ada had been desperate to hear.

Words that finally rekindled hope.

Phoenix then turned to the doors behind him, where more guests had just arrived.

"And we're not alone."

The Sunlight Family had remained silent until now because they had been preparing for this very moment.

Phoenix, in particular, had worked tirelessly to bring it together.

From the doorway, two figures entered ...

Both were of the same age as Frey.

One was a boy with white hair and golden eyes.

The other was a girl with radiant golden hair and eyes now darkened with an intense black.

Ada recognized them instantly.

Both were already famous names.

"The Hero, Snow Lionheart ... And Princess Sansa Valerion."

Phoenix gestured toward them.

"These two will help us...

and they might just be the deciding factor."

Snow Lionheart ...

the Church's Hero.

"I'll do everything I can."

Wielder of Vermithor's Sword, bearer of the Will of the Lord of light.

Snow's influence over the Church was immense.

If he stood by Frey's side, the Church would be forced to follow ...

for opposing him would mean defying the Will of their god.

After the deadly battle they shared during the finals of the Victoriad, Snow had glimpsed it.

Just as Frey had seen a reflection of himself in Snow ..

Snow, too, had seen a reflection of his own desperate struggle in Frey.

He could feel it ..

He understood, even if just a little, the immense suffering that boy carried.

Someone like Frey...

Snow wanted to grow alongside him.

He wanted to fight him again.

He wanted to fight beside him ..

A warrior worthy of his respect.

Meanwhile, Sansa took a brief glance at Iris Sunlight.

Their relationship wasn't exactly amicable, especially since the Sunlight Family had once backed her brother in the battle for the throne.

Iris was the type to follow the path he believed to be right, no matter who stood in his way.

Thus, he showed no sign of stepping back today either.

But today's gathering was for a different cause.

Frey Starlight...

He was someone precious to her ...

someone who had already lost everything.

The only one who had ever treated her like a real human being ..

Even when everything inside her screamed otherwise.

Someone like him...

She would never allow him to die.

"I'll do whatever I can to help."

Everyone nodded at once.

Phoenix turned back toward Ada.

"Come on... let's save Frey."

Ada couldn't find the words.

She barely managed to hold back her tears ...

because at last, something she had lost during these agonizing days had finally returned.

Hope.

Chapter 220: The One Who Was Always There

-Frey Starlight's POV-

"Damn you.

Damn you.

Damn you!!"

I cursed, again and again and again.

Balerion, you treacherous bastard!

The cursed serpent coiled tighter around me than the chains ever could,

suffocating me, choking out even the slightest trace of aura I might have released.

Muzzled, shackled in the darkness, I kept cursing endlessly.

"Let me go!"

Let me blow everything up!

Let me die ..

That's all I'm asking for.

I wasn't asking for much.

Just death.

Just let me die, for God's sake!

I had no reason left to live anymore.

Not now.

How could I continue breathing in a world that slaughtered my family, destroyed my life, and kept torturing me even after my reincarnation?

It was supposed to be just a story.

Just a damned novel I wrote during a wild bout of inspiration.

Just a damned novel!

So how...

How the hell did it come to this?!

An unbearable emptiness gnawed at me, choking me even worse than the chains.

My body was shattered from the last use of "Ignition."

If not for that bastard Balerion, I would have blown everything to pieces...

Even my own weapon had betrayed me.

What did I have left now?

I seriously wondered, my mind completely blank.

Maybe the Empire would decide to execute me.

I had killed thirty-eight worthless NPCs anyway.

I only wished I had taken myself along with them.

I had exposed everything.

Maybe ..

maybe they really would kill me.

And even before that, although Balerion saved me, my body had been damaged beyond repair.

It wasn't healing anymore.

Maybe...

maybe I would just die without doing anything else.

Yes!

Death death death death death death death death death death !!!

I want to die.

Just let it happen already.

Death death death death death death death death death death !!!!

I muttered like a madman,

waiting for salvation.

The Temple.

Specifically, deep underground, inside the temporary prison where the shattered Frey Starlight was kept.

The number of guards was immense.

They were on high alert,

all of them powerful warriors.

Hundreds of them,

stationed for one purpose only:

To guard one boy.

