

VILLAIN 241

Chapter 241: Even Normal Is a Lie (1)

– Frey Starlight's POV –

Yawn

Wearing the official uniform of the Temple's elite class, I made my way toward the classroom.

Everything felt like a dream ... as if I'd stepped a full year back in time to when I first set foot in this place. But anyone could tell that the Frey who walked these halls now was no longer the same as the Frey from back then... not by a long shot.

The whispers around me were living proof of that.

"That's him... the one who won the Victoriad."

"The man who defeated the hero."

"Don't make eye contact! He's a criminal."

"I heard he just got out of Alcatraz... only days ago."

"Terrifying..."

Thanks to my enhanced senses, I could hear every word with painful clarity.

They repeated my damned name so often I almost wanted to change it.

Frey, Frey, Frey, Frey... I swear, if one more person says it—

"Frey!"

"..."

"Haha, you're back! Look at you!"

Slap!

Danzo slammed his palm on my back ... just a slap, but it sent me two meters forward before I caught myself.

"It's been a while, Danzo."

"It really has. So, how was Alcatraz? Is it really the hell everyone says it is?"

It had been some time since I last saw him, but I felt an odd sense of emptiness at how easily he glossed over the fact that I was a criminal who'd just left the most notorious prison in the Empire. Instead, he treated it like I'd just returned from a vacation.

That kind of backwards thinking... I guess it's why I never minded him too much.

Adjusting my posture, I replied.

"Other than the time distortion, it was pretty normal."

"Really? I heard people go insane in there."

"Do I look insane to you?"

"You looked insane before you went in! Haha!"

Slap!

He hit me again as we walked toward the classroom, chatting the whole way.

"That's good for you, Frey."

"How exactly is any of this crap 'good for me'?"

"You've got a criminal record now. That probably makes you look tougher... Maybe I should finally drop the whole 'pretty boy' label."

That again...

"I'd really appreciate that."

"Your face isn't helping. Even with the dark circles under your eyes, you still look like the damn princess."

Somehow the conversation swerved toward her now, which made me ask instinctively:

"The princess?"

Seeing I didn't catch his meaning, Danzo clarified.

"Oh right, you've only just returned. It's not a big deal, really. The princess's been spacing out a lot lately. She's got worse bags under her eyes than you."

He paused for a moment before adding:

"Seeing her like that... reminded me of you, somehow."

Those last words made me wonder ... how exactly had others seen me? I hadn't given it much thought over the past two years. I never really cared about what people thought of me.

But from what Danzo said... something was definitely going on with Sansa.

"Everyone's got their own struggles," I murmured.

Danzo nodded.

"You're right."

The princess...

Thinking about Sansa inevitably brought Aegon into the picture.

I wondered what he was scheming now, especially since I'd grown into something far bigger than he probably expected.

Our relationship had become unclear, but one thing was certain ... he was my enemy.

And I fully intended to settle things with him very soon.

After all... I now had the one card that would let me play his game on my terms.

While lost in my train of thought, we eventually arrived at the classroom.

Most of the others from Class B were already there. The only new face was Daemon Valerion, who apparently preferred attending our sessions over those in Class A.

We arrived on time, so I didn't get the chance to talk to anyone else except Danzo.

Before heading to his seat, he turned to me with a grin.

"Better watch your back, Frey. I'm coming for that top rank."

When I looked at his card, I noticed he now held the fourth rank in the class.

'Why don't you challenge the second and third first... then come bother me.'

I sighed and leaned back against the desk at the back of the room.

Before the professor arrived, I quickly scanned the students in the room.

Ragna, Seris, and the princess.

She looked exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes not unlike mine.

Hawk Eyes noticed something else ... an odd shift in her golden hair. It had grown slightly darker.

As I stared at her, she noticed and met my gaze. I waved, and she returned it, though her expression didn't change at all.

Just seeing her again made me recall the power she once displayed...

Somehow, she possessed a strength normally reserved for demons.

It could easily be mistaken for the Supreme Shadow Trait, but I knew better. There was something else.

What exactly was she hiding?

I pondered that, but was interrupted by the creak of the door ... and the arrival of a face that instantly surprised me.

That violet hair... She walked in wearing a long black coat, her expression grim ...a stark contrast to the image I once had of her.

"Sophia..."

I muttered her name without realizing it. Apparently, she heard me ... because her eyes landed on me right away.

"Oh, Frey Starlight. So, you've finally returned."

I nodded at her words.

"Yeah..."

"Good. Now your class can finally resume proper training."

She was brief and to the point, starting the lesson without delay.

Given the Empire's current state, Temple lessons had become almost entirely practical. We rarely sat for theory anymore.

Sophia had us sparring in pairs, only stepping in to offer occasional pointers.

She was especially effective with the Wave Controllers ...her specialty.

But when it came to me, she'd simply nod and move on. It seemed there was nothing she could teach me now.

To be honest, I hadn't expected her return.

After the infiltration incident, Sophia was supposed to leave the Temple for good.

Back then, she lost consciousness when Aegon appeared and defeated Kai Luc ...she never witnessed the massacre that followed.

Eventually, she was meant to investigate, digging until she discovered that the true culprit... was the prince himself.

She'd turn against him and seek revenge, only to be manipulated and discarded in the end.

That was her tragic fate.

And yet, here we were ... the future had shifted once again, and Sophia had returned as our instructor.

I couldn't help but feel a bit curious. What kind of future awaited her now?

Chapter 242: Even Normal Is a Lie (2)

-Frey starlight POV-

Sophia's class ended. After seeing her again, I figured I wouldn't run into any other familiar faces for a while.

As always, I was wrong.

An odd old man with white hair and a sharp black suit appeared, barking out as he entered:

"Don't touch anything with your filthy hands! Get to the damn training hall and wait for me!"

He barked at everyone.

I just sighed.

Luca Bonatiro.

The old bastard had found his way back, too.

His lab was still the same, filled with all those precious relics of his...

I really began to wonder if I hadn't somehow jumped a year backward.

In any case, he kicked all of us out.

I was just about to leave ... until his voice stopped me.

"Not you, Frey Starlight."

I halted and turned slightly to look at him.

"Excuse me?"

"You'll stay."

And so I did.

In the end, I found myself alone with Bonatiro.

He didn't speak, so I broke the silence myself.

"Forgive me, but why did you stop me?"

Bonatiro looked at me for a moment, then went back to fiddling with whatever he had in his hands.

"You want to know why I kept you from joining the others?"

"Yeah. Isn't training supposed to start now?"

"Training? Hmph... you're excused from that, Starlight."

"What?"

"I have nothing left to teach you. You're already stronger than me."

My dark eyes narrowed slightly at those last words.

But he didn't care and simply continued.

"The Temple is still the same idiotic place no matter who runs it ... blind to the monsters they're sheltering."

"You're overestimating me, clearly."

"Bullshit."

Bonatiro clicked his tongue and rose from his seat.

"You, that crowned hero... a few upper-year students like you... none of you should remain here any longer."

He stepped up to me.

"There's nothing left for you to gain."

His words gave me pause.

Would staying at the Temple really make me stronger?

Would it help me at all?

But before I could ask those questions, there was a more important one:

Why did I even need to grow stronger in the first place?

I had no direction to point my blade anymore...

I wasn't the same person.

Bonatiro clearly saw the emptiness in my gaze.

"A lot's happened, hasn't it?"

I nodded.

"Yeah... a lot."

"Figures. Nothing surprising."

I let out a quiet laugh at that.

"Nothing surprising? Did you really expect the student standing before you to win the Victoriad and do all the things I've done?"

Bonatiro paused for a moment, staring at me with those dull, lifeless eyes.

"I didn't expect it... but the possibility was always there."

"And what exactly made you think that?"

A year ago, I was nothing. So what did he see in me?

"From the very start, you were different, kid. Your body didn't house one soul ... but two."

He said it so casually, but the words struck me like lightning.

"What did you just say?"

The air between us shifted instantly.

