

VILLAIN 251

Chapter 251: About Love

-Frey Starlight's Pov-

A full month had passed since my return to the Temple and the start of the second year.

"You're looking way better these days, man."

Danzo slicked his hair back as we walked together down the main path toward class—me in the center, with Danzo on my right and Ghost on my left.

"Better? What exactly changed about me?"

I'd heard the comment more than once, usually from Danzo. He always paid attention to details.

"The bags under your eyes are fading, and your aura's different. You're nearly done with your emo phase."

He noticed things I never did about myself.

"If I had half your energy, maybe I wouldn't have had any of those issues to begin with."

The guy does push-ups until he passes out. There's a limit to how insane one person should be.

"Hey, neither of you could handle my energy...especially you, twig boy." He pointed at Ghost, grinning.

"..."

Ghost stayed silent as always. Normally that'd provoke Danzo, but lately the two had mellowed. They'd grown used to each other.

"How've things been with you, Ghost? Nothing bothering you, right?"

I asked that question a lot. His answer never changed.

"Everything's fine."

He never questioned why I asked. That was just who he was.

"Why do you keep asking him that every single day?" Danzo butted in, naturally.

"No special reason."

"Oh, I get it. Just look at him ...he looks like he might drop dead any second. How does someone fight with a skeleton for a body?"

Danzo started circling him like usual. Ghost, unbothered, answered coolly.

"This skeleton's more than enough to flatten your brick wall of muscle."

There it was.

"Haha! That's great!"

Danzo laughed and rolled up his sleeves.

Seeing what was coming, I drifted away from the scene.

"Then show me, you bastard!"

They'd grown closer, sure ... but a fight was still inevitable.

I glanced back one last time. Ghost dodged Danzo's swings like they were nothing.

The silent assassin had chosen me over Snow in the end. And since I wasn't pushing him away anymore, we somehow ended up as friends.

Ding!

Ghost Umbra

Affection Points: 50

This person considers you an essential part of his life.

Available Information:

Name: Ghost Umbra

Rank: B+

Combat Style: ???

Current Thought:

I wonder what goes on in that musclehead's mind... if he even has one to begin with.

I didn't fully grasp what that last part meant. Maybe it was related to the "light and shadow" talk he was always bringing up.

Still, Ghost belonged to the Shadow Court ... an organization that felt like a constant headache for anyone in its sights.

He'd broken their code during the Victoriad by using his full power. I expected backlash.

I even used the Third-Person pov on him a few times, but nothing happened.

Maybe I didn't know my old story as well as I thought.

Either way, I waited .. for whatever was next. But it was all still hazy.

I opened the system, glancing at the quest log:

Main Quests:

—Eliminate the Darkness of the Imperial Family : 5000 Achievement Points

Failure Penalty: -5000 Points

Death of the Prince and Princess .

Yeah...

I had no idea how that quest even triggered. It had just... appeared.

I made my way to class. She was there, sitting with the others.

Sansa. Alongside Seris Moonlight and Selena Hemsworth.

For some reason, I knew the darkness mentioned in the quest wasn't referring to her snake brother.

If the target were Aegon, the quest wouldn't have popped up now. As twisted as he is, he's still smart. He'd never go so far as to kill the Emperor ... and I doubt he could, even if he tried.

No...

The real answer was Sansa.

Ever since that mission appeared, I've tried getting closer to her several times, but we've barely managed to talk for more than five minutes. It was as if some unseen force kept pushing me away.

She'd grown quieter, her eyes darker, and her once-lustrous hair had started to lose its shine.

"Hey, you."

While I was absentmindedly staring at her from my seat, Ragna turned around from the desk in front of me.

"Ragna? What is it?"

The spear-wielding brute studied me for a moment before asking,

"Is it... maybe..."

"What?"

He leaned in a little, sparking my curiosity.

"What do you think about the princess?"

That caught me off guard.

"In what sense?"

I tried to play dumb, but he went straight for the throat.

"I think you're in love with her."

"And why would you think that?"

"Are you really asking me that?"

Ragna sighed, whispering as he leaned on my desk.

"You've been staring at her for weeks now. You keep trying to approach her. There are rumors already, man!"

Ah...

"So everyone thinks that, too?"

"Yeah. Get a grip, man! Don't let your feelings rule you like some animal."

Love advice from Ragna...

"No need to worry. It's not what it looks like."

I guess it's easy to misinterpret things in situations like this ...and, truthfully, my words probably didn't sound very convincing.

Ragna patted my shoulder and nodded solemnly.

"No worries. I get it."

"Get what? Like I said—"

"First loves are always the hardest. You're just unlucky yours happens to be the princess. She's way out of your league, but don't let that get you down! One day, you'll find your true love!"

He wasn't going to listen.

"Whatever, man. Let's just drop it."

Ragna nodded again, thinking he fully understood my 'struggle.' He must've thought I looked heartbroken after being rejected.

Class started, with Sophia as usual at the front. Sitting in the back, I leaned against my chair and stared at the ceiling.

'First love, huh...?'

I chuckled at myself, dumbly reflecting on everything that had happened.

I've been completely lost ever since I lost my reason to live. So I waited... and waited in silence, until that mission appeared ... something I took as a hint, a sign.

And the moment it did, I chased after it like a child, desperate for someone to tell me what to do.

I didn't even notice the way people were looking at me ... how I appeared in their eyes.

Now that I've finally opened my eyes, I realized everyone saw it. It must've looked pathetic.

"This really isn't like me..."

I wonder... does she think the same?

Ding!

Name: Sansa Valerion

Affection Points: 50

-Sansa sees you as a weird friend, but doesn't mind having you around.-

Current Thought: I feel sleepy...

So simple...

After all, that girl can read emotions through facial expressions. She must've already figured out that those rumors weren't true.

For the first time, I was actually thankful for her strange ability.

Still, that didn't change the fact that I needed to get a better grip on myself moving forward.

But thinking back on Ragna's words... love, huh?

I remember writing something like that in the Novel.

I glanced around the main characters near me ... each one had veered so far from the path I'd originally planned.

In the early outline, the war wasn't supposed to start anytime soon. The characters were meant to live peacefully for a while in the temple.

Naturally, that peaceful environment would've led to relationships blossoming here and there.

After all, they were basically high schoolers in a fantasy setting.

But now ... thanks to the looming war and all the changes ... no romance had bloomed yet. I hadn't even seen any dating among the elite students, despite how common it once was at the temple.

Honestly, I preferred it this way.

My mental age had long since passed thirty. The last thing I wanted was to get involved in some teenage romance drama.

Yeah... let's definitely not go down that road.

Chapter 252: The Dark Princess Rises

—Frey Starlight's POV—

The hours passed quickly, and I suddenly found myself caught in an unexpected conflict...

After we finished the usual training sessions, a large arena had gathered the Elite Class into two sides ...boys versus girls.

At the forefront of our side stood Danzo and Ragna, who were already engaged in a heated argument with several girls—most notably, Selena and Clana.

"Repeat what you just said?"

The girls looked furious, yelling at the two walking mountains of muscle towering over them.

"Having trouble with your hearing? No worries, I'm generous enough to say it again: All of you are just support standing in the back while we're the ones doing the real fighting."

"Heh, a perfect mindset for muscleheads like you. Just a bunch of brainless brutes."

The argument, unsurprisingly, had escalated between Danzo and Clana Starlight in particular.

I sighed, throwing a glance toward Phoenix, who stood off to the side, laughing.

This was all his doing ... he'd been the one to suggest a match between the boys and girls of the class.

He clearly did it on purpose. I was sure of it.

Either way, this wasn't going to end peacefully...

"Don't make me laugh, girl. You talk all high and mighty, but only one of you even made it to the final eight during the Victoriad—and she got her ass kicked out in the quarter-finals!"

Danzo hit a nerve... Clana had no comeback for that. Meanwhile, Seris frowned slightly ... he was clearly referring to her.

But she wasn't the one who replied this time.

"Oh? So you're basing your grand judgment on the Victoriad, huh?"

It was Selena who stepped up now.

"And what else should I base it on?"

With a calm smile, the sorceress drew her wand and pointed it at Danzo.

"It's simple. Let's fight. The top three girls against the top three boys. That way, you'll get your answer, instead of relying on pathetic assumptions."

