

VILLAIN 261

Chapter 261: A Step Into the Darkness (1)

– Frey Starlight's POV –

Face to face with Oliver Khan, whose suffocating killing intent still weighed down on me like a storm.

Just how many lives had he taken with those hands?

"You've really lost your way this time... Lord Starlight."

Oliver walked toward me in slow, deliberate steps, while I staggered back with a half-smile.

"I was just looking for a place to spend the holiday. Heard the winter atmosphere at Moon Castle is lovely this time of year."

"..."

He didn't respond with words ... but with something else entirely.

I barely leapt back in time to dodge his sudden strike. For a moment, I thought I had succeeded ...until the burning pain in my gut told me otherwise.

With a horizontal gash across my abdomen, I stumbled backward. Oliver followed immediately.

"Your senses are impressive."

I barely managed to block his daggers with my sword, struggling to hold my ground.

"What are you talking about? I failed to dodge that," I gritted out.

"I was aiming for your intestines."

Sparks burst from the clashing of metal as Oliver ramped up the speed of his strikes. All I could do was parry.

"Did you really think you'd walk out of here alive just because you're the young lord of House Starlight?"

Slash!

He continued tearing through me with ease.

The sound of clashing metal echoed throughout Moon Castle.

"If you thought your name alone would be enough... how disappointing."

It was humiliating ...how he managed to beat me down and mock me at the same time, while I could barely breathe under the pressure of his attacks.

With a sudden kick, he launched me into the wall once again.

Just a few seconds into the clash, and the place was already starting to crumble.

I gasped for air and stood, leaning on Balerion.

He'd asked me if I thought my status alone would keep me safe.

"To be honest... I didn't think so either."

Coming here like this, without a plan or backup ... that was sheer idiocy.

It was clear I couldn't get past Oliver Khan's eyes because of a skill he possessed:

'Soul Domain.'

He could extend his aura to cover a massive range. Anything that crossed that space—he would sense it instantly.

The only way to bypass it was to either have a skill stronger than his ... or simply be stronger than him.

And clearly, I had neither.

"Ordinarily, I wouldn't have come here this way..."

It was reckless. Completely reckless.

But the system's directive was the only clue I had.

I had no other options.

Clang!

I fought back with Balerion as the wounds on my body piled up one after another.

"Do you want to die?"

His daggers cut across my face ... he did it on purpose.

"Yeah... I did, actually."

Until recently, I really wanted to die.

"But I can't die yet."

Dying pointlessly like this wasn't an option.

"Then show me how you'll survive."

It hadn't even been ten minutes, and I was already covered in blood.

I had no idea what kind of performance Oliver wanted from me.

But somehow, it felt like he didn't actually want to kill me.

Oliver Khan wasn't known for talking ... only acting.

Toying with his opponents like this wasn't his style.

If he really meant to kill me, I'd be dead already.

I didn't know much about his character ... especially since in the version of the story I wrote, Sansa didn't survive.

The Oliver I knew and the one standing before me were vastly different.

But I was certain they were the same man. And that was the bet I made , the reason I hadn't used anything but Balerion and not the dark sister .

"Why did you come here, Frey Starlight?"

Boom!

Another explosion rocked the hall, splattering more of my blood across the floor. I kept fighting ...and talking at the same time.

"I came to see the Princess."

"And why do you want to see her?"

The conversation was turning strange. Oliver answered me so casually, as if we were on a stroll.

Meanwhile, I struggled just to stay upright under the pressure of his onslaught .. let alone speak.

How many injuries had I taken by now?

"I'm worried about her," I replied.

The truth was... I came because of the mission. But that wasn't a complete lie. If I could help the Princess, I would.

"I want to help her."

I said that, panting, as Oliver paused to look at me. I had no idea what expression he wore under that mask.

But those crimson eyes ... they never lost their glow.

"I see..."

He spoke calmly, while a terrifying blue aura swirled around his right dagger. The pressure of his aura lifted his long white hair into the air .. and I froze in place.

"Now... you may die."

I didn't even see how he moved his hand ... but his dagger shot out like a missile, aiming straight for my face.

Even with my Hawk Eyes, I could barely follow it.

In my current state, that would've killed me without a doubt.

"Damn it..."

I cursed, as everything turned black.

But it wasn't the usual darkness of losing consciousness... it was something else entirely.

Oliver Khan's explosive dagger stopped mere inches from my face ... ensnared by hundreds of black threads, cocooning it like a spider's web.

I recognized it immediately. That shadow ability...

"Frey!"

Sansa rushed toward us, her steps quick and sharp.