Silence fell. We stared at each other.

I hadn't meant to react, but my body had already been conditioned to release killing intent the moment such a situation arose.

I couldn't stop it.

Bonatiro didn't flinch. In fact, he seemed to take it as proof of what he'd said earlier—when he claimed I was stronger than him.

"Did you know, Starlight, that I'm blind?"

"What?"

He kept looking straight at me, pointing at his pupil.

It looked perfectly normal.

"These eyes... they've never seen what others see. All I can perceive is the aura things contain."

Aura. Life force itself.

That's how Bonatiro could sense the true value of all the strange items he kept in his lab.

"The first time my eyes landed on you, I saw two auras ... one deep, suffocating black... and the other, a shattered white light. Only a faint trace of it remained."

I listened silently, hearing something I had never known until now.

"I assume some lingering will had always been with you... a powerful will... but you've lost it now, since all I can see now is darkness."

"That's why you weren't surprised by anything I've done?"

I cut in, and he nodded.

"Exactly. It's not definitive proof, but... you could say it was instinct."

I let out a dry laugh as I reassessed the man in front of me.

I never imagined anyone could know about my Dual Soul.

"That really is surprising..."

I laughed faintly, and Bonatiro spoke again.

"Life hasn't been kind to you, has it, kid?"

"No..."

"That other aura ... who did it belong to?"

He asked softly.

"My father."

"Abraham Starlight, huh... Yeah, I suppose someone like him ...someone who defies reason could pull that off."

Another silence fell between us, but I wasn't thinking about Bonatiro anymore...

Instead, my mind drifted back to my father's final words ... about the thing that now lives inside me...

The Dual Soul had vanished yes ...but I'd been thinking lately... maybe there was more to it. All that talk about the vessel... the Engineer... the Nameless...

It all pushed me to ask:

"You said my body now holds a single soul?"

"That's right."

"Are you sure?"

"There's only one soul inside your body, kid. My eyes don't lie... That body now has a single color."

Bonatiro's words only added to my confusion ... and that didn't help in the slightest.

Not wanting to drag things out, he walked past me and gave my shoulder a firm pat.

"In any case, you're exempt from my classes, kid. But in exchange—!"

He shouted that last part, and I asked:

"In exchange?"

The moment I asked, his eyes lit up, and he leaned in uncomfortably close.

"Let me examine your weapon ...Balerion the Black dread from time to time!"

"...What?"

I stared at him, unable to hide the confusion on my face.

"That's my only request, kid! I treasure relics, and that sword is undoubtedly one of them!"

When Bonatiro entered his usual obsessive mode, I knew debating him further would go nowhere. I reluctantly agreed, especially after he reminded me that my ownership of Balerion was no longer a secret to the world.

Frey Starlight... bearer of one of the seven legendary swords.

Actually... two of them.

Once I gave in, Bonatiro nodded enthusiastically and rushed off to train the others.

"Excellent!"

He vanished down the hallway, leaving me behind to wonder what I was supposed to do for the next three hours.

One day back at the temple... and a handful of old faces was enough to make it eventful already.

I just laughed to myself.

"Even if he wants to live a normal life... nothing about Frey Starlight is normal, huh?"

Maybe I'll just go watch the others train.

Maybe mess with them a little.

With those thoughts, I made my way to the training yard.

"If my life were a comedy show... I'd definitely watch it."

Chapter 243: Refining Talent (1)

The Temple...

A school that had for generations, produced the talents that carried the Empire on their shoulders through the ages.

And the current generation was no exception.

Inside one of the training halls ..nothing more than a square arena of solid ground ... a different kind of chaos unfolded.

Within such a confined space, twenty young men and women moved at breakneck speed, constantly bombarded by dozens of attacks launched from beyond the arena's boundaries.

The sounds of explosions and destruction hadn't stopped for over an hour now.

Three instructors, led by Bonatiro, had surrounded the elite class students and relentlessly attacked them from afar.

Their only task was Survive until the end .. without stepping outside the arena.

Everyone was drenched in sweat, either fending off or dodging the terrifying waves of a master-class Wave Controller like Bonatiro.

Among the students, naturally, the crowned champion, Snow Lionheart, stood at the front, with Daemon Valerion pushing alongside him, as expected.

The others were making their mark in their own ways.

Everyone ... except one.

A student like them sat off to the side, watching from afar, with nothing better to do during the hours of free time granted to him.

Frey Starlight leaned against the wall, watching them with a scowl.

Of course, they'd noticed him.

Danzo and Ragna immediately began shouting the moment they saw him lounging around doing nothing ... but the rainstorm of magical bombardments from the instructors didn't give them the luxury to speak for long.

Frey smirked behind a clenched laugh, mocking their misery.

"You're moving that ass pretty well, Danzo."

With a satisfied grin, Frey raised a thumb toward his struggling friend.

"Full marks."

Danzo probably couldn't respond, but the throbbing veins crawling across his forehead like worms from sheer rage said more than any words ever could.

The arena began to shrink ..slowly but surely .. forcing many out of bounds.

It was absurd watching so many students run around in such a confined space, to the point some crashed into one another.

The training continued for a full three hours.

By the time it ended, only ten students remained within what was now barely a few meters of ground.

They were all drenched in sweat, each to varying degrees.

Among them, one might have thought Ghost, who'd elegantly slipped through every attack, was in the best shape ... but that wasn't true.

Both Frey and Bonatiro realized it at the same time.

Among the twenty students, one person hadn't moved since the beginning. She blocked everything ... without lifting a finger.

It wasn't the Hero Snow, nor any of the other so-called monsters.

It was the princess.

She had deflected and even retaliated against every single attack effortlessly.

Her shadows crawled across the ground like a living creature ... rising instinctively to shield her while countering with jet-black spikes at blistering speed.

Reading her body language revealed the truth: she wasn't even trying.

And yet, even in that idle state, she made the hair beneath Bonatiro's robe stand on end ... a man ranked S.

The first description that came to the mad professor's mind was likely the same any sane person would think:

"What a demonic power..."

Sansa was changing ... slowly, but steadily.

Bonatiro grumbled as he declared the session over.

The class ended, and on the other side of the room, Frey couldn't hide his interest in the princess, who had clearly undergone... no, revealed... a great deal since he last saw her.

He tried to approach her ... but some familiar faces stood in his way.

Danzo alone was enough to completely block his path with that massive frame.

He grabbed Frey by the shoulder, still dripping sweat, his expression wild.

"Tell me, Frey ...how did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Did you bribe him?! Give him something rare, maybe? Tell me ... how did you get that Motherfucker to exempt you from training?!"

Danzo shook Frey violently, gripping his scrawny frame.

Meanwhile, Sansa had already left the room.

Frey sighed and gently pushed Danzo away to reclaim some breathing space.

"Stop yelling in my face. I didn't do anything to him."

"That's impossible..."

"Consider it a privilege of being the Victoriad champion."

Frey hadn't been serious with his words ... but it seemed Danzo partially believed him, muttering under his breath:

"So the winner really gets privileges like that...?"

They were just empty words, yet they were enough to spark something inside Danzo ... a flare of regret. Regret for not training harder, for not performing better in the Victoriad .

That moment of silence from Danzo allowed Frey to turn his attention elsewhere.

His eyes met those of the silent assassin ... Ghost.

The latter simply nodded without a word.

Next to him stood Dawn and Snow.

At that moment, Frey and Snow locked eyes ... an unspoken reunion since the final battle where they'd staked everything.

Frey often wondered: had that battle really happened? Or was it just a fever dream?

If he were shown the fight from afar and told:

"That's you."

He would've shaken his head, denying everything.

If someone asked him to do it again, he likely wouldn't even know how he pulled it off the first time...

Had he truly defeated the Hero?

But he had no choice but to accept the truth. The memory of that day ...the ecstasy of battle ...was still carved into his body.

And he wasn't the only one who felt that way.

Deep inside, Frey held nothing but respect for the man standing before him.

"I thought you weren't coming back."