Reasonable...

She hit back with a challenge while mocking him between the lines. That girl really is something...

"Perfect! Glad it came from you."

As expected, both Danzo and Ragna took the bait instantly.

The argument reminded me of those heated debates that always used to flare up in the past .. especially from women who believed men were useless altogether.

The whole thing gave me a bad feeling... especially when Danzo turned toward us.

I was standing beside Snow, and he wore the same deadpan expression as me.

"Hey... don't tell me..."

"Yeah. Looks like we're really doing this."

Danzo headed straight for us, just as we expected.

"Princess #1 and Princess #2, you're fighting!"

"Why us, exactly?"

"Are you playing dumb? You're the Victoriad Champion and the Runner-up. Of course you're fighting!
We want a flawless victory!"

Danzo was serious about this.

Meanwhile, the girls had already picked their team of three.

The sorceress Selena, the Wave Controller Seris... and the third one ... the one I focused on the most ..Sansa.

"Looks like they've settled their lineup..."

We spoke among ourselves, just as the prince stepped back with that usual sly grin.

"I don't think I'll be joining you, gentlemen ... but best of luck."

His friendly words didn't hide the cold look in his eyes, which remained fixed on Sansa as he walked away.

Ghost vanished just as quietly. He wouldn't be joining either.

Snow, after accepting his fate, grabbed a standard sword and stepped forward.

"So who's on our team? Me, Frey, and... you?"

"I guess so."

Danzo was already geared up and ready to go when...

"Stop."

A surprising figure stepped forward. Daemon Valerion, with his slicked-back blond hair and ever-combustible attitude.

"I'll fight. Step back, gray-hair."

"Huh? And why the hell would I do that?" Danzo snapped, glaring at him.

"You're the weakest among them ... and you've lost every single fight against me, so what are you whining about?"

"You barely managed to win!"

"That doesn't change the fact that I did win. Step back."

Daemon was determined this time, and somehow managed to push Danzo out of the way.

Selena didn't miss the opportunity to mock Danzo, who wouldn't even be fighting.

"You were running your mouth just a moment ago, and now you're stuck watching from the sidelines. Pathetic."

She laughed, then turned her attention back to her opponents.

Frey Starlight, Snow Lionheart, and Daemon Valerion.

It could easily be considered the strongest possible team, to the point the entire training field started filling up with students the moment word spread about what was happening.

Standing shoulder to shoulder, I glanced at Daemon.

"I didn't think you'd be interested in a match like this."

The proud lion of House Valerion wasn't known to waste his time on meaningless duels.

"I'm usually not. But this time is an exception."

Sparks of lightning erupted around him as his gaze remained fixed on one person.

"I just wanted to fight her ... at least once."

He was talking about her. Sansa.

The princess who had sparked so many questions with that mysterious, demonic power of hers.

Sure, on paper our side looked far stronger... but that wasn't necessarily true.

Sansa had purposely stayed out of the Victoriad. Selena, too, hadn't tried her best because she'd been dealing with Aegon at the time.

If the princess had fought freely using her demonic powers without restrictions... I wonder what would have happened back then.

Now, it seemed I was about to find out.

Phoenix stood in the center of the ring and gave the signal.

"Begin!"

"Come on, mighty men! Show us what you're made of!"

Those were the last words we heard before the battle began.

Two duelists and a tank ... against a sorceress and two Wave Controllers.

But the fight didn't go as expected at all.

Selena and Seris teleported away instantly, while Sansa stepped forward.

'Alone against all three of us?'

From the very start of the fight...

Sansa engaged us at close range while Selena and Seris bombarded us from a distance.

Daemon took the brunt of everything, focusing entirely on charging the princessc... absorbing all the hits with his hardened body.

He moved at a terrifying speed for his size and swung a brutal punch at the slim figure in front of him.

From afar, everyone heard the devastating impact as a wave of lightning aura exploded across the arena.

Daemon was shocked to see a black pillar erupt between him and Sansa, blocking his strike completely.

He tried to force his way through, but dozens of shadowy tendrils burst out of the pillar and lashed at him.

"What the hell are these things?!"

The tank held his ground and attacked alongside Snow, coming from both flanks simultaneously.

It was a perfectly coordinated assault .. the kind we'd mastered after all our battles against Melina.

But Sansa didn't even move to block us.

She just let the shadows do all the work.

Black spikes appeared from thin air, one after another, targeting us like oversized bullets.

The terrifying part was that we couldn't even cut through those shadows ...we could barely deflect them.

"There's no point in trying to cut them," Sansa said flatly.

"Many stronger than you have tried. And they all failed."

Meanwhile, Seris and Selena rained down endless barrages of fire and ice spells.

We couldn't even get close ... the entire arena was already blanketed in Sansa's shadows.

Trapped like rats in a cage, we couldn't move an inch.

We didn't realize how serious it was until the moment those shadows nearly swallowed us whole.

Black tendrils, razor-sharp spikes, and shadowy blades rained down on our heads with deadly speed.

I don't even know when Daemon started using his black lightning, or when Snow unleashed his full arsenal of elements.

As for me, I tapped into my newly acquired shadow immersion state ... alongside Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow.

Sure, we didn't use our legendary weapons... but we were fighting seriously.

We didn't hold back. We didn't retreat.

But fighting those shadows felt like taking on a black sea forged from unbreakable steel.

Massive black hands formed from the shadows, slamming Daemon into the wall with a brutal barrage of strikes.

No matter how fast I moved ..alongside Snow, who even activated Void Step—we couldn't get within five meters of Sansa.

Seris and Selena's barrage only made things worse.

It was relentless artillery, nonstop. The kind of pressure that brought back memories of what Kai Luc once unleashed.

And yet... despite the fact that the three in front of us were far weaker than Kai Luc, they somehow felt more terrifying.

The reason was simple ...the princess.

Wave Controllers typically struggle in direct combat. They lack the physical capabilities to stand toe-to-toe with duelists.

But Sansa had completely erased that weakness.

She didn't even give us room to breathe.

Forcing my body beyond its limits, I surged toward her, weaving through the tendrils and dark blades that kept hammering toward me.

Even with my speed, several struck my body. But despite the pain ...I broke through, piercing the black tide.

There, standing right before Sansa, I raised my sword and unleashed as much aura as I could muster.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Infinite Darkness."

Shadow aura surged into my blade, erupting toward her like a vortex.

But Sansa merely smiled.

She raised her palm toward me ..calm, effortless.

"Your darkness is lukewarm, Frey."

I heard her voice beside my ear ... just before her shadows surged from nothingness and swallowed me whole.

Darkness collided with darkness.

But just as she said ..mine was faint, shallow, compared to the abyss she commanded.

Seconds later, I found myself embedded into the far wall of the arena.

And that was just fifteen minutes into the fight.

Under the stunned gaze of everyone present, in the midst of a shattered arena and a ceiling that had been entirely blown away—tendrils of black still stretched high above us.

That was when Phoenix finally stepped in to stop the battle.

Our bodies were wrecked, torn apart in ways no sparring match should ever allow.

Especially Daemon ...his chest had been sliced open by a vicious blow.

Propping myself up on my sword, I exchanged a glance with Sansa.

She looked completely unaffected.

Daemon shouted that the fight wasn't over yet ... but Phoenix ended everything by force.

He saw no reason to continue.

The champion of the Victoriad, the champion of the Church, and the beast raised by House Valerion ...

All of us were utterly defeated...

By the Dark Princess.

Chapter 253: Shadows Beneath the Throne (1)

– Frey Starlight's Pov –

It took a full minute of silence—me and everyone else—just to process what had happened, before the crowd erupted into cheers for the princess who had just delivered a breathtaking display.

"Where did all these people come from?"

Snow muttered beside me, still trying to pull himself together.

None of us had suffered fatal injuries except for the deep gash across Daemon's chest ... but we were in rough shape.

The temple students who'd witnessed the match were captivated by Sansa. She had just defeated the students believed to be the strongest of their generation.

The match hadn't been broadcast to the Empire's citizens , it was limited to a handful of people .. but rumors would spread, inevitably. And without even realizing it, Sansa had just scored major points against Aegon in the race for the throne.

Speaking of the prince... he stood clapping alongside the others, a calm smile drawn across his face.