My battered body trembled as I looked up at her. I noticed small changes—her hair had darkened, and there were shadows under her eyes—but I was in no condition to dwell on the details.

"Hey... Sansa."

The princess frowned the moment she saw the state I was in.

I guess this scene had become familiar by now...

Sansa clenched her fist, and the shadows dispersed. Oliver's dagger clattered to the ground.

"What is the meaning of this, Oliver?"

He remained calm, just as he had the entire time he was beating the hell out of me.

"He committed a crime by trespassing into royal grounds."

"He's someone I know," she said firmly.

"Even so... he must be punished."

"And he already has been."

She pointed to the gashes and bruises from my 'friendly' exchange with Oliver.

Oliver stared at her in silence for a moment, then gave a slow nod.

"As you wish."

Satisfied, Sansa exhaled in relief and turned back to me.

"Sneaking into royal territory... I'm not sure whether to call you brave or just insane."

"Probably a little bit of both," I said, lifting myself up with effort. Then I dismissed Balerion too ... hoping to ease the constant pressure Oliver had been pouring over me.

Standing before the princess, I could finally get a proper look at the changes that had come over her.

It had only been a few days since our last meeting, yet she already looked different.

"Why did you come here, Frey?" Sansa asked, with Oliver still standing behind her.

"I came to see you, of course... You left without saying a word."

A brief silence.

"Are you... worried about me?"

She seemed genuinely surprised by the idea.

"Isn't that what friends are for?" I shrugged casually. Sansa gave me a small, quiet smile.

"But you're not really that kind of friend, are you?"

"What kind of scumbag do you take me for?"

I answered her question with another. She sighed, defeated.

"Fine, there was a bit of sincerity in what you said... Come on. You're my guest now."

Sansa turned and gestured for me to follow her.

Chapter 262: A Step Into the Darkness (2)

The princess had a strange gift for reading people's faces. The fact that she hadn't kicked me out meant that the mission wasn't the only reason I came here.

At the very least, it meant our bond wasn't a complete lie.

As she led the way, I was left alone with Oliver. Glancing at the masked man behind her, I couldn't help but think about the shift I'd seen in him.

"Hey... was that whole performance really necessary?"

Why did he play along with me up until now? I wanted to know the answer.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He feigned ignorance.

"Aren't you the Grand Warden? You're supposed to be at the Emperor's side, watching his back..."

What's with your obsession with Sansa?

I didn't expect him to respond. But he did.

"I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be."

A cryptic answer.

Oliver walked beside Sansa and tossed one final warning over his shoulder.

"Be careful... Frey Starlight. Your punishment may not be over—it depends on what you do next."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that..."

I quickly followed after them.

As we wandered through the cold halls of Moon Castle, I started to notice something strange.

"Do you usually live here alone?"

Aside from the three of us, the castle was completely empty.

"Um... normally, it's full of servants. But this time, it's empty because of some... circumstances."

I had a pretty good idea what kind of "circumstances" she meant.

Eventually, Sansa led us to what looked like a reception room.

I sat across from her, a wooden table between us.

Oliver Khan placed two cups of a green drink that I guessed was tea.

I glanced at the cup, then at the Grand Warden in turn.

"What? Don't you like tea?" he asked.

"I never said that..."

"Then drink it. It's the only thing I'm good at making."

The Grand Warden, preparing tea? That alone proved how empty the castle truly was.

For a second, I even feared he might've poisoned it...

But the content in my cup was identical to the one he served the princess.

Cautiously, I took a sip—only to be surprised by how good it tasted.

Sansa, who had been quietly watching me for a while, finally spoke.

"I suppose you're wondering why this place is so empty... and why I left so suddenly."

"I am," I replied simply.

"This is why."

She raised her palm, and black flames burst forth, spiraling into tendrils of shadow.

A wave of pressure rippled out, sending a chill down my spine.

"My powers... they've been getting harder to control. So I chose to isolate myself until I learn to fully contain them."

Her words were expected ... but I couldn't help but wonder if she was even allowed to share something like that with me.

"So that's why the castle is empty..."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Aren't you overreacting? You seem fine to me."

That was a lie, of course. It hadn't even been a week since we last met, yet she looked noticeably different ... especially her aura.

"It may be an overreaction... but it's better this way. I don't want anyone getting hurt because of me."

Her voice wavered slightly at the end.

"Did something happen recently?"

I tried nudging her toward the incident at the Temple, but she shook her head.

"Nothing happened. But..."

"But?"

She hesitated for a moment before locking eyes with me. That seemed to give her the push to continue.