It was Snow who broke the silence first.

"It's been a while, hasn't it? But here I am, standing before you again."

"A few months for me... but I imagine it felt like a few years for you."

Snow smiled as he said it, extending his hand.

"It really did."

Frey clasped Snow's hand, and immediately he felt the iron-hard grip ...the coarse skin marked by calluses earned through endless swings of the sword.

By contrast, Frey's hand, thanks to his unique body, was much smoother and cleaner.

They each put a bit of force into the handshake ...an unspoken acknowledgement before releasing at the same time.

"I heard you stood up for me. I owe you one."

Frey spoke first, grateful. If not for Snow's intervention, the Church would've pressed much harder, likely demanding his execution.

"No need to thank me. I did it because I felt it was the right thing to do. That's all."

Snow was someone who acted without expecting anything in return. A trait befitting a true hero.

But was it really the proper action for a hero to take? For a champion of the Lord of Light who was meant to deliver justice wherever he went?

No matter how you looked at it ... Frey had been guilty. Yet Snow defended him anyway, without a solid reason.

Simply because he wanted to. He wanted to face Frey again. He wanted to keep someone like Frey close.

It was a selfish desire. One that clashed with his role as a hero.

Excited, Snow tried to talk about their last battle, to revisit every moment, every detail...

But he couldn't unleash those emotions freely. An awkward tension born of time and distance hung between him and Frey.

"Hey, enough with the formal tone! What's wrong with you two?"

Danzo cut in.

"One of you sounds like a depressed girl who just hit puberty, and the other like a damn priest. Keep this up and I'll kick both of you!"

"A depressed girl who just hit puberty..."

Frey chuckled at the absurd metaphor.

Is that how they saw him?

"And don't you sound like a kid who just hit puberty yourself?"

That unexpected jab came from Ghost—calm, expressionless, and precisely what irritated Danzo the most. He exploded as usual while Snow and Dawn instinctively stepped aside.

Frey found himself standing in the middle of a group that reminded him of his high school days.

It was an experience no one was meant to live through twice... yet here he was.

He smiled faintly. In moments like this, Frey felt grateful for their straightforward, uncomplicated personalities ... people who didn't judge him like the others did.

He found himself fitting in with them easily. If he had gone back in time to the days before the Victoriad, he probably would've rejected such relationships outright.

But now... maybe he could let it be.

Maybe the answer he'd been searching for was right here.

The answer to what his father truly wanted for him ... when he asked him to live.

Frey spent the entire day surrounded by his peers, letting himself drift into the student life he had long denied himself.

From time to time, he clashed with people like Daemon, though a number of others kept a clear distance from him.

Among the most notable were Prince Aegon, who remained locked in his own world as usual, and the princess, who appeared lost in thought. Others like Seris Moonlight and Clana Starlight had their own reasons for keeping away.

Amid all that, Frey's first official day back at the temple came to an end as he completed everything on his schedule.

But just as he was about to leave, Phoenix appeared out of nowhere and stopped him at the edge of the training fields.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To my room... I guess?"

"Not anymore."

Phoenix grabbed Frey by the shoulder and led the way.

"Your real training begins now."

Chapter 244: Refining Talent (2)

"Then what do you call everything I've been doing all day?"

Frey grumbled, but Phoenix chuckled, his eyes glowing with familiar energy.

"You can consider it a warm-up. Honestly, if not for the training you're about to receive, the Temple wouldn't even be worthy of having you right now."

That finally caught Frey's interest ... and Phoenix knew it.

"What you're about to attend is a secret training session. Only wielders of the Legendary Weapons are allowed."

Frey's eyes narrowed slightly.

"I take it Snow will be there?"

"Correct."

A flicker of anticipation crossed Frey's face. What would happen when Balerion, the Black Dread clashed against the sacred blade Vermithor?

But one question lingered more urgently.

"Will you be leading the session?"

Phoenix shook his head.

"Unfortunately, I don't know much about how to fight with legendary weapons."

"Clearly," Frey muttered, recalling Phoenix's chaotic, brute-force fighting style that blended close-quarters brawling with wave controlling. A warrior like that could never teach swordplay properly.

"Then who's in charge of the training?"

Frey asked, and Phoenix simply smiled.

"You'll find out soon."

He deliberately left Frey in the dark, walking ahead as they headed to a secluded training ground, hidden far from prying eyes.

There, three others had already arrived.

Snow, Daemon, and surprisingly ...Danzo.

Frey didn't understand what was happening. These weren't the people he expected to see in a training for legendary weapon wielders, but Phoenix took the lead and explained.

"Alright, now that everyone's here... we've got two wielders of the Seven Great Swords, and two bearers of the Burning Shields."

That made Frey turn instantly toward Danzo.

"Danzo... you?"

Danzo clenched his fist, his eyes never leaving Daemon.

"You're not the only ones who got their hands on some fancy toys."

Phoenix nodded in approval and gestured for Danzo and Daemon to follow him.

"Good. I'll be handling these two myself."

Meanwhile, Frey and Snow looked at one another in confusion.

"Pardon me," Snow asked, "but what exactly are we supposed to do? Are we just supposed to fight each other?"

Frey exchanged a glance with him, but Phoenix simply waved as he walked away with the others.

"Your instructor's already here."

Suddenly, a dreadful chill crept up both their spines. They leapt apart instinctively, putting distance between themselves and the figure that had appeared behind them.

Just a few steps behind them now stood a woman neither of them had ever seen up close ... only on screens or at grand ceremonies.

She wore nothing but a tattered black dress and a golden helmet.

"Your reflexes aren't bad."

The former Vice Director stepped toward them, raising her right hand as a massive golden greatsword extended from it.

"You..."

Both Snow and Frey muttered the word at the same time.

The woman before them calmly removed her helmet, letting fiery red hair tumble freely down her back.

"Melina, wielder of the Claymore," she said. "I'll be your instructor... Champion of the Church , and Champion of the Victoriad."

At last, they understood.

Given their status as wielders of the Seven Great Swords, it only made sense that their instructor would be one of their own.

"Arm yourselves."

Melina wasn't one for small talk—and with that single word, the battle began.

In response, both Snow and Frey instantly grew serious, honoring her command without hesitation.

"Come, Balerion."

"Ignite, Vermithor."

Within the sealed training ground, three of the Seven Great Legendary Weapons were summoned, each one releasing an ominous aura as their inevitable clash drew near.

Melina took one step forward ... and then vanished with the second.

Frey barely reacted in time. She appeared like a ghost behind him, and he narrowly blocked her strike. The obsidian blade of Balerion met the golden claymore with a thunderous clash, sparks of fire bursting from the impact.

The sheer difference in raw power sent Frey flying across the arena, crashing hard against the distant wall.

Melina adjusted her stance immediately as Snow rushed in, attempting to capitalize on her momentary focus on Frey. But she parried his flaming strike with ease, wielding her three-meter blade with terrifying grace.

"If you want a surprise attack to work, you must either be fast enough not to give your opponent time to react—"

She swung, her sword moving like a machine, trapping Snow within a flurry of golden arcs.

"—or strong enough to finish them in a single blow."

She paused, intercepting a dark slash launched by Frey from across the room.

Using his speed, Frey reappeared above her, aiming a downward strike cloaked in shadow aura.

She blocked again ... this time the force of his strike cracked the ground beneath her feet.

"Like that?"

Frey grinned.

Melina nodded, unfazed. "Exactly."

Frey kept up the pressure, and Snow joined in. Both had already realized this was a two-on-one.

But Melina's strength far exceeded theirs. Even together, they posed no real threat to her.

Then again, this wasn't a fight to the death ... this was training.

The three of them became locked in a whirlwind of steel, their clashing auras ... gold, black, and white ... mingling in a chaotic storm.

From time to time, Melina's voice echoed between strikes, laced with aura-enhanced clarity:

"Your strikes are quick, but far too predictable. Rely more on swordsmanship than instinct."

Explosions followed her every movement as she gracefully danced between Frey and Snow.