What just happened was clearly a blow to him. Because no matter how intelligent or cunning an emperor may be, those traits are meaningless without overwhelming strength.

An emperor is, first and foremost, the Empire's shield and sword. Their only requirement is to be strong enough to defeat anyone.

And Sansa had just shown that kind of strength ... strength worthy of the throne.

So why are you smiling, Aegon?

Where exactly does the darkness within the Imperial family lie?

"What the hell were those shadows?"

"I couldn't cut through them... and they were ridiculously fast."

Daemon and Snow had already started breaking down what they'd just faced.

Sansa's shadow ability was vast in range, harder than steel, faster than the eye could follow, and disturbingly versatile.

It was, without exaggeration, an absurdly well-rounded power with no visible weaknesses.

You could almost call it a perfect shadow ability... if such a thing existed.

"Her darkness isn't natural. I've only felt something like that once in my life."

Snow was inching closer to the truth.

He had sensed this kind of power once ... during his fight with the masked man from the Ultras. The man who wielded an otherworldly black flame unlike anything he'd seen.

Sansa's shadows carried that same energy.

It was only a matter of time before people realized she was using a demonic ability .. if they hadn't figured it out already.

"What about you, Frey?"

Snow's voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"Her shadows are definitely nothing like Ghost's."

"Obviously," Daemon muttered, sparks of lightning dancing between his fingers.

"The Valerions have always inherited light and lightning. Generation after generation."

He clenched his fist, casting a final glance toward his cousin.

"But that cursed darkness... only the gods know where it came from."

Different opinions, but from the outside? We probably just looked like a group of losers licking their wounds.

I didn't linger long. I slipped away at the first chance, distancing myself from the roar of cheers and from Danzo's shouting as Selena continued mocking him.

I wasn't even sure how I ended up at one of the temple's private gardens.

I sat alone on a bench, staring at the system screen and the one mission that had been haunting me for some time:

– Eliminate the Darkness of the Imperial Bloodline –

Time Remaining: 23 Days

It was difficult to grasp what exactly this mission wanted from me.

If Sansa was the darkness in question... did that mean I was meant to kill her?

What if the darkness was Aegon instead? Or somewhere else entirely?

Still, I doubted the system would throw me against someone like Maekar ... not unless it wanted me dead.

No. I was almost certain that the target this time... was Princess Sansa.

So then what?

I had no intention of killing her. And I wasn't even sure I could.

I've always hated these kinds of missions ... ones that throw me blindly into the unknown.

But this time, I had the tools to shine a light on that uncertainty.

And that tool was one of the system's most broken abilities:

– Glimpse of the Future –

The more I thought about it, the more terrifying it seemed.

It literally allowed me to see the future. That kind of power broke the rules of this world.

And honestly, I had no idea why I even had access to something like this.

During the Victoriad, I'd avoided using it .. I was too afraid of seeing myself fail.

But now? There was no reason not to use it. Except... its cost was high. Very high.

But I had enough points saved up from completing the final mission before ...

so after a deep breath, and for the first time in a long while, I used my cheat ability once again.

The mission Eliminate the Darkness of the imperial Bloodline had a countdown:

23 days remaining.

I didn't know what that meant exactly,

but I decided to look 23 days into the future to see how this would all unfold.

"Show me the fate of that damned family... please."

It cost me a full 1,000 achievement points,

but the ability activated flawlessly.

Reality tore apart around me ...like someone had taken an eraser to the world...

and the colors gradually came together to form the scene I wanted to see.

My heartbeat accelerated from how violently I was yanked out of the present.

In the past, this ability would only show me a single image.

But now, what unfolded before me was a moving scene .. so vivid, so real,

I felt like I had actually traveled into the future.

It was nighttime. I floated like a ghost in the sky,

watching from above the Royal District ..

a place I had only seen before in photographs.

It was a region brimming with majestic castles and towering palaces.

Among them, three massive castles stood above the rest .. which I assumed belonged to Maekar and his sons.

Everything was eerily quiet.

Just another crisp, uneventful autumn night.

Seconds ticked by. Then minutes.

And I began to think I had just wasted a thousand achievement points for nothing.

But of course, that was just the calm before the storm.

How strange, how easily the world can shift ...

as if someone were tampering with my vision and senses.

BOOOOOOM!

With a deafening explosion, one of the three castles erupted in flames.

Screams echoed through the night.

From beneath the rubble, pitch-black tendrils tore into the sky,

as fire and shadow swallowed everything.

I watched those black tentacles shred through anything in their path,

while something crawled through that cursed darkness.

"Aha... AhahahahahaHAHAHA!!!"

And at the center of it all,

a creature—a demon—laughed maniacally

as it slaughtered every soul in its way, painting the land with blood.

It slithered across the ground like a plague,

bringing destruction and death in its wake.

And it had only one target:

From the Imperial Castle, Maekar emerged...

carrying a colossal spear in hand.

His face and golden eyes were cold as ever.

Serpents of lightning coiled through the sky, illuminating the night as the Emperor hurled his weapon at the thing crawling toward him.

The bolt of lightning ...an attack worthy of an SS+ entity clashed with the cursed shadows,

unleashing waves of destructive power.

I was thrown from that twisted reality and woke up, back on the garden bench—

drenched in sweat, with a cold hand on my shoulder.

I could feel the sweat crawling across my skin.

My breathing was erratic.

My heart pounded against my ribs like it was trying to escape my chest.

I turned to see whose hand it was ...

and within moments, I had my answer.

"...Sansa?"

"What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"How long have you been here?"

It took everything I had to keep my composure, trying to meet her gaze while silencing the primal instinct inside me screaming to get away.

Sansa, ever observant,

was already watching me closely.

I had to lock down my expression fast ...or she'd see right through me.

"I've been here for a while. I called your name a few times but got no answer."

"Ah... I guess I got lost in thought again."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"It's actually nice to see you acting like yourself again."

"What do you mean?"

I asked. Her reply wasn't what I expected.

"You've looked... empty, ever since you came back."

Such a sharp insight, as always, from the princess.

"Empty, huh? ...Now that you mention it, we haven't really talked like this in a while."

Every time I tried to find her, something would get in the way.

But when she came looking for me? Nothing stopped her.

"Yeah... It wasn't easy sneaking away from all those students earlier."

"Can't blame them. You did just wipe the floor with me, Snow, and Daemon."

"..."

She didn't respond immediately.

Maybe she was thinking about something.

But I didn't give her time ..I followed with another question:

"How have you been lately?"

Sansa tilted her head and looked at me.

"I'm fine... nothing out of the ordinary."

"What about your power? Those shadows..."

The moment I added that last question and studied her expression ..it lasted for less than a second .. but even though she tried to hide it gracefully, I noticed the faint crease in her brow before she smoothed it away.

She was incredibly skilled at controlling her facial expressions.

I assumed it was one of those habits she'd mastered over time, likely due to her status as a princess.

Because of that, I couldn't tell if I was imagining things, or if I'd really seen it.

In response, she simply raised her hand ... allowing thin strands of shadow aura to swirl around her fingers.

"I've recently reached the point where I can manipulate it freely."

Sansa began shaping her shadow aura into different forms.

She started simple—circles, squares—while continuing to speak.

"Little by little, this power has become an inseparable part of me."

Slowly, the shapes became more complex: a three-dimensional sword, a spear formed entirely from shadow.

The way she controlled it ..so swift, so precise ..felt almost instinctive.

"Your control is amazing," I commented as she put on the display.

The princess smiled softly.

"Yes. I have it under control now, so there's no need to worry."

"Right..."

No need to worry?

Truthfully, I wouldn't have worried.

That level of aura manipulation proved how deeply she'd mastered it.

But...

That glimpse I saw of the future still haunted me.

Because that thing ...the shadowed monstrosity that attacked Maekar ...

I saw it.

For a fleeting second, I recognized the figure within that darkness.

That creature, that nightmare that had risen from nowhere...

Even if she looked slightly different ..

it was still you, Sansa.

That abomination .. one more terrifying than any demon I've seen...

Was that really you?

Chapter 254: Shadows Beneath the Throne (2)

No matter how long I stared at her, aside from the blackness in her eyes,

she still looked like herself.

The same Sansa.

She, along with Abraham Starlight, were the only characters I never wrote anything concrete about.