"Lately... I've been able to sleep."

The moment she said that, I remembered how she used to be during the island trial—she never slept at all back then.

"That's a good thing, right?"

She nodded faintly. "Yes, but in return... I've started having nightmares."

"What kind of nightmares?"

A good friend probably wouldn't press her for details ... but I'm not that kind of friend. I needed to understand, for her sake.

Thankfully, our relationship was strong enough for her to feel safe telling me.

"Nightmares of when I was kidnapped. Of how I killed everyone... how I spilled their blood. And recently, I had a dream... a dream where I killed one of the maids."

The moment she said that, a realization struck me.

"May I ask... where exactly did that nightmare take place?"

I asked carefully. Her response came quickly.

"The Temple."

As soon as she uttered those words, I glanced at her, then at Oliver standing behind her.

He was staring at me with those crimson eyes, as if daring me to say another word ... one wrong move, and I'd lose my head.

Noticing the sudden tension in the air, Sansa spoke quickly.

"But they're just dreams. There's no need to worry..."

She really didn't know.

They were lying to her. Letting her believe everything was fine. Sansa wasn't stupid... had she really been fooled so easily?

I swallowed hard and played along.

"But staying here all alone... isn't it a little lonely?"

She turned toward Oliver.

"I have Oliver with me. So I'm not really alone."

"With a silent guy like him? I doubt he makes much of a difference. So, how about I make you an offer, Your Highness?"

"An offer?"

I smiled and gestured toward myself.

"How about I stop by from time to time? Keep you company so this cold castle doesn't feel so empty."

"But—"

"No worries. I can handle myself if anything happens. I've got Balerion, the Black Terror, with me ... and I'm not afraid to use it."

Sansa fell quiet for a while, clearly caught off guard by the offer.

She eventually looked to Oliver.

He stared at her in return.

And in that moment, he noticed the difference ... small, but undeniable. The princess seemed livelier today, more than she had in days.

And the reason... was me.

Oliver closed his eyes briefly before responding.

"As long as I'm around, and he only visits in the morning... I'll allow it."

The moment he said that, I struggled to hold back a grin of victory.

This was it .. I'd secured the chance to follow the system's advice properly.

"I promise I won't disappoint," I said.

Sansa looked at me in silence... then her eyes widened slightly.

"I look forward to it... but, Frey, you've been acting like nothing's wrong this whole time .. are you actually okay?"

"What do you mean?"

She pointed at me.

"You're bleeding... a lot."

"What?"

I looked down—and realized I was sitting in a pool of blood from my earlier wounds.

"Ah, damn it..."

And just like that, I collapsed from blood loss.

"This is really embarrassing..."

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Frey passed out in his chair.

Oliver Khan sighed, while Sansa rushed over to tend to him.

The Grand Warden watched the two of them in silence, thoughts swirling in his mind.

He had sworn—he would not fail this time.

This time... he would save her.

His only family.

Chapter 263: The King's Shadow (1)

15 Days Until the Mission Deadline...

Frey Starlight collapsed unconscious before both the princess and Oliver Khan.

Without hesitation, Sansa rushed to tend to him, doing what she could to stop the bleeding.

"He's lost a lot of blood... was all of this really necessary?" she asked.

"He broke the law. And he's paid the price."

It was necessary. Frey understood that well ... that much had become clear to the masked Warden during their brief encounter.

That confrontation had been more psychological than physical. Frey was capable of so much more, yet he allowed Oliver to wound him without much resistance.

In doing so, Frey conveyed his willingness to cooperate... to remain on the Grand Warden's good side. If he'd resisted in earnest, their clash could've brought the entire castle down.

Oliver ultimately decided to allow Frey to meet the princess again ... though only under his watchful eye.

Perhaps, just perhaps, this would help pull her out of her growing darkness.

That was the thought on Oliver's mind as he carried Frey's battered body to the front gate .. the very place where the young man had previously taken down two elite guards.

Oliver's Spirit Domain extended across the entire Moon Castle. And if necessary, he could expand it further, at the cost of tremendous aura consumption.

Nothing happened within his range without him knowing.

And yet, instead of returning to his usual post at the princess's side, Oliver turned toward a different destination.

Moving faster than even Madam A could track, he darted toward one of the most shadowed corners of the Valerion Province.

Within the suffocating dark, only the faint crimson glow of his eyes lit the way.

He stood still, gaze fixed on a single point in space.

"Show yourself."

His voice, calm as ever, carried a rare undercurrent of impatience.

And in response, a figure emerged from the gloom.