"You have a terrifying arsenal of elements under your belt, but you favor only a few ... especially Star Aura. Learn to use your full potential."

Their pace continued to quicken, as though both boys were desperate to prove something ... if only to themselves. They still couldn't land a hit.

"You're both used to fighting one type of enemy. That's why you're struggling against the range of the claymore. In situations like this, treat your opponent as if they're wielding a spear."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Without realizing it, both Snow and Frey began responding like disciplined students.

After all, it wasn't every day one got to train with an SS rank swordswoman.

Despite her youthful appearance—early thirties, at most—Frey and Snow both knew better. The deeper a person's connection to aura, the longer they maintained their vitality.

Who knew? Melina might have been the same age as Carmen.

And so, Frey's real training finally began.

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Elsewhere, Danzo and Daemon stood face-to-face.

Daemon didn't look thrilled.

"Is there any point to this?"

"Yes," Phoenix replied casually. "I want you two to go all out. That way I'll know just how hard I need to hit you when it's my turn."

His plan was simple: to turn tanks like them into real monsters, he had to push their durability and resilience to the absolute limit ... through pain.

Unlike Daemon, Danzo was eager.

He slammed his fist into his palm, sending a shockwave through the air that made Daemon raise a brow.

"You know, I didn't think the chance would come this soon ..the chance to settle the score."

"You think you're capable of that?"

Daemon scoffed.

A silver glow burst around Danzo's body.

"You'll find out soon enough."

Silver aura swirled tightly around Danzo's body, radiating with a brilliance that nearly blinded the eye.

From within that wave of light emerged Danzo, clad in a towering silver armor that made him appear far more massive. The helmet of the armor was shaped like the gaping maw of an enraged dragon.

"The Silver Dragon Armor..."

Daemon muttered, before a wide grin slowly spread across his face.

"So that's where it ended up."

That armor was the prized weapon of one of the largest guilds in the Empire. It had belonged to Danzo's father—Adam Smasher—until recently.

But now, it had been passed down to the son.

Laughing, Daemon tore off his shirt, revealing the ominous tattoo etched across his chest and shoulder.

"Let's see what you've got!!"

A flash of golden brilliance erupted around him as his own colossal armor materialized.

Phoenix watched with a pleased smile.

"The Golden Dragon Armor... and its Silver twin. Two of the SS-class relics."

They were the most powerful dragon-forged armors ever crafted by human hands.

And now, they belonged to two boys who hadn't even turned eighteen.

"This generation... is terrifying."

Before his eyes, the two clashed like colliding tanks—armor against armor, no weapons, just raw fists.

Exactly the way Phoenix liked it.

"Let's make this damned academy worth something."

This time, he would draw everything out of them.

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The Elite were essential to the Empire ... and to the coming war with their ancient enemy.

They were the talents destined to lead the charge one way or another, which is why they received so much investment and attention.

But the title "Elite" didn't mean equality.

Yes, they bore the same name... but within their ranks, the differences were stark. Only a few truly possessed monstrous potential.

Some were fated to rise and shine.

Others... to be forgotten and cast aside.

Among those students ...

Was a girl.

Adriana ... The bookworm. The coward. The one who had always carried herself in a way unbecoming of the elite.

She now sat alone in her dark room, fixated on something in her hands.

Her room was stark .. eerily so, especially compared to other girls'. Sitting on the floor, Adriana clutched something tightly.

For some reason, the longer she looked at it, the more her smile widened...

Revealing a face no one had ever seen.

If there were a word for her expression now ...

It would be disturbing.

Upon closer inspection, the object in her hands was a photograph.

A photo of a particular girl.

Sansa.

"Oh... how adorable."

Adriana spoke softly, recalling the princess's display of power. The demonic shadows that shredded her opponents.

In those fleeting moments, Adriana had barely managed to maintain the mask she'd worn until now.

"Ahh... my dear Sansa..."

She lifted her head to gaze at the room around her—walls, floor, ceiling—completely plastered with pictures of the princess.

Dozens. Hundreds. Far, far too many.

With the same unsettling smile, Adriana's eyes softened further.

"You really are... perfect."

Something had definitely changed in that room.

Chapter 245: What the Shadows Remember

In the beginning... there was only darkness.

A pitch-black room. Strange figures she had never seen before.

A cold metal table, slick with blood and a stench so foul it turned her stomach.

A blinding light overhead pierced her vision, forcing her eyes shut.

Her lips were cracked from dehydration. Her body frail, skeletal ... had long since been stripped of anything that once sustained it.

The people around her had no faces, not in her eyes. And their words... were barely comprehensible noise.

What had they done to her?

She didn't know. All she remembered... was the screaming ... and how much it hurt.

From the depths of the girl, black tendrils erupted, tearing through those strangers like paper ... ripping them apart, pulverizing them into a grotesque pulp of blood and flesh.

In that darkness, her only ally... was the shadow.

"Huh?"

The princess opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was a massive gash carved into the wall in front of her.

She was still in her usual nightwear. And this... this was her room in the elite wing of the temple.

Barefoot. But what truly unsettled her were the bloodstains on her hands.

Sansa trembled. Her chest burned.

"It's alright. You're safe now."

A warm hand gently patted her head. It belonged to a masked man who had appeared behind her, soundlessly.

His crimson eyes gleamed behind the mask ... visible even in the pitch-black room. But Sansa knew him. She recognized him the moment she saw him, and that only stirred the turmoil inside her further.

With a strained voice, she asked the question that had haunted her since she awoke ... still trapped in a sleepwalking nightmare.

"Was this... my doing?"

She looked at the blood on her hands. Oliver Khan immediately shook his head.

"You didn't do anything."

"But ..."

"It was just a nightmare."

With a motion faster than sound, his hand struck her neck gently. Sansa collapsed into unconsciousness, and he caught her before she hit the floor.

"Just a bad dream," he murmured.

He placed her back in bed and brushed aside strands of her platinum hair—now slowly darkening to black.

Without thinking, his hand moved to his side, feeling the wound in his gut, still seeping blood.

But within a moment, the flesh knit together. The deep gash sealed itself almost instantly.

Oliver Khan said nothing. But his eyes said a lot as he looked down at the sleeping princess.

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—Frey Starlight's POV—

Sleep.

Eat.

Train.

Make idle conversation with... friends.

Train again.

Eat more. Sleep again.

Oh, and... take a dump.

I wake up every morning at 5 AM. Head out for light cardio ... just a warm-up for the rest of the day.

A habit I picked up while preparing for the Victoriad.

After my early training session, I return to my room. It's usually 6 AM by then.

I take a quick shower ... not because I sweat much (this body barely does) ... but it's a habit I've kept from even before my reincarnation. This body used to have an obsession with cleanliness... and I'm not sure I've completely shaken it.

After showering and glancing at my lean but toned frame, I get dressed and leave.

On the way, I always seem to run into Snow, Danzo, or even Ghost ... who shows up like he teleports in.

We chat about the most meaningless things. Utter nonsense, really. But it's typical for kids our age... or rather, their age.

After that? Just more training.

And more training.

And even more training.

At the end of the day, I spar against one of the most dangerous swordmasters alive ... Melina, wielder of the Claymore.

And that's exactly what I was doing now, side by side with Snow Lionheart.

Wielding a legendary weapon grants tremendous destructive power to its bearer. But that leap in strength only truly manifests for people like me and Snow.

We were barely at Rank B. But because our weapons were Rank SS, the true range of our power climbed dangerously close to Rank S. That's why Balerion has always been my greatest trump card.

But it's a different story when an SS rank weapon falls into the hands of an SS rank Awakened.

At that level, the weapon is no longer the primary source of power ...it becomes merely a tool, a refined conduit that brings out the wielder's full potential.

And that's exactly what was happening in our battle against Melina.

"Don't become overly reliant on your weapon. It's just a tool. It can make the battle easier, yes ... but it won't win it for you."

If your foundation is weak, no weapon will matter.