And somehow,

her presence was something I didn't want to lose.

After deciding that, I let the topic fade, and continued chatting with Sansa like I used to in the past, ignoring the darkness that swirled quietly around her.

At times like these, meaningless, lighthearted conversations were more than welcome.

After all, isn't that what friends do?

And just like that, we lost track of time.

"You've been staring a lot lately."

Her voice came out of nowhere, and she turned toward me with a teasing smile.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied, deflecting with casual denial.

She chuckled softly.

"That's unlike you, Frey. Could it be... you've fallen for me?"

"You know that's not the case."

I mean, she can literally read emotions from facial expressions .. so what was the point of asking?

"I know," she nodded.

"But do you know?"

"What are you getting at?"

"What kind of feelings do you think I have for you, Frey?"

She rose from the bench, eyes locked on mine .. those deep, dark eyes of hers.

There was no clear answer to her question.

I didn't have her ability, so all I could do was guess.

"I'm afraid if I say 'love,' you'll try to kill me."

"You're more clueless than I thought." Sansa shook her head.

"I could never fall for someone who breaks his promises."

...A promise.

I remember her bringing up something like that before ..

a promise made to the other Frey, the one who lived before I reincarnated.

Though honestly, I wasn't even sure we were different people at all.

"To be honest... I forgot about that promise."

So I told her the truth .. straightforward and unfiltered.

She nodded, showing no reaction.

"I figured."

Silence settled between us.

We stared at each other for a while.

"So?" I asked. "Aren't you going to tell me what the promise was?"

"No. It doesn't matter anymore if you've forgotten it."

Sansa turned to leave but glanced back at me with a faint smile.

"Even if you don't remember it, Frey... you've been fulfilling it perfectly all along.

I guess that's just the kind of person you are."

Her words stirred something in me.

But if she wasn't going to tell me, I figured I'd leave it be ... for now.

She was the last to arrive, and the first to leave.

The sun had already begun to set.

"It's getting late."

"Yeah..."

"You should head back to your room now, don't you think?"

"I'll stay a little longer."

Sansa had made up her mind to leave, as if something was forcing her to.

So I didn't try to stop her.

With one last look at her, I remembered how she was one of the few who stood by my side ..

even when others had called for my execution.

"Thank you... Sansa. For everything."

Maybe I wouldn't have survived if not for her.

So saying "thank you" was the least I could do.

Sansa replied with a smile.

"No need to thank me. You saved my life, remember?"

"So we're even then."

I waved at her, and she did the same ... disappearing from my view.

Sansa...

Yeah. I definitely don't want to kill you.

Slowly, the smile faded from my lips, replaced by my usual cold demeanor,

as I welcomed another uninvited guest.

"How long do you plan to watch from over there?"

I didn't even bother to turn around.

The blonde-haired prince clapped as he stepped forward.

"Impressive senses, as always... Frey."

"Aegon."

The prince, smiling as usual, glanced first at me, then in the direction where his sister had disappeared.

"I see your relationship with my sister is going smoothly."

He remarked with a smirk. I answered him plainly:

"Better than my relationship with you, at least."

"Ouch. That hurts, you know."

He feigned offense, then walked over and sat right where Sansa had been moments ago.

"What do you want?"

I asked, my patience already thin.

My relationship with him had never been friendly.

But Aegon was also good ..too good at hiding his true thoughts.

Dealing with this royal family was one long migraine.

"No need to worry, Frey. You're no longer one of my priorities."

"Is that so? Hard to believe."

Aegon wasn't the type to let a rogue piece wander around his chessboard, spreading chaos.

"Can't blame you. Normally, I'd just eliminate pieces like you... but you're too stubborn to die. Killing you's quite the hassle."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I said with a dry laugh.

He chuckled as well.

"It was a compliment. You should be proud."

"I feel disgusted instead."

"So cruel."

Aegon shrugged, then gazed up at the sky.

"There are plenty of eyes and hands surrounding you now, Frey...

To be honest, I'm not sure if dealing with them is any better than dealing with me.

You might find me charming by comparison."

There was no telling what exactly he meant ... or who he meant.

But he wasn't wrong.

Maybe that was his conclusion after failing to kill me more than once.

I smiled faintly, staring at the ground.

"I'll figure things out... same as always."

"Then keep dancing on the board however you like. For now."

"You seem awfully calm. If I were you, I'd be feeling some pressure right now.

Sansa's not such an easy opponent anymore."

I threw the jab, and he only laughed.

"Is that what you truly think, Frey Starlight?"

"..."

Aegon stood up, and for once,

I saw his real face ... his real smile.

"My battle with my sister ended a long time ago."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

But Aegon was already walking away, still smiling.

"I've already won. It's over. Sansa destroyed herself with her own hands."

His words confirmed something:

he knew things others didn't ..

and unlike me, he didn't need a glimpse of the future to realize it.

"Look forward to the show that's about to start in the coming days.

I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

He waved goodbye and disappeared,

just like his sister had.

I sighed and remained seated.

"What kind of show...?"

And what blood would I need to spill this time?

With that thought gnawing at me,

I stood and left the garden as the sky grew darker overhead.

Chapter 255: A Night with the Gang

– Frey Starlight's Pov –

Lately, fragments of old memories I thought long buried had begun resurfacing .. memories of my high school days, hanging out with friends, and the carefree moments that once defined my life.

Perhaps my ongoing effort to adapt to this new reality has stirred those echoes from the past ... especially now.

It was the weekend. We were allowed to leave the temple for a few days if we wished, or just stay holed up in our rooms ... something I usually would have done.

But not this time.

Standing in front of a towering skyscraper, I stared in silence. Snow was on my right, Ghost on my left.

We weren't the only ones. Danzo, Ragna, and even Dawn were with us.

"We're here! Come on, everyone!"

Danzo called out cheerfully, leading the way as we followed. We now stood at the entrance of his home, right in the heart of Belgrade's capital district.

And yes—it was exactly what it looked like.

A few days ago, while the elite class guys were still licking their wounds from that humiliating defeat at the hands of the girls, Danzo ... realizing most of us weren't planning to leave the temple offered to host a sleepover.

Honestly, I had no real reason to accept or decline. In the past, I would've refused, arguing I didn't want to form bonds with characters from my own story. But things had changed. And so, here I was.

"This whole building is your house?"

Dawn asked, visibly impressed, as he looked up at the massive structure that towered above us.

Danzo replied casually, "Yep. I live here with my father. We own the entire building, but we only use one floor."

"Amazing," Snow commented.

He managed to keep a neutral expression, but I knew he was the most affected. After all, he'd spent most of his life without a home.

Without thinking, I gently patted his shoulder.

No need to hide it, my dear hero .. I understand more than anyone.

Snow seemed like he wanted to say something but chose to remain silent, as if coming to terms with something unspoken.

Inside the building ... which apparently was Danzo's house ... we were greeted by a few sharply dressed individuals in formal black suits, each bearing the emblem of a silver dragon. I assumed it was the symbol of Danzo's father's guild.

They didn't approach us once they saw Danzo among us, allowing us to proceed to the elevator without interruption.

Danzo pressed the button for the 27th floor.

"Why the 27th floor?" Snow asked.

"When we moved in, we just picked a random floor. Ended up on 27, so we stuck with it."

"That's a weird way to decide where you'll spend the rest of your life..."

"Does it really matter, though?"

The elevator carried us up.

Even though most of the elite class guys were here, there were some notable absences. The prince, for one. I figured Danzo wasn't quite sure how to invite someone of his status.

And then there was another name missing...

"Where's Daemon?"

The moment I asked, Danzo sighed with clear irritation.

"I did invite him. But the one thing he wanted... wasn't available."

"And what was that?"

Danzo recalled what the blond tank had asked him.

"He wanted to know if any girls would be coming. When I said no, he told me he wasn't interested in sleeping over with a bunch of guys."

"Ah..."

I could understand Daemon's sarcasm. Despite his age, who would've guessed he was that type?

"Screw him. It's not like we need some brainless musclehead around anyway."

Danzo grumbled. Ghost looked like he was about to say something, but I stopped him. I knew exactly what he was going to point out.

No need to remind Danzo he's also a musclehead.

Anyway, once we finally reached the floor, the elevator doors opened ...