-Step-

His footsteps tapped softly against the stone as he descended,

step by slow, deliberate step.

He walked past the guards as if they weren't even there.

Descending the stairs, one step at a time.

Everyone around him ...every guard he passed ... froze in place, as if their very lives had been stolen from them temporarily, just to allow him to pass by in utter silence.

In mere seconds, he reached the heavily fortified prison cell.

As if he had stopped time itself,

he arrived there like it was nothing more than a casual stroll through a park,

not one of the most secure locations in the Empire.

His body slipped through the massive iron door,

as if phasing right through it,

and appeared inside the cell.

In that dark, desolate place, only two figures existed.

Frey Starlight, who spent his days in a haze..

sometimes cursing and spitting rage at the world, sometimes falling back into hollow silence.

He sat there quietly now,

staring at the ground.

The figure approached him.

Shrouded in black, with one arm missing.

At that moment, Frey Starlight raised his head.

And what entered his vision...

was the true form of that being.

A strange figure,

dressed entirely in black from head to toe.

Only the piercing blue eyes were visible ...

eyes that looked like glowing glass orbs.

Frey's own eyes widened slowly.

He didn't need evidence.

He didn't need explanations.

Those blue eyes said it all.

It was him.

The life that had been drained from Frey's body suddenly reignited.

"UMMMMMMM!!"

The gag over his mouth prevented him from speaking,

so all he could do was hurl his broken body forward in rage.

The rattling of chains echoed violently

as they tightened,

refusing to let Frey take even a single step closer.

"..."

He struggled viciously,

blood running down his arms from the force of his thrashing,

desperate to break free and lunge at the man before him.

It was him.

The one responsible.

The one who had plunged him into this hell.

Standing right there in front of him ...

and yet, Frey couldn't do a thing.

No one could possibly understand the agony Frey Starlight felt in that moment.

The Engineer didn't seem moved at all by Frey's desperation.

With his one remaining hand,

the cloaked figure approached.

In a flash ..

that hand pierced right through Frey's chest.

A violent emptiness struck him as his chest was torn open.

Their black and blue eyes locked.

Frey felt a searing pain tear through him,

as blue lines of energy pulsed outward from the Engineer's hand,

spreading throughout his body.

He screamed and cursed through the gag,

but no sound could reach.

The Engineer carried out whatever task he had come for,

without hesitation.

But even as he worked,

his gaze never left Frey's broken face.

Frey could feel it.

The sheer helplessness.

Tears streamed down from his dead, hollow eyes.

He tried to mouth something,

his words too broken to be understood.

But the Engineer understood them anyway.

He heard it clearly.

The one thing Frey wanted to ask:

"Why me?"

Why had he been chosen?

Why did he have to suffer through this nightmare designed just for him?

The Engineer finished his work,

withdrawing his hand from Frey's chest.

The gaping wound healed instantly,

and Frey's body slowly regained some semblance of vitality.

But he had already lost consciousness.

The body was restored.

But the soul inside had suffered wounds that would never heal.

The Engineer thought about Frey's question for a moment.

"Why me?"

He opened his mouth and spoke,

his voice distant, cold.

"Why did I choose you?"

Such a foolish question.

"I didn't choose you.

From the very beginning... there was never anyone else."

You were the only one.

You don't even understand the simplest truths about yourself.

You have no idea...

how long I've waited...

and waited...

"Your suffering?"

I saw it all.

I was there.

When you ran alone through the Eastern Nightmare Lands,

fighting just to survive.

Who do you think stood in the shadows,

fending off the monsters that chased you?

Who do you think guided you to the Shadow Sect,

where you fulfilled your first destiny?

I was there.

When assassins came for your head ...

whether they served the Prince or others ...

who turned their blades aside, unseen?

I was there.

When the Invasion came to the temple,

who twisted the strings,

showing the enemies a false future,

just so you could survive?

I was there.

When the Moonlights sought your death,

who revealed the future to Ada Starlight?

Who gave her the weapon to save you?

I was there.

When you tried to take your own life,

who made Balerion stop you?

I am here.

I was there.

And I will always be here.

Until you reach it.

Until you reach the truth.

Frey Starlight ...

Until you learn who you truly are ...

I will remain.