This was our fourth day training under Melina, and even with the two of us fighting her together—Snow and I—we still hadn't managed to land a single hit.

We had thrown everything we had at her. I'd even used the Blood Form and my new Shadow Property.

Sure, it made the battle more chaotic, more explosive ...but I was still losing. Badly.

"Snow Lionheart," she called out. "You still lack full control over your sword. You need to learn how to channel its abilities properly."

I had exchanged countless blows with her myself.

Her claymore was just like Balerion ... fused to her arm. Except hers was absurdly long.

"Your strikes are powerful, Frey Starlight."

Clang!

Sparks flew with every clash of steel.

With each step, I found myself driven back ... crumbling beneath her sheer force.

"Strong, yes... but empty."

She raised her hand, and her blade moved automatically ...almost with a will of its own.

"You don't seem interested in getting stronger."

When she said that, her crimson eyes locked onto mine.

I forced a faint smile.

"Was it that obvious?"

"It was. You're different from the Frey I saw during the Victoriad."

So... she'd been watching?

"I thought I was doing a decent job hiding it."

She nodded slightly.

"You are. But your sword is far more honest than you."

Truth be told, my current state was objectively better than back then.

I had the Supreme Shadow Property now. I was beginning to understand how to harmonize with the shadow Adaptation

And yet...

There was still a massive gap between the Victoriad Frey and the one I was now.

Somehow, the person I was back then felt so much stronger.

"Is that what they call... drive?"

The drive to live. To push forward. To become better and stronger.

Chapter 246: Two Blades

Melina didn't speak further. She was here to teach swordsmanship, not fix the psyche of her students.

And that's exactly what she did, until the end of our session.

Two hours later, Snow and I collapsed to the floor, drenched in sweat.

As always, we hadn't laid a finger on her.

My mind was adrift, struggling to find solid ground.

After each session, we'd usually exchange feedback with her while watching Phoenix beat the hell out of Daemon and Danzo.

"Frey Starlight. Your stance is lacking."

Her voice cut through the air, breaking the silence.

"What do you mean?"

"Your footing is solid, but the issue lies in your right hand."

My right hand?

"How so?"

"You unconsciously try to use it during combat. That means wielding a single sword may not be optimal for you."

I was stunned by her observation ...it made it clear that I was standing before a true elite.

"I considered whether a shield might suit that hand... but it doesn't fit your style. That only leaves one option ... a second sword. A dual-blade style."

"Now that you mention it," Snow chimed in, "didn't you fight with your right hand during the Victoriad?"

He was recalling my battles from the tournament.

I nodded.

That confirmed Melina's theory perfectly.

"Try fighting with two swords from now on. It might be your key."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I replied simply as the session officially came to a close.

She wasn't wrong, of course... especially since my right hand was already hiding another flaming sword.

"A dual-sword style, huh..."

The truth is, I had been hiding the Dark Sister ever since it came into my hands.

My father's sword ... something I considered a secret trump card to be used only in case of an emergency.

Again, that's an old mindset. One I picked up long ago.

Keep your aces hidden to survive the stronger foes.

Every step I took always had meaning behind it. But now, even all of that felt... meaningless.

People had started viewing me differently. My abilities were no longer a secret. At this level, no enemy would underestimate me. Instead, they'd stay alert, always ready for whatever I might pull from the shadows.

So I asked myself: is there even a point in hiding this weapon anymore?

The answer was yes. Hiding it was important. Showing it off would be foolish.

But did any of that actually matter?

I wanted to think simpler.

Much simpler.

This sword was my father's. His weapon. His closest companion.

I wanted to fight with it.

"I want to use it in battle."

A simple desire. Selfish. Reckless, even. But I decided to honor it.

Melina was still there when I returned.

"What is it? We're done for today."

"I'd like to request a duel, my lady."

"Wasn't that what we were doing just a moment ago?"

That was true, but this time... this time, what I wanted was something different.

"Not another training bout. I want something deeper... I want a battle to the death."

I didn't want to fight knowing I'd walk away.

And I didn't want her to hold back either.

"Frey Starlight, there's no point in going all out against you right now. You haven't reached the minimum threshold required to justify such a challenge."

How could I challenge someone I hadn't even been able to touch?

That was the meaning behind her words.

But this time, I didn't respond with words.

"Come."

From the void, Dark Sister materialized in my hand. I grasped the black katana by its hilt.

Melina masked her expression well, but I saw it ... the flicker of surprise in her eyes as they fell on that lost blade.

"The Dark Sister..."

"Not just that."

From my other hand, Balerion the Black Dread appeared as well.

Wielding two swords, both capable of mass destruction, I felt stronger than ever.

But what I truly wanted ...was to see how far I could push the woman before me.

She stepped forward slowly, eyes locked on Dark Sister.

"That katana... Abraham Starlight?"

"My father left it for me as a gift."

"I see."

She gave a curt nod, then cast off her cloak and summoned her blade.

"You asked for a real battle, Frey Starlight. And that's exactly what you'll get."

Even she seemed exhilarated at the sight of someone wielding two legendary weapons.

And that was what made her accept such a childish request.

"Come at me."

She opened the floor.

And I accepted.

"Fight me with everything you've got!!"

Father...

I still don't understand the meaning of life you wanted me to find.

I still don't know why you robbed me of my right to die.

I don't know... but at the very least, this time, I'll do what I want.

No planning. No manipulation. No clever tricks.

I'll simply do whatever I want ... and let the wind carry me wherever it may.

Then I'll see how far it takes me.

With a smile, I launched into a thunderous battle against Melina.

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The Other Side of the World.

Gavid Lindman, the proud Aether Bearer and Lord of the Ultras, stood still, clad in his usual formal suit, staring silently at the shattered Wall of Mages and the sea of torn bodies scattered across the field.

"A disaster,"

he muttered as he gazed at the canvas of carnage.

"I agree,"

came the voice of the old man, Mergo, who appeared behind him. Together, they stared at the same scene.

Lord Godfrey was being dragged away, his body battered, bloodied, and armor shattered beyond repair.

Above them, floating in the air with a furious glare, stood Astaroth, the 19th-ranked Demon ... clearly shaken, his eyes fixed on a single figure.

That figure lay motionless at the center of a massive crater, rusted armor still clinging to his form.

As for Astaroth, there was no trace of his right arm ... just a faint wisp of flame flickering in the wind where it used to be.

"We underestimated him..."

Gavid Lindman cursed under his breath.

Here, at this very location, had taken place the battle now known as The Battle of the Eternal Prison.

The mission had been straightforward: Lord Godfrey and his forces were to retrieve the strongest Hollow ... Pontiff Sulyvahn ... in preparation for the coming war.

They had truly believed that Godfrey and his army would be enough.

But they were wrong.

Terribly wrong.

Pontiff Sulyvahn had already reached the SS+ Rank.

With a savage, devastating fighting style, he had nearly killed Godfrey ... until Astaroth intervened at the last moment.

And even the demon had not emerged unscathed from a clash with such a mindless monster...

In fact, next to Pontiff Sulyvahn, even a demon seemed sane.

The aftermath of their battle was visible in every direction. This place had become nothing but a crater of destruction and war.

A war now looming on the horizon.

In the end, the Ultras had succeeded.

They had captured Pontiff Sulyvahn.

And the Hollows were now officially in play.

Chapter 247: Orphans of Ruin (1)

"What a grim sight."

"Mergo..."

With one hand resting on the hilt of his hidden blade .. Aether, Gavid Lindman glanced sideways at the staggering old drunk who arrived late.

The old man greeted his peer with a faint smile, barely visible through the wild hair covering most of his face.

"Lord Lindman, as diligent as ever... I take it you were part of the battle?"

"I only delivered the final blow. Barely made it in time."

"That's still impressive."

Mergo praised him, though Gavid's scowl only deepened.

"A shame, really. I would've been here sooner if I had your spatial manipulation skills."

"You're right. It's a pity you don't—ha ha!!."