And what we saw next was the last thing I expected to witness today.

A hulking man stood in the hallway. There had to be a limit to how many muscles one body could carry ... but this guy looked like he'd broken that rule and eaten bodybuilders for breakfast. His chest alone was about the size of my entire torso.

But that wasn't the shocking part.

It was the frilly pink kitchen apron barely clinging to his waist... and the gleaming bald head catching the light like a polished gem.

Standing before us was none other than Adam Smasher ... Danzo's father.

"Ooooh! Danzo, you finally brought your friends!"

The infamous leader of the Silver Dragon Guild had come to welcome us himself.

Just... not in the way anyone expected.

That apron certainly didn't suit the image of a man who led a powerful guild. But the aura surrounding him didn't lie ...not for a second.

"Dad! What are you doing?!"

Danzo yelled at his father, who only laughed in response.

"I made dinner for you all! Look at you skinny runts ... where are your muscles? Where's your manhood?!"

We all greeted the hulking tank of a man, but it was clear we were far too scrawny to catch his eye ... especially Ghost, whom Adam smacked on the head the moment he saw him. For a brief moment, he actually thought Ghost was about to die... from the sheer lack of muscle and how thin his body was.

Danzo was the only one who barely met the standards of his muscle-obsessed father.

Eventually, Danzo shoved him aside, trying to get rid of him.

Adam Smasher kept laughing until the end. He genuinely looked happy seeing his son bring home this many people.

Weird as he was, there was no denying it ... he truly loved his son.

"Sorry about that, guys... Let's head to my room. It's just through that door over th—"

Danzo turned to gesture at the room behind him, only to find me already standing in the doorway.

I'd opened it without thinking, and now everyone was staring.

"What?"

I instantly realized my mistake and scrambled to cover it.

"Sorry for opening the door... I just had a feeling it was your room."

Of course, that was a lie ... I already knew the layout of this place from using the third-person pov on Danzo before.

They didn't know that, though. I had to be more careful moving forward.

Luckily, no one suspected anything, and we entered the room without issue.

"Your dad's amazing," Dawn commented. "I never thought I'd see the legendary Adam Smasher wearing a kitchen apron."

"He does this from time to time," Danzo replied. "Especially since Mom passed away... It's just the two of us now."

"Oh... Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a bad memory."

"It's fine. It happened a long time ago. Doesn't really matter anymore."

Danzo smiled and quickly changed the subject.

Still, what he said gave me a new insight into his character—his mother had passed away.

My respect for Adam Smasher rose unconsciously in that moment. What a father.

The night was just beginning, and we hadn't even started yet. But somehow, after Danzo mentioned his mother, the conversation naturally drifted toward deeper topics. There was a lot we didn't know about each other, after all. Plenty to talk about, plenty to do.

Time flew by, and to my surprise, I found myself genuinely enjoying the sleepover.

They might be fierce warriors... but they were still just teenagers barely eighteen.

Guys their age were bound to enjoy themselves and forget the weight life had thrown on their backs.

Me, on the other hand—I was an old man in a young body. I was worried I wouldn't be able to fit in.

But thankfully... that fear faded quickly.

Turns out there was still a kid somewhere deep inside me. And moments like these helped me forget, if only for a while, the looming problem I had to solve within the next twenty days.

Surrounded by friends... I felt like I'd just started living.

Chapter 256: A Smile in the Dark

Far from Belgrade's city center, where Frey currently was...

Inside the silent temple, where only streetlamps lit the vacant roads past midnight...

Within the Elite Dormitory, a young maid walked quietly through the corridors where the students slept.

She gently opened one of the doors to check on the person she was assigned to care for.

But the bed was empty.

"My lady?"

She called out, scanning the room.

The place was dark, so she instinctively reached for the light switch... but nothing happened.

It was as if a cocoon of darkness had swallowed every source of light.

"My lady, where are you?"

She asked again, forming a blade of wind aura in her left hand—hidden behind her back.

Eyes wary, she surveyed the surroundings, ready for anything.

But then a chilling laugh echoed through the room.

The sound didn't come from one place. It came from everywhere ... all at once.

It wasn't the gentle voice of the princess she was used to serving.

It was the laugh of a wicked witch.

That was the terrifying part ... the way it resonated from every corner of the darkness around her. As if dozens of voices were laughing in unison.

The maid tensed, completely thrown off by the eerie situation.

"My lady... please... come back to your senses."

The maid pleaded with her lady ... and the reply came swiftly, whispered right beside her ear.

"Why?"

Every hair on the maid's body stood on end as the battle-hardened servant lashed out toward the voice, only to slice through empty air.

"Wrong! Try again!"

"Over here!"

"Here~!"

In her growing panic, the maid didn't realize how completely the darkness had enveloped the room. Every source of light had been smothered.

She began to feel something circling her, the sound of the princess's voice echoing from all directions. No matter where she turned, she couldn't find her.

A suffocating pressure squeezed her chest ... fear and confusion wrapping around her like chains. Instinct drove her to flee, but it was too late. She was already surrounded.

Then, without warning, the princess screamed:

"Time's up!"

Like a game ending ... or a turn coming to a close.

The maid hadn't found the princess... and now it was the princess's turn to find her.

With a playful tone, Sansa's voice echoed through the darkness.

"My turn~"

In an instant, the maid's eyes widened. Something brushed her heart in a flash of unnatural sensation.

She glanced down ... and saw nothing.

But she felt it.

Dozens of jagged, spear-like tendrils erupted from the void and pierced her body, her blood mixing with the shadow, forming a formless, colorless sludge that dissolved into the darkness.

She died instantly, still standing.

And the princess? She had been standing right in front of her the whole time ... wearing her nightdress, a wide smile stretched across her face.

Though in that abyssal darkness, no one could see it.

But one victim wasn't enough. She wanted more .. needed more. Fortunately, the Elite Dormitory was full of people to play with.

She was just about to move... when something tore through the darkness and sent her flying backward.

He appeared like a ghost.

His crimson eyes scanned the maid's lifeless body, then flicked to the princess.

There was no way to read his expression beneath that mask—but his eyes said enough.

He clenched his daggers and cursed under his breath.

"Why... why did it have to be now of all times?"

Why did she lose control... only when he wasn't there to stop it?

"Come play with me~"

Sansa giggled, her presence vanishing as her voice danced through the shadows.

But Oliver Khan stood firm, eyes tracking something darting through the black.

"Come back to your senses, Sansa... this isn't you."

He paused, then corrected himself, adjusting his stance.

"Actually... it's best if you don't ...You're not ready to bear the weight of taking a life."

No sooner had he spoken than the same sharp tendrils of shadow surged toward him. But he was already gone ...vanishing, only to reappear behind the princess.

With a clean swing, he tried to end it right then ... but her hardened shadows blocked his blade completely.

"..."

He attacked again. So did the shadows.

Sansa darted like a demon through her veil of black, and they clashed in bursts of speed. Her projectiles were fast—faster than most could react—but they never touched him.

And Oliver... couldn't break through her ironclad defense.

"She's gotten stronger..."

He analyzed the fight coldly.

Though he wasn't going all out, it didn't change the truth: Sansa had just fended off a fully awakened SS ranked opponent.

An impossible feat under normal circumstances.

But it was happening now.

Those cursed black tendrils closed in, joined by dozens of thorned spikes meant to kill him, just as they had the maid.

Oliver crossed his daggers, his crimson eyes flashing.

Aura surged violently around him ... and in an instant, he moved faster than the eye could follow.

His arms danced like serpents, weaving dozens of explosive blue lines through the air.

One strike ..faster than lightning ,ripped the darkness apart, carving through the veil of shadow and dragging the terrified princess out of her lair.

His dagger left a deep red gash across her chest, and she collapsed unconscious into his arms.

Oliver gritted his teeth, holding Sansa's limp body close ... the same girl he had just struck down.

With the darkness gone, the light returned ... revealing the catastrophic destruction left in their wake.

Sansa's shadows had cloaked everything—silent, suffocating, absolute.

But when the light returned... the truth was laid bare. The place was devastated.

The wound Oliver had carved into Sansa's chest slowly faded, vanishing completely without even leaving a scar.

He had made sure not to strike too deep.

But that kind of recovery ...instantaneous, flawless was not something a human should be capable of.

And yet, that wasn't the real problem.

