

VILLAIN 23

Chapter 23 Homecoming (1)

-Frey starlight POV -

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"Snow here ♪ and snow there ♪"

"A mountain here ♪ and a mountain there ♪"

I took a deep breath, letting the crisp, cold air fill my lungs.

My gaze wandered over the vast, untouched landscape.

"You know, Balerion... Back then, I was too busy running for my life to truly take in this place."

"It's beautiful, don't you think?"

The terrain had shifted the moment the gates appeared.

The very air and ground had become saturated with aura, reshaping the land itself.

"Oh, that reminds me."

I reached into my ring and pulled out my personal laptop.

"Let's not repeat the same mistakes. There might be a new quest..."

Opening the screen, I navigated to the quest log.

"Bingo."

I was right.

A new side quest had appeared:

Return to the gate before time runs out – Reward: 500 Achievement Points

Time remaining: 05:46:20

I stared blankly at the screen.

It expects me to cover all that distance in just five hours?

"Pffft—Hahaha!"

I burst into laughter. And here I thought I was the crazy one... Turns out, the system is even worse.

It had taken me days to reach this point—granted, I only traveled in the mornings. Not to mention all the detours I had to take to avoid the Nightmare Creatures...

"But you know what? This might be the perfect chance to test my strength."

I stretched my legs, took a deep breath, and assumed a runner's stance.

"You better keep up, Balerion. We're about to put on one hell of a show."

"Phantom Steps."

One moment, a boy stood in the middle of a snow-covered field.

The next, the field was empty, as if no one had been there at all.

The world blurred around me as I moved at an insane speed, the wind howling against my face.

"This is incredible!"

I rushed into the cave where ancient skeletal remains lay dormant.

Ahead, the broken bridge I had once destroyed loomed over the abyss. The gap was massive...

But I cleared it in a single leap.

As I entered the narrow tunnel, I let out a loud shout—

"Wake up! Wake up, you fools! Dinner time!"

As if answering my call, the skeletons stirred. The eerie sound of grinding bones filled the air as they lunged toward me.

"Haha, yes! That's it—come at me!"

I extended my sword forward and spun at blinding speed.

The moment the skeletons got too close, they were instantly shattered. All they saw was a furious black wheel, slicing through everything in its path.

Bones piled up in my wake, but nothing slowed me down.

Like a raging black storm, I cut through the skeletal horde without taking a single hit.

At the cave's entrance, hordes of giant rodents swarmed, blocking my path.

But just then, something shot out from the gate.

The rodents lifted their heads, their beady eyes narrowing.

All they saw was a small black dot in the sky.

I wrapped my arms around Balerion and hurled myself downward. From below, they saw only a streak of black light plummeting toward them.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Black Meteor!"

The moment I crashed into the ground, dozens—no, hundreds—of rodents were sent flying in every direction.

I carved through them like a living shadow, leaving only blood and severed limbs in my wake.

"Move! Move! Get out of my way—I don't have time for this!"

At this moment, nothing else mattered. I cut down everything that dared stand in my way.

"Faster... Deeper... I need to go even deeper!"

With every slash, more creatures were sent flying in bloody pieces.

"Show me what you're made of, Balerion! Is this really all you've got?"

As if provoked, Balerion trembled violently, drawing even more energy from my body.

His strikes grew sharper. Heavier.

"Yes! Haha! That's what I like!"

And then, in mere moments, I reached the edge of the cliff.

"Clear the way—I'm coming through!"

With those words, a madman leaped from the top of a towering mountain.

The wind howled, my hair whipping against the sky as I plummeted at terrifying speed.

"I'm free!"

I laughed wildly, exhilarated by the sheer thrill of the fall.

As the ground rushed toward me, I twisted my body and plunged Balerion into the mountain's surface, dragging it along the rock face.

Sparks exploded as friction slowed my descent.

Luckily, Balerion was sturdy enough to withstand the process.

By the time I hit the ground, my speed had dropped just enough to absorb the impact.

I looked up. A straight, scorched line now ran down the mountainside.

"Look on the bright side, Balerion—we left our signature behind."

Wasting no time, I dashed toward the forest ahead.

The trees blurred past as I leaped from branch to branch.

"Don't be mad, my friend. I had to do it, or I would've died from the fall."

My sword was acting like an annoyed tsundere again...

Giant crabs scuttled through the forest.

One lifted its head.

In the next instant, the world flipped upside down.

Its severed head landed beside its still-standing body.

These creatures were no longer a challenge.

I glanced at my right hand. The engraved circle was still there.

"Good... It's still intact."

Back then, I had lost my right hand. I feared that meant losing my connection to the return gate as well.

But thankfully, it was still here.

I channeled my aura into the engraving, causing it to glow with white light.

Instantly, I sensed the gate's location.

I tore through the crab-infested forest until I reached familiar ground. My steps slowed, almost instinctively.

"...Alright. The madness ends here."

This was the same place where the Mist Stalker had attacked me before.

Yes, I had grown stronger. But compared to that thing, I was still nothing more than an insect.

The memory of that encounter was carved deep into my body.

So deep that even the mere thought of facing it again made my skin crawl.

I moved cautiously, releasing my aura to scout the surroundings.

I couldn't cover much ground, but it was enough to sense what lay ahead.

Fortunately, the mist was shifting, constantly in motion.

There was no sign of it anywhere.

Still, I had lost a lot of time... I might have failed the quest.

A few minutes later, I stood before the gate.

I pulled out my laptop and checked the screen.

Return to the gate before time runs out – 500 Achievement Points (Completed)

Time remaining: 00:12:45

Barely made it, huh? Less than fifteen minutes to spare.

Had I not hesitated in the misty lands, I would have arrived much sooner.

But whatever.

At last... I was leaving this cursed place.

This was where I had experienced terror unlike anything before.

This was where I had come closest to death.

But I had survived. And now, the journey ends.

I activated the gate. A white rift appeared before me.

I was just about to take my first step through the gate when I suddenly stopped.

"Ah... I almost forgot."

I glanced at the companion clinging to my hand.

"Sorry, my friend, but no one can see you right now."

Lifting my hand high, I spoke softly.

"You know I love you, but we don't have a choice."

Balerion responded immediately, glowing with a deep purple light. A burning sensation spread across my skin.

Painful? Maybe. But something of this level no longer fazed me.

In that instant, Balerion vanished, replaced by a massive tattoo of a serpent that coiled from my hand up to my shoulder.

"Oh! My hand!"

I flexed my fingers, staring at them in fascination.

For an entire year, I had held onto Balerion, fused with my body. Opening my hand again felt... strange.

I examined the large tattoo on my arm.

This was my first time getting a tattoo.

"Well... at least it looks cool."

It was so vivid, so lifelike—it almost seemed as if the serpent could strike at any moment.

I wrapped my hand in black bandages and stepped into the gate with a smile.

"I'm back."