Mergo laughed, ignoring the deliberate jab.

He could've joined the battle from the start with his teleportation, and had he done so, they might have subdued the Pontiff much faster ... without the cost.

But he chose not to.

"Astaroth won't be pleased with this outcome."

"He can think what he likes. Just as you do."

Standing on the desolate plains, on earth that had drunk its fill of blood and corpses, death had become routine.

"How many dead this time? Hundreds? Maybe thousands... The Pontiff was particularly spirited today. Such a shame what that man has become."

"You pity the beast that caused all this?"

"Beast? That's a flattering description."

Mergo chuckled.

"You and I—we're monsters too, Lindman."

"I won't argue with that." Lindman said with a frown...

"The heavens and the earth..."

Without warning, Mergo began speaking softly, savoring each word as if unaffected by the carnage around him.

"Seasons shift endlessly across this sky and soil, and so too do men follow cycles beyond their control."

"Change is inevitable. To survive, we must adapt."

"In the end, we all get what we deserve. Perhaps for destroyers like us, our fate will be to lie among these corpses one day."

Reclining amid the bloodied dead, Mergo smiled and closed his eyes, drifting into a nap.

"You damned old fool..."

Gavid Lindman turned away, leaving the old man alone ... unwilling to deal with him further.

"My fate... is the work of my own hands."

Though he said it only to himself, Mergo heard it loud and clear, and his smile widened.

Opening his eyes, he watched Gavid walk off, the hem of his fine coat billowing behind him.

"Poor soul..."

Gavid had no idea he was walking a path inked in fate ... one that would lead him precisely where destiny willed.

Later, the old man rose again, the stench of death still clinging to the air around him.

"There you are."

He patted the head of a barefoot young man dressed in nothing but a black robe.

"Hey... old man."

"What is it, Lawrence?"

"There are so many bodies."

"I know. It's a shame, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"Why is it a shame? Because the dead no longer have stories to tell, Lawrence."

"Each one had a tale waiting to unfold ... but its threads were severed too soon, whether they lived a life of grace or of hardship."

"In the end, they all perished."

Mergo's voice dipped into solemn depth without warning, prompting Lawrence to scratch his messy white hair.

"Grace? Didn't they just die because they were weak?"

Lawrence asked like a child, and Mergo answered with the calm patience of a father.

"You could see it that way. Had they been stronger, maybe they would've survived."

"So power decides life and death?"

"Not necessarily."

The two walked away from the battlefield and its noise.

"Why not? You just said they would've lived if they were stronger."

In a world ruled by the law of the jungle, Lawrence had instinctively grasped a cruel truth.

"Remember, Lawrence—no matter how strong you become, there's always someone stronger."

"Stronger than Mergo?"

"Yes. Far stronger than me."

By now, the two were far from the battlefield with the Pontiff. Their journey had shifted toward a new goal: recruiting more of the Hollows ... without warning or permission.

Lawrence was a strange one, more like a lost child who had latched onto the only man able to handle him ... Mergo.

"So if strength isn't the answer... then what is? What decides life and death?"

"A good question."

Mergo tampered with the space around them, instantly warping the two far away.

"Let's use the Ultras as an example."

"How?"

"Demons are beings of terrifying power. Astaroth is only the nineteenth seat, and yet he's a monster by this world's standards. And the Ultras? Just humans. But they survived by selling themselves to the strongest side. That's how we've made it this far."

"But the humans in that place... The Empire, they're still alive too."

"They are. They've survived as well. But the Empire is fractured by nature ... between the clergy, the noble houses, and countless rogue factions. Each fights in their own way."

"Still, when war comes, they rally together in a single force despite their differences. That makes them far more dangerous than they appear."

"I don't get it anymore."

Lawrence groaned, annoyed and confused. He no longer knew what answer Mergo wanted from him.

The old man patted his precious empyrean on the head and looked forward.

"It's adaptation, Lawrence."

"Adaptation?"

"Yes. Whether it's a righteous warrior who survives by holding onto his beliefs, or a wretched traitor who sells out everyone around him ... what matters is adapting to the trials of life and death."

"In the end, only the best players survive. The ones who learn how to play the game of life."

Lawrence sighed in defeat, giving up on trying to understand the deeper meaning.

"This is way too complicated... I'll just stick with my first answer."

"Ha ha. Then focusing on getting stronger must be your way, huh, Lawrence?"

The two continued chatting without pause or fatigue.

Eventually, their feet reached a strange place.

In the middle of a barren wasteland, an unnatural patch of green burst forth ... lush plants and gentle winds, like a mirage more than a reality.

In that vibrant patch of earth stood a large building... an old monastery built from black brick, fenced in by tall iron gates. Above its entrance hung a simple sign with just a few words:

"Yhsefka Orphanage."

An orphanage bearing the symbol of a dove ... a sign of freedom.

An orphanage in the heart of a dead desert.

Hope buried in a pit of despair... even if that was the furthest thing from the truth.

"What is this place?"

"It's a home for children who've lost their parents."

"Parents..."

Lawrence winced at the thought, his mind straining to remember a mother or father he could no longer recall.

Mergo gently patted his head as they reached the orphanage gates.

There stood a hulking guard who looked down at them, his glowing eyes visible beneath his iron helm.

Chapter 248: Orphans of Ruin (2)

"What business do you have here?"

The guard was hostile. Mergo showed no signs of matching that hostility—he preferred words.

But Lawrence moved first.

Without hesitation, he charged the armored man, morphing his arm into a monstrous crimson-black spear of flesh.

In a savage blow, Lawrence's arm pierced the guard's chest and tore through his back.

He screamed like a madman as tendrils exploded from his arm, bursting through the knight's body and ripping it into scattered chunks of meat.

Not that the guard's screams could be heard clearly over Lawrence's frenzied howling.

As for Mergo, he simply pulled out his usual drink and sipped calmly, waiting.

A few minutes later, the orphanage door creaked open ... and out stepped a single man.

From inside, Mergo could see the children peeking from the windows, fear etched in their eyes as they looked to that man. Their hope rested on him, as if he were their only savior.

A man with long, reddish-brown hair. His posture straight like a spear. He wore the robes of a priest, his rugged brown skin hidden beneath them. A golden reading monocle hung loosely over his crimson right eye.

Mergo recognized him. And so did the so-called head of the orphanage.

"Mergo..."

The man's deep voice echoed, his glowing eyes locked solely on the old drunk.

He ignored the feral beast lunging from the side ... Lawrence, who shrieked with madness.

Lawrence's arm swelled into a grotesque monstrosity as it came crashing down with terrifying force upon the man's body, unleashing a violent shockwave.

Blood sprayed. The sound of bones shattering and flesh tearing pierced the air.

Lawrence howled, stumbling back as he stared in disbelief at his ruined arm.

What had he struck?

Was it some unbreakable metal?

No .. he had struck flesh. The man still stood, untouched. Not even a scratch.

Even in the haze of his madness, Lawrence could only think one word:

"tough!!"

The man finally turned toward the Imperian, his crimson eyes glowing ominously—as if an insect had dared collide with him.

"Insolent."

A single word in return for a scream that shook the heavens.

Lawrence charged again, his body twisting into a monstrous shape as black tendrils spiraled violently around him, trying to crush the man before him.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.!

Suddenly, explosions rang out for miles—like someone had set off a series of devastating bombs.

The orphanage director had moved. His arm had struck, like a rocket launcher ...no aura, no flashy lights.

Just pure, raw power.

In three rapid punches, he obliterated flesh and bone alike, leaving Lawrence shattered on the ground ...his body broken, mouth and eyes wide open in disbelief.

The director raised his fist for a final blow ... one that dropped like a reaper's scythe to reap the soul of the writhing boy beneath.

But the strike never landed.

It was stopped.

Blocked cleanly by a sword that appeared from thin air.

Mergo, holding his blade in one hand, deflected the strike with precision.

"I see you're harvesting souls on your sacred grounds, Director of the Orphanage... Smough."

He spoke the cursed man's name aloud.