The true issue... was that someone had died tonight.

"You've crossed the line, Oliver Khan."

A third voice spoke from the darkness, though Oliver had sensed his presence long before.

"I know," he replied simply ...still holding Sansa in his arms.

Behind him stood the head of the temple.

Ivar Valerion.

He had witnessed everything.

"Her powers are beyond control," Ivar said coldly.

Oliver's reply came firm and immediate.

"It's too early to say that."

"No. It's not.

Look beneath your feet, at the blood.

Look at the maid's corpse lying in front of you. Isn't that enough?"

"..."

A long silence followed.

Then Ivar sighed.

"You know what must be done."

Oliver remained stubborn ... he always was when it came to Sansa.

But this... this wasn't a decision he could make alone.

He nodded.

"I know."

His gaze dropped to the unconscious girl in his arms.

"There's no place left for her in this temple anymore..."

Chapter 257: A Quiet Night (1)

— Frey Starlight's POV —

It was past midnight.

Darkness blanketed the city, and most sane people had already gone to sleep. Among them was Adam Smasher, who'd turned in early after preparing a high-calorie dinner packed with supplements—clearly designed to maintain that monstrous physique of his.

As for us, we barely managed to eat half of what he served.

Feeling full to the brim, we wandered around with the rest of the guys, exploring the upper floors of this massive tower.

"Another residential area..."

We were now on the 34th floor, which was an identical replica of the 27th.

So far, this skyscraper featured dozens of residential floors with rooms styled like luxury hotels. Some floors were fully equipped training halls or diverse combat arenas. Occasionally, we'd stumble upon game rooms, or even a massive pool at the very top.

The whole place felt more like a high-end resort than a home.

"Man... your place could fit the entire Temple inside," Dawn muttered, holding his head in disbelief. Just one floor of this place could probably eclipse his entire home.

"It's impressive, I'll give you that. As expected from the Silver Dragon Guild," said Ragna, who didn't seem that surprised. Understandable, considering his father led a guild as influential as Danzo's family's.

"The lives of the rich really are something else..."

The moment the word "rich" was uttered, most of them turned toward me.

"Speaking of rich, we've got the direct heir of House Starlight with us. I wonder what his place looks like."

Thinking back to the mansion I'd stayed in for a while ... it was definitely luxurious... but I barely lived there. The Shadow Sect and the Temple felt more like home than that place ever did.

"Don't get your hopes up. My house is pretty average compared to this."

Even though I said that, it didn't seem like they bought it.

"Bullshit. Did House Starlight go bankrupt and we just didn't hear about it?" Danzo asked as I shrugged with a smile.

"I wouldn't know. I've always been the unwanted child, so I never got the best of things."

The moment I said that, they all gathered around me, intrigued.

"What's up?"

"Frey... since you brought it up, I've heard a lot of rumors about you," Danzo said, stepping closer now that he no longer held back his curiosity.

"What kind of rumors?"

"Stuff like... torturing maids," Danzo started.

"Or raping underage girls," Ragna followed.

"I heard you raped a mother in front of her son..." Even Dawn? What kind of messed-up rumor was that?

The only ones who stayed quiet were Snow and Ghost, simply watching.

I facepalmed, wondering just how vile a reputation I had.

"Where the hell do these damn rumors come from?"

"Don't get us wrong, Frey. We know you're not actual trash, but as they say .. no smoke without fire," Dawn pointed out.

He wasn't completely wrong, considering I'd only taken control of this body recently.

"My story isn't as exciting as you think," I replied calmly.

"Like hell it isn't! You still haven't told us what really happened in the Nightmare Lands!" Danzo said, fired up.

"Or the truth behind your strength," added Ragna.

As they kept throwing in mention after mention of the feats I'd achieved, I realized how much I'd really done in just two years.

In the end, I gave in to their pressure and started telling them everything about my life.

Sitting at the top of the tower, I felt like some old man surrounded by kids, telling them a fantasy tale ... my tale. A story of survival.

And to be honest... my story could probably make a great movie. One I'd actually enjoy watching myself.

It took me four full hours to share everything. I omitted details about the system and the mechanics behind it, of course, but I told them about the Shadow Sect and the horrors I'd faced.

At first, I recounted it all with indifference. But as I went on, it felt like a heavy weight was slowly being lifted off my chest.

When I finally finished, there was no applause ... just a long, heavy silence.

"That's it, guys. No sequels. I'm barely eighteen. Come back in a few years, maybe I'll have more."

I joked, and Snow was the first to laugh.

"That was one hell of a story."

"Yeah... I feel bad for ever calling you a sissy," Ragna said.

"Same. I was hoping to impress you with my own story, but compared to yours, mine sounds like child's play," Dawn added.

"But where's the part about rape? I feel like you skipped some important bits, Frey."

Danzo slapped my back, trying to pry something out of me.

Not that I was hiding anything ... it's just that I didn't actually know what the original Frey did. The memories I inherited were incomplete.

"It's been four hours already, what more do you want? My throat's gone dry."

"That's suspicious..." Danzo muttered, though he let it slide.

Thinking about it... I really do wonder if this body is still a virgin. Who knows what the old Frey did with it?

"Speaking of girls... we're surrounded by beauty from every angle. I can't help but wonder if any of you have certain thoughts, if you know what I mean."

Danzo laughed slyly, but everyone immediately denied it.

"Come on, don't be like that. What are you, gay's? Or maybe someone here's actually into guys?"

He turned toward Snow, who simply shook his head.

"We're all born with a primal instinct toward the opposite sex. But the environment we live in doesn't allow us to act on it. There's too much at stake."

A textbook answer from the prophesied hero. Well done, Snow.

He really had dedicated himself to his mission, but Danzo didn't seem satisfied with the answer.

"Bullshit. You say that while Lara Croft's been glued to your ass this whole time?"

"That's true. I heard you get love confessions constantly, from both inside and outside the temple!"
Ragna added.

With that face of his, the Church's hero was bound to gain too much attention.

"How about this ... we each name the girl we think is most attractive in the temple. Just to see where everyone stands."

Talking about women was bound to happen among men no matter the time or place.

"Are we seriously going to rate the girls like they're products on a shelf?" Dawn asked.

"What's wrong with that? I'm sure they do the same with us," Danzo replied.

"I wonder about that..."

"Anyway, let's start! You first, princess."

Danzo went straight for Snow.

It felt like we were about to do something stupid at four in the morning.

After a bit of pressure, Snow sighed and finally gave his answer.

"Seris."

"What!?"

"Seriously?"

Everyone was shocked.

Seris was a reasonable choice, sure. She was beautiful, but maybe they expected something more unique from the Church's golden boy.

"You're more normal than I thought..."

"I just answered your question," Snow muttered, clearly not interested in pushing the conversation further.

Maybe he picked her at random since she's the most well-known. Ironically, in the original draft I wrote, he does end up with her...

Then the others followed with their picks.

Dawn also said Seris.

"Her beauty's undeniable, but I'm more curious about what lies beneath that icy mask she wears all the time."

Ragna went with Clana Starlight, surprisingly enough, saying he found her attractive.

Danzo shocked us all by choosing Selena—the witch he always bickered with.

It's worth noting that Ghost had vanished ever since I finished telling my story. I assumed he went to bed, so we didn't get a word from the silent assassin tonight.

Now, all eyes were on me.

Chapter 258 A Quiet Night (2)

-Frey starlight POV-

...

"This is stupid, guys. No matter what I say, it won't mean anything ... I'm not in love with any of them."

"Stop dodging and spit it out already," Danzo pushed.

After a moment of thought, I finally gave them what they wanted. Whatever happens, happens.

"If we're talking about personality, the princess is the one I feel most comfortable with. But if we're talking about my personal preferences in terms of looks and body... then I'd choose Uriel Platini."

The first had the personality most compatible with mine. The second had the mature, full figure that topped them all.

"A very detailed answer..."

"Older women, huh? Frey, you really are something."

Uriel was five years older than us, so their reactions were only natural.

"You're the ones who wanted an answer. Deal with it."

"Very on-brand, Frey. Nothing about you is ever normal. But Uriel? You've got good taste. That chest of hers is a dangerous weapon, hehehe..."

After some more shameless banter, everyone eventually passed out. By the time it hit five in the morning, they were all asleep.

Lying awake, I was the only one left sitting at the top of the tower, watching the sunrise in the distance, completely unable to sleep.

"This damn insomnia..."

My thoughts wandered back to everything that had happened... and what awaited me once I returned to the temple.

I was still trying to adapt to this new life. I'd already taken some major steps forward...

But I couldn't help wondering ... where would it all lead?

The overthinking kept me up. Insomnia gnawed at me as I sat alone, welcoming the first rays of the morning sun.

"What's got you up this late?"

Apparently, I wasn't the only one.

Snow appeared behind me, hands in his pockets.

"You couldn't sleep either?"

"Yeah... Sleeping's become a real challenge lately."

We both sat in silence, gazing at the horizon. The height of the tower offered us a breathtaking view of the vast capital, Belgrade.

"So, what's on your mind?" I asked.

"A lot of things... mostly the weight of the responsibility that's been put on me lately."

To be the hero of the empire ... placed on the same level as the first Emperor, Kazis Valerion... It was a burden only a few could understand.

"What about you?"

I responded with a light smile.

"My problems seem small compared to yours... Let's just say I'm trying to find a reason to keep living."

He chuckled too.

"Never figured you were the type to have an existential crisis."

"I'm only eighteen ... just a kid, really. But I've lived a bad life," I replied.

"We all make mistakes, but you're a good guy, Frey."

"Heh... I'm not sure you really know me, then."

"I think I do."

I turned toward Snow after hearing those words.

"It might sound strange, but I feel like I understand you. I've felt that way ever since our fight at the Victoriad finals."

I was honestly surprised to hear him say that.

I didn't think he'd sensed it too ...even if vaguely .. the fact that we were two sides of the same coin... except he was the superior version.

"We both gave it everything we had in that battle..."

Our swords had spoken more truth than anything else. After mimicking Snow through Shadow Adaptation, I saw the world through his eyes.

And somehow, he saw it through mine.

I smiled wider and lowered my head, gazing at the vast space below us.

"It was a good fight... except you didn't go all out."

I said it calmly, and Snow's golden eyes widened.

"I..."

"No point in denying it. You said it yourself ... we already know plenty about each other."

He went quiet for a moment, his gaze shifting before he nodded slowly.

"It's not like I held back on purpose..."

"I know."

"I still can't control that power."

"You will. Eventually."

"You're way too understanding."

Snow laughed, and I joined him.

I already knew about his true form .. his King of war state. His strongest form.

That was the peak of Snow's power, and he didn't use it against me in the finals.

If he had, I wouldn't have been able to defeat him... but it seems he had his reasons for holding back. So i didn't judge him .

Just like how he didn't judge me for the innocent blood I spilled that day...

"I doubt we're falling asleep anytime soon. What do you say? Want to fight until we both pass out?" he suggested.

"That's a masochistic way to knock yourself out, man... but sure, I'm in."

Snow leapt back, and with a wave of his hand, summoned Vermithor, the sacred sword.

Meanwhile, Balerion extended from my hand as if responding to the call.

"This whole place is basically a training ground, so we can cut loose a little. Just don't go overboard," Snow said as he stretched his limbs to warm up.

"Relax. I'm not the type to destroy other people's property."

A violet aura surged around me as I raised my blade and pointed it at him.

"But make no mistake, Snow..."

I smiled.

"Even with that hidden power of yours ... you won't beat me."

Snow chuckled as he heard that.

"I guess I'm not the only one keeping secrets."

After that, neither of us said another word.

The only sound echoing from the top of the Silver Dragon Guild Tower that morning... was the clash of swords, steel, and surging auras.

In the end, we both collapsed on the cold floor and fell asleep ...right there, side by side ... after hours of sparring.

The sun had risen high, and the clock struck eight.

Off to the side, a towering man—well over two meters tall—watched in silence. He had been the first to sleep and the first to rise: Adam Smasher.

He gave a nod of approval after witnessing the intensity of the duel.

The leader of the Silver Dragon Guild had never imagined he'd live to see teenagers, barely eighteen, fighting on par with his own level at that age.

"The son of Abraham... and the hero of this era."

With those words, Adam Smasher turned and vanished, leaving us passed out on the floor of his home.

"My son still has a long road ahead of him... if he ever wants to stand among them."

This generation... might just be the strongest in the last three centuries.

...

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...

Time slipped by.

In the end, Snow and I returned to the Temple draped in lingering shadows, having barely caught two hours of sleep before the others shook us awake.

"What the hell were you two doing? You look like the walking dead."

"..."

The sleepover had ended as quickly as it began .. and just like that, we were back at the temple.

All I wanted was to collapse into bed and finally sleep.

But even that... had become a luxury.

Because the first thing that greeted me upon my return ... was the news that the princess had withdrawn from the temple.

I smacked my forehead and swore under my breath.

I was gone for one day... and this is what I come back to?

The target of my mission had vanished ... slipped right through my fingers while I wasn't even around.

"Damn it..."

Another curse escaped me. I had seriously underestimated things this time.

Now I had to reach the princess ...under Maekar's nose himself.

"Spare me this nonsense..."

All I wanted... was just a few hours of sleep.

Chapter 259: Fifteen Days of Darkness

— Frey Starlight's POV —

By the time I returned to temple grounds, Sansa was already gone.

Her withdrawal carried heavy consequences, especially given her noble status. The instructors claimed it was only temporary ... that she'd return eventually.

But anyone with half a brain could see the lies in their words. They didn't even bother to explain why she left.

"Something happened the night I was gone."

Before I realized it, my fist had clenched tight enough to nearly crack the desk in front of me.

Seated in class, my eyes drifted to her empty seat.

Maybe... if I had taken the mission seriously from the start. If I'd declined that sleepover ... maybe I could've prevented all of this.

Main Mission: Eliminate the Darkness of the Imperial Family (18 Days Remaining)

What now?

Should I head to her family's estate? There's no way they'd let me see her. Even imagining a way past their defenses was a stretch ... their guard would be at full alert.

I cursed under my breath, trying to think.

I was sure the me from before the Victoriad wouldn't have stumbled into a mess like this.

Lost in thought, I was snapped back to reality when something slammed into my desk.

"Frey Starlight, am I boring you so much that your mind has to wander this far?"

"Ah ... apologies, Miss Sophia..."

"Focus. You never know... even these dull lectures might just save your life one day."

"Of course."

I smiled politely, hoping she'd just move along. As attractive as Sophia was, she could be a pain ... and her lessons were only useful for Wave Controllers anyway.

Once she walked off, I returned to what mattered.

If I wanted answers, I needed to investigate. And that meant heading to the scene of the incident.

Sansa's room.

— Midnight —

As the night settled in, I stood facing the left wall of my room.

The elite dorms were fully equipped—private kitchen, bath, even a small training area.

What mattered most now was that our rooms were directly connected. I was ranked first in our class.
She was second.

Which meant her room was right next to mine.

This wall... was the only thing between us.

If there was any place to find clues, this was it.

With Balerion in hand, I quietly pierced the wall ... just enough to create a small passage into her room.

The temple's walls were built to endure just about anything... but not Balerion.

Breaking into a girl's room wasn't ideal, but I had no other choice.

I stepped through, expecting little.

But what I found left me speechless.

"...Where am I?"

I asked the words aloud without thinking.

This wasn't an elite dorm room anymore. The space was swallowed in darkness, dense with an eerie power that devoured all light.

The room was far too large. At least four times the size of a normal one.

That shouldn't have been possible.

The air was thick with destruction. Debris littered the ground. Bloodstains splattered across the walls and floor. The remnants of dark aura still lingered like a haunting echo.

"From the outside, it looks normal... but in here?"

Some kind of spatial distortion? A manipulation of dimension?

Whatever it was, it painted a clear picture.

"A battle took place here."

What truly shocked me was that Sansa's shadows still remained. They hadn't faded.

Of course... they were hers.

I approached one of the floating tendrils, slowly reaching for it as a veil of black aura formed around my hand.

Since reaching the first stage of Shadow Adaptation, I'd gained access to its superior properties. For now, I could only merge my shadow into my body to amplify my strength and aura.

But even so... I should be able to exert some control over any nearby shadow.

I reached out ..

The shadows reacted instantly.