Smough responded coldly.

"The only soul spilled here was ended by your own disciple."

The space around them began to quake as Smough pushed harder, but even that force couldn't move Mergo.

"A soul for a soul... You know how things work around here, Lord Mergo."

"My apologies. I never did care for Hollow law."

They locked eyes, their auras crackling and clashing like lightning around them.

In the next breath, Smough lunged for the kill.

Mergo grinned.

And with one sweeping strike from his Uchigatana, he unleashed a wave that shredded the entire orphanage into thousands of fragments ...slashing Smough himself into ribbons in less than a second.

Or so it seemed.

In the chaos, Smough slowly lowered his hand. Mergo calmly returned his sword to its sheath.

Then he chuckled softly.

"Wise choice."

Smough said nothing. He was still caught up in the vision ... what would have happened had that clash been real.

It never happened. The battle had taken place entirely in their minds ... a mental clash that showed them both the inevitable outcome. And Smough had realized: fighting Mergo would have been a bad idea.

He clasped his hands behind his back and sighed with restrained annoyance.

"What business do you have with me?"

"Relax. I won't ruin your feast, oh dear Cannibal... I'm just the messenger."

"A message?"

"War is coming. So arm yourself. Be ready. The Demon will reign this time."

"Another war..."

Mergo laughed.

"And not just any war ... the final one."

"After this, the Empire and the Ultras would no longer coexist."

One would be erased. Completely.

Smough understood. This time, participation was not optional.

A Demon and a Half-Demon had appeared before him. That was all the warning he needed.

Without a word, he turned back toward the orphanage.

"Leave. You're scaring the children."

"Ha! What a doting father you are."

"Ah yes... I am the father. And wouldn't you know it .. my son has gone astray... and run far from home."

Smough paused for a moment before confirming to Mergo:

"I will serve... as I always have."

The Lord of the Ultras nodded in return.

"I'll be counting on that."

With a single step, the old man Mergo vanished ... carrying the broken Lawrence with him, leaving the orphanage director, Smough, standing alone.

Smough placed a hand over his face as an eerie sound echoed all around him...

A sinister, hollow laughter.

"The time is near... my child born of darkness."

"It's time... to come home."

He turned and stepped back into the orphanage as the doors of Yhosefka's Orphanage shut behind him once more ... until the day came again when another lost child needed shelter.

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Elsewhere on that same earth .. but on the opposite side of the coin...

The training ground of the Temple lay shattered, scarred by the ferocity of the last duel.

Huff... Huff...

Frey exhaled heavily, sprawled out on the ground with both arms stretched wide.

In his hands ... two blazing black swords.

Weapons that gleamed brilliantly... yet his body could no longer move.

Standing above him was a woman with fiery red hair, a radiant smile gracing her lips.

Her breath was also uneven as she rested her colossal claymore gently against Frey's neck.

"You've lost."

"No need to say it... I already know."

The two spoke calmly, ignoring the bloodstains and the deep sword scars etched into the ground around them.

Melina extended a hand to the wounded Frey, who rose to his feet with difficulty, forcing a crooked smile onto his face.

"Lately, I seem to be getting my ass kicked by women a lot..."

Chapter 249: Ashes of Tomorrow (1)

—Frey Starlight's POV—

Melina extended her hand. I grabbed it with some effort, using it to pull myself up from the ground, my body aching from the relentless beating I had just taken.

"You fought well," she said.

Coming from the infamous swordmaster, those words felt oddly out of place... especially with her massive claymore still resting near my throat.

"Should I take that as a compliment?"

"Not in the slightest."

She shook her head.

"Your ability to stand is proof enough."

It wasn't exactly comforting, but Melina never sugarcoated things. This might've been her version of high praise.

We had fought for exactly fifteen minutes...the limit of how long I could maintain Blood form with Balerion, amplified by Dark Sister's aura surge.

And even with all that, I barely managed to keep up with the iron hurricane that was Melina.

Naturally, the moment those fifteen minutes ended, the battle was over.

Throughout the fight—and even now—there was something strange in her eyes. A look I couldn't quite place, but one I couldn't ignore anymore.

"Um... is something wrong?"

"You..."

She answered without hesitation.

"I never thought I'd see someone wielding two of the Ancient Weapons at once."

"Is that really such a big deal?"

I knew no one had ever wielded two of the Seven Legendary Swords at the same time. But in the end, they were still just weapons ... anyone could technically find them.

Apparently, I was wrong.

Her piercing stare told me just how little I understood.

"SS ranked swords aren't ordinary weapons. Not just anyone can handle them."

That made some sense, though I hadn't struggled with either sword so far.

"Are there... requirements or something?"

I couldn't recall writing anything like that in the lore ...aside from Vermithor, Snow's sword.

Thankfully, Melina was patient enough to explain.

"These swords aren't just forged steel," she said, gently running her hand over her golden claymore.

"They're fragments of riddles, shaped into blades. Sometimes, it's the sword that leads you ...not the other way around."

They weren't meant to be lumped in with ordinary weapons.

"You must've experienced it ...those moments when the sword feels alive. When it acts not as a tool, but as something... sentient."

I looked at Balerion.

The Black dread had been with me since my Shadow Sect days. We'd seen a lot together.

And yes .. there were moments. Moments where it moved or acted in ways beyond my understanding.

"I see. You've felt it too."

"Kind of..."

"It's like possession," she said.

"A subtle one."

"Possession?"

"Yes. Sometimes the nature of the blade affects you ... a thirst for blood, a surge of emotion, or even something more direct... like the blade moving on its own."

"..."

"What I mean is .. these swords have a will of their own. They test their wielders before they ever submit."

A test...

Was what happened in the Shadow Sect Balerion's trial?

And what about Dark Sister? It had followed me from the start .. did that mean I'd already passed its test?

"Frey Starlight, because they have will, these swords gradually consume the one who bears them. They constantly influence you. That's why wielding two of them is nearly impossible."

"Everyone who's tried... either died or went insane."

Most people could barely handle one. Add another, and it should've crushed me. And even if they could, the swords themselves had pride .. they refused to be wielded together.

"But here you are."

Melina stepped around me slowly, eyes analyzing every inch of me.

"Carrying two blazing swords as if it were nothing."

"Your body can withstand blows meant for someone in the SS class, and you're barely in B rank."

Even if Dark Sister and Balerion boosted my power tremendously, it shouldn't be enough to close that kind of gap.

"Your foundation matters. Everything else is just reinforcement."

"There's something... unusual about you."

Her words... weren't wrong.

"I won't argue with that," I said with a faint smile.

"Even I don't fully understand myself."

There was far more chaos inside my life than I could ever make sense of.

"May I ask you something?" she said. "Why do you fight?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Everyone who comes to the temple has something driving them. A desire or ambition that pushes them to fight."

Things like power, fame... or even something trivial like wanting to make friends or live a better life.

"Which one are you, Lord Starlight?"

The moment she asked, I realized ... she had seen through me.

She was the type who could read an opponent with just a few exchanges of the blade.

"A reason to fight... I used to have one. Not too long ago. But now... not anymore."

"My goal was clear ... distant, yes, and the path to it was rough, often feeling impossible..."

"But it was always there. I knew exactly what I wanted. That clarity helped me fight beyond my limits. But now... there's too much clouding my mind."

"A lot has happened recently, so what should I strive for now? Should I burn what remains of me chasing revenge against a distant enemy beyond my reach? Or should I search for other truths hidden behind the curtain? Or perhaps... it's all far simpler than that?"

"I don't know anymore."

I had no idea what Melina saw in me. Or what she felt from the emptiness of my words, from the hollowness in my eyes.

But she reached out, gently placing her hand on my shoulder.

It was a slim hand ... fitting for a woman. Yet the firmness in her touch proved otherwise.

It was the hand of someone who had devoted everything to the blade.

"It's alright," she said softly. "You can fill that emptiness, piece by piece, and figure out who you are in time. That's why the temple exists, after all."