They lashed at me like serpents, and if it weren't for Balerion still fused to my arm, I might've been impaled.

"Shadows that move on their own... like a creature with its own will."

Think, Frey.

There was too much blood here.

"Sansa attacked someone ... and the fight was one-sided."

Judging from the blood...

"She seriously injured them. Maybe even killed them."

But the claw marks and damage to the ground said otherwise. Whoever she fought wasn't weak ... they fought back, hard.

"...Someone else intervened and ended it."

Someone powerful.

The blurry image in my mind was starting to come into focus.

Sansa had lost control—and done something unforgivable.

And the temple had no choice... but to send her away.

I crouched in the middle of the room ...a space that felt cut off from the world ...trying to figure out how to deal with this mess.

"...Useless."

I sighed, giving in to the frustration, and pulled up the system interface.

Time to cheat again.

> Random Advice : 500 Achievement Points

Direct Advice : 1000 Achievement Points

The prices had jumped ridiculously, making me hesitate.

Random Advice offered the safest route ... but always in the form of a cryptic riddle I could never fully decipher.

Direct Advice were blunt and clear ... but they always came with a brutal challenge I'd be forced to face afterward.

Honestly, I never understood any of the riddles anyway.

So this time, I chose the direct Advice.

"Alright, let's do it..."

How do I deal with the darkness of the royal family?

The system glowed the moment I submitted the question.

> Meet the princess 14 times over the course of 14 mornings.

On the 15th night, go to her. There, you'll find your answer.

...

...

...

I stared blankly at the screen, resisting the urge to slam my fist through it.

Yes, the instructions were clear. But the real issue was still the same.

I was struggling just to meet her once .. now I had to somehow sneak in 15 times?

They really want me to infiltrate the emperor's estate ... the most secure place in the entire empire.

I ran a hand through my hair, then stood up.

"No other choice."

Come to think of it... the Ultras had pulled it off once. They even managed to kidnap the princess. So why couldn't I?

I was doing this. No matter what.

Chapter 260: The Moon Palace Infiltration

Once I made up my mind, I spent the day at the temple planning everything and informing people about my "planned absence" to avoid raising suspicion.

I was dead serious about breaking into the emperor's home tonight. And no ... it wasn't a joke.

The imperial fortress stood in the northern part of the capital, Belgrad.

To get there faster, I used one of the teleportation gates connecting the temple and the city.

Wearing plain black clothes, I moved through the capital's early-morning streets.

Infiltrating the emperor's estate at dawn...

Yeah. I was definitely losing my mind.

But I had no other options.

The capital was vast and advanced, far more so than anywhere else I'd been.

It took nearly an hour to reach the Valerion family's private sector.

From a hilltop, I finally saw it ... the view I'd once written about myself.

The wonder of House Valerion.

Unlike other noble territories, the Crownlands were home to towering castles that looked like they belonged to another era.

Among them stood three particularly grand palaces ... one to the west, one to the east, and one to the north.

But the real spectacle was the climate.

The western palace was buried in snow year-round, locked in an eternal winter.

The eastern one basked under scorching heat, like summer never ended.

And the northern one? Calm and temperate.

Despite being just a few hundred meters apart.

They said the land had been this way for centuries ... ever since a battle between monstrous Awakened scarred the earth so deeply, the effects never faded.

My destination was the snow-covered western palace ... Moon Palace, Sansa's residence.

All I could do was pray I wouldn't be struck down the moment I got close.

Moving quickly, I approached the front gates.

The place looked more like a military base than a residence. No one was even allowed near it.

Standing before the massive gates were two towering guards radiating raw, explosive aura.

If these were just the gatekeepers, it was clear how overwhelming the Valerions really were.

And here I was, knocking on their front door.

It reminded me of the vision I'd seen of my father storming House Starlight. The only difference... was that I didn't have the power to stand before giants like Maekar.

As I got closer, one of the guards flared his aura ... an instant warning.

"Turn back, boy. You're trespassing on royal grounds."

And this wasn't even the inner courtyard.

I raised my hands in surrender and gave a sheepish grin.

"My apologies—I'm Frey Starlight!. A friend of the princess."

I spoke confidently as the guards exchanged looks at my words.

"The princess withdrew from the temple without any warning, so I came to check on her. As her friend, I mean no harm."

I was gambling on my status as a young lord of a noble house carrying some weight.

But of course...

"Turn back. Even if you're the young lord of House Starlight, this is the Emperor's land. Your status means nothing here."

Stubborn to the core.

"Are you sure about that? What do you think the princess will say when she finds out you kicked her only friend off her doorstep?"

I tried every approach I could think of, but nothing worked. And worse ... this was the only path I could take.

The royal estate was protected by a celestial dome similar to the one above the temple. That gate was my only way in.

I hoped that a more assertive tone might make them reconsider, but all I got in return were their raised spears.

"One last warning. Turn around yourself, or we'll make you. The choice is yours."

I'd hit a wall with these damn guards.

They weren't budging, no matter what I said.

"No other way, huh..."

I sighed, annoyed .. then the air around us shifted.

"Come, Balerion."

Some people only understand the language of force.

The two guards were probably A+ rank. Strong for gatekeepers, sure ...but that didn't mean much to me.

With a single step, I was already between them.

"What the—?!"

A teenager not even half their age brushing past them like it was nothing .. it was enough to make them realize how serious this was. One instantly cloaked his spear in flames. The other conjured light.

They both thrust at me, but only hit the afterimage I left behind after leaping into the air.

With a single dark slash, I unleashed a wave of aura that engulfed them both, knocking them out cold.

I made sure to hit them hard enough to knock them unconscious and save myself the time.

The moment they fell, I dashed inside at full speed, summoning the Dark Sister to boost my aura and push my speed to insane levels.

Like a shadow, I passed unseen through the royal grounds .. one building after the next.

No one even noticed me.

I wished it would stay that way, especially as I reached the snow-covered palace ahead.

"I have to see her today."

The system's advice demanded I meet the princess for 15 days in a row.

If I failed today, I wouldn't have enough days left to complete it.

I prayed my full strength would be enough.

Snow flew past me as I surged forward, wrapped in black light. But the deeper I went, the stronger that suffocating pressure became.

I could feel eyes watching me from the shadows ... many of them.

Not one or two, but so many powerful presences that it genuinely made my skin crawl.

But for some reason, none of them attacked. And that... let me keep moving forward.

There was no turning back now.

After piercing through the final stretch, it finally came into view ...

Moon Palace, blanketed in eternal snow.

It towered ominously before me, radiating such a sinister aura that I instinctively wanted to retreat.

But that place was my target.

With one leap, I launched myself toward one of the open windows up high, successfully infiltrating Moon Palace.

The place I had only seen through the old Frey's memories .. here I was, stepping inside with my own feet.

As soon as I entered, I dismissed Dark Sister and was about to do the same with Balerion—my goal had been achieved, after all.

The palace was silent, desolate... as if everyone had abandoned it.

I took a step into the dim hallway ..

And froze.

Cold sweat trickled down my spine. Every hair on my body stood on end.

A killing intent ... so dense and heavy, it nearly crushed me on the spot.

It was like thousands of worms crawling across my skin, threatening to devour me whole.

I couldn't move. Not even a twitch.

"You might be just a brat barely out of childhood... but you've got some sense."

Most rookies would've lunged at him on sight ... unable to even sense or comprehend the murderous aura pressing down on them.

With half a smile, still paralyzed, I slowly responded—my eyes shifting to the corner of my left vision.

"Of course. I'm not exactly eager to die today."

Only an idiot would pick a fight with the Grand Warden himself—Oliver Khan.

He drew his daggers, the blades glowing faintly in the gloom of the empty palace.

"Unfortunately, you are going to die. Right here. Right now."

CLANG!

Steel clashed in a flash.

I barely managed to intercept his strike with Balerion, but the impact alone sent me flying across the hallway and slamming into a wall.

Just one strike ... and he wasn't even serious.

But my arm felt like it had been shattered.

"Shit..."

I'd really found myself the worst possible opponent.

Now I understood why none of the other strong auras had moved earlier.

They didn't have to.

Because he was here.

And Oliver Khan... was more than enough to handle any intruder.

His crimson eyes gleamed at me in the dark.

And I knew—he wouldn't be holding back anymore.