Maybe that was her way of telling me... to lean on her. That she would help me.

I couldn't fully grasp her true intentions, but for now ... I chose to accept the hand she offered.

"I'll look forward to that."

She nodded once. After that, we sat together and discussed my new way of fighting.

I wasn't used to dual-wielding yet, but according to her, I had the talent for it. What I needed now was to strengthen my foundation and truly understand my own capabilities.

That included mastering the first stage of Shadow Adaptation, which I had finally reached.

All things considered, I realized I still had a long road ahead of me.

"Well then, I'll see you tomorrow, Lady Melina."

"Yes."

I saluted the red-haired swordswoman and made my way out.

As I walked, I glanced at the annoying system window that occasionally popped up in front of me.

Ding!

Melina Maiden

Current Level: SS

Affection Points: 15

The Claymore Bearer is curious about you.

– More information cannot be displayed due to insufficient Affection Points –

...

Curious about me, huh?

Well, I suppose that's better than her hating me.

With that thought, I left the training field. Meanwhile, Melina remained behind, her eyes lingering on me as she pondered what had just occurred... and what had happened the day before.

Once she was certain she was completely alone, Melina raised her sword skyward, her gaze locked on the blade.

"What a strange generation."

Her crimson eyes reflected against the golden edge of the claymore.

"Yesterday, the Church's Champion came to me in that strange form of his. And today, the Victoriad Champion wields two flaming swords."

Strangest of all ... both had managed to withstand her blows.

"Am I starting to rust?"

In that moment .. They say someone heard the sound of a sword cutting through the air... from miles away.

Chapter 250: Ashes of Tomorrow (2)

- Frey Starlight's pov -

When I left the training grounds, night had already fallen, but the temple was still lively.

In an effort to distance themselves from the looming chaos of war, the temple's overseers ensured that the place remained bustling around the clock.

Even the students did their part in their own ways, and the temple's walkways were now packed to the brim.

I wandered between restaurants and shops that looked more like a small city than facilities belonging to an academy.

Moments like these... I really missed the old man, Shaheen.

Who knows what that cursed geezer was doing right now?

I just hoped he was still alive.

After wandering a bit, I picked a restaurant that served dishes from what used to be called French cuisine, then sat and started fiddling with the system for a while.

The new system hadn't changed much ... except for the introduction of the Affection Point feature.

I checked my stats, same as always, alongside my current achievement points.

I was in Rank B-, right at the peak of that tier to be specific.

In terms of abilities, I had unlocked the Third-Person Perspective—a feature that allowed me to observe or even lightly influence people who had high affection toward me.

On that note, I decided to test it out, since I didn't have much else to do.

The first person that came to mind was my sister, Ada, but I'd already used it on her several times. So I decided to switch things up.

My pick ended up being Danzo.

His affection score toward me was 50 ... probably the bare minimum required to activate the ability.

Danzo Smasher

Affection Points: 50

— Danzo sees you as both a friend and a trusted ally. Your unwavering will—

... strong enough to endure hell and still remain standing has earned his deep respect.—

Available Information:

Name: Danzo Smasher

Rank: B-

Combat Style: Sky Maneuver

"Alright then... let's give it a shot."

I activated the ability, and that strange sensation of immersion returned ... like my soul was being pulled out of my body.

A wave of nausea hit me as everything went dark.

When I opened my eyes again, I found myself floating in the air, and the scenery around me had changed completely.

I was inside a spacious room ... simple, yet elegant in its details.

Looking down, I saw someone familiar.

"Huff... Huff..."

I heard the sound of rough breathing, and sweat dripping heavily.

There he was ... Danzo, doing push-ups like a madman, muscles gleaming under the light.

"Push-ups, huh? That checks out."

It was exactly what I expected of him. The scary part was ... he wasn't even counting. I figured he'd just keep going until he physically collapsed.

Judging from the look of it, his rep count must've been in the thousands.

I spent the next few minutes drifting around in my ethereal form, not gonna lie ...I was pretty excited at first. I mean, spying on people as a ghost? Yeah, it's unethical... but also kind of thrilling.

To watch everyone, knowing none of them could see you?

If I wasn't mentally stable, I'd probably have caused some disasters with this power by now.

"Stay sane, Frey... stay sane."

I pushed aside any unwelcome thoughts and continued floating near Danzo.

I tested the limits of the ability ... like range, for instance.

Unfortunately, I couldn't move more than a few meters away from the target, meaning I was stuck orbiting Danzo's ass.

Second, I wanted to know if there was a time limit.

Minutes passed, one after another ... but no signs of the ability ending.

So I concluded it must be aura-based.

In other words, I could probably stay in this form as long as I wanted, thanks to my SSS tier aura reserves.

I kept drifting lazily above Danzo, who had now switched to doing one-handed push-ups.

Bored, I opened the system interface and idly scrolled through it.

So far, every system ability had held some kind of meaning. Whether it was the direct advice, the writing functions, or something else.

The system didn't give anything without purpose ...well, aside from side missions, of course.

Which made me wonder: what's the point of this new Affection System, really?

Was the system trying to push me into deepening my connections with others? Trying to make me understand them better?

The more I thought about it, the more confused I became...

And it wasn't just Affection Points that had changed.

There was another ability I hadn't touched in a long time ..

A Glimpse of the Future.

The ability that once let me see a snapshot of a coming event had evolved.

– Glimpse of the Future –

The upgraded ability now grants a short sequence ...a few seconds of a future event.

The image... had become a video.

It was a terrifying skill, to be honest.

I mean ...it literally showed me the future.

I didn't use it during the Victoriad, because I was too afraid of seeing myself lose.

But now... now it might just be one of the most powerful tools I had.

Suddenly, I remembered what I'd seen before ...

That vision of half the temple in ruins.

Back then, I thought the cause was the temple core explosion ...but I was wrong.

Also...

Is it really safe to trust that the future shown to me is accurate?

I don't know much about time manipulation, but one thing I do know is that the future isn't fixed ... it can shift with even the slightest action.

In other words, just by seeing a glimpse of the future, my own behavior might change and create an entirely different outcome. And that change won't necessarily be for the better.

So where did I even get an ability like this in the first place?

Could it be that the future is actually predetermined? That the destruction of half the temple hasn't happened yet ...but will, inevitably?

I started getting a headache just thinking about this whole time-based nonsense, so I decided to shelf it for now.

"Yeah... let's not mess with time."

It was probably for the best.

Suddenly, a realization hit me.

"Wait... what exactly happens to my body when I enter this state?"

As soon as I thought that, I realized I'd been spying on Danzo for over half an hour.

The bastard was still doing push-ups which must've thrown off my sense of time.

I immediately deactivated the ability, and invisible hands dragged me back into reality along with a wave of nausea.

When I opened my eyes ...

I found my face buried in the mashed potatoes and chicken stew that had been served to me.

My hair and face were a complete mess.

I slowly pulled myself up, wiping off my face ... only to see everyone in the restaurant staring at me like I was insane.

A few staff members were whispering worriedly, and I could tell they'd probably tried to wake me several times without success.

I quickly paid the bill, muttered an apology, and rushed out of there.

"Let's not do that in public again..."

Yeah. That was embarrassing.

I returned to the Elite Dorms afterward.

I didn't really have anything to do...

Even the system missions were empty aside from those twisted side quests telling me to get into a relationship with people like Seris Moonlight.

I'd been ignoring those for obvious reasons, so I was left with nothing to occupy myself.

But I knew this quiet wouldn't last forever.

That blue-eyed bastard... the Engineer.

I knew he wouldn't leave me alone.

It felt like he knew too much about me ...as if he had orchestrated everything from the start... from the moment I was born.

A man like that could be lurking nearby right now, somewhere I couldn't see.

That's why I was sure this peace was only temporary.

The storms would return again.

Storms I wasn't even sure I'd be ready for.

"All I can do is keep giving it my all, just like I always have... right, father?"

With a faint smile, I returned to my room ...

thus ending another day within the temple.