A shimmer of green light slid over the man's frame, gradually revealing him.

Tall, robed in black, and wearing a steel helm, the man stared back at Oliver with piercing pale green eyes.

"Your instincts are as sharp as ever."

The mechanical tone in his voice and the way he masked his presence left no doubt.

It was him.

Mist Umbra—the current Master of the Shadow Court.

"Seems your injury's healed up well."

Mist had taken a direct hit from Astaroth during the Empire's failed assault on the Ultras Continent. It had sidelined him for a long time .. but now the Empire's deadliest assassin had returned.

Mist and Oliver. Both silent by nature, neither particularly fond of pleasantries. The air between them was tense, heavy.

"What do you want?"

"The princess."

"I'm handling it."

"Are you?"

Mist circled him slowly.

"There have been signs. Many signs. And what have you done about them?"

Oliver remained silent.

"Nothing," Mist answered for him. "You've done nothing. You let emotion cloud your judgment, too blinded to act on even the simplest of truths."

The pressure between them thickened. Two SS ranked Awakened in one place wasn't something the land could take lightly.

"Did you really come here just to spout self-righteous nonsense?" Oliver asked, his tone edged with irritation.

"I came to tell you this: if you won't deliver the final blow, someone else will."

"I said I'm handling it. Are you planning to interfere with the contract I made with Maekar?"

The name dropped like a stone.

Mist hesitated for a brief moment ... but didn't falter.

"I don't know what agreement you struck with the Emperor. But it's time you started acting like yourself."

He stepped closer, until they stood face-to-face.

"Act like the assassin we trained you to be."

Mist's words tugged at buried memories ... ones Oliver had long cast aside.

"I no longer serve the Shadow Court."

"You can't run forever."

"Oh, I can. And if the Court wants my head... let them come take it."

Oliver brushed past him, voice low and deadly.

"If the Court comes after me, blood will be spilled. But whose blood... that's still undecided."

Mist said nothing. He wasn't ready ...not to challenge the man who was once his rival... and his friend.

"She's dangerous, Oliver," he warned, voice quieter now. "Open your eyes... before it's too late."

A final warning. Maybe even a last mercy.

"I told you ... I'm handling it."

"You'd better be."

With those words, Mist vanished entirely, leaving behind only a hazy afterimage of his aura.

Oliver didn't bother looking his way. He simply walked off in silence.

No one knew what was running through his mind as he pulled out an old pendant from his coat .. a delicate silver chain with an oval gem at its center.

He opened it.

Inside was a carefully preserved photograph. A woman in her prime, golden-haired with radiant amber eyes.

She looked just like Sansa, back when she was still full of life. Only older. More refined.

It was her mother.

Oliver gazed at the image for a moment, then closed the locket with renewed resolve.

That night, he continued what he had always done... until the very end.

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– Frey Starlight's POV –

10 Days Until the Mission Deadline

Five days had passed since I started visiting Sansa every morning.

Five days spent chatting for hours, waiting for something—anything—to happen. But so far, the only thing I gained was more hostile glares from Oliver Khan, who clearly regretted agreeing to my daily visits.

He must not have expected this outcome when he allowed it.

I kept thinking the direct advice's impediment would strike soon. But everything went... smoothly.

As if that future I had glimpsed never existed.

I sat in my room, still mulling over the cursed mission dropped on me like a noose.

Was this really it? Just talk to the princess for ten more days?

I tapped against my desk's worn wooden surface ... God knows how many times I've replaced it after smashing it to splinters.

It was midnight, and I couldn't sleep no matter what I tried.

No matter how much I replayed it, what I saw in that future vision... was a demon.

An entity far too powerful to be human.

Humans weren't supposed to host things like that ... not yet, at least.

There was a concept, far in the future, of people becoming vessels for demons... but that wasn't supposed to happen any time soon.

If what happened to Sansa was the same case—

Then her salvation was literally impossible.

And I couldn't do anything to stop it.

I found myself standing at a dead end.

Utterly helpless, with nothing left but to wait. Wait... and hope.

And hope was such a cursed thing.

But even with the little I had left, I decided to use everything at my disposal.

I opened the system interface and checked the affection-based abilities ... especially the one tied to Third-Person Perspective.

Thankfully, Sansa's affection points had already reached 50, unlocking the deeper version of the skill.

This time, I wanted to go further ... see what she saw.

Maybe it would bring me closer to the truth.

I took a deep breath and activated the Third-Person Pov... bracing myself for whatever came next.

Chapter 264: The King's Shadow (2)

But the image I expected ...the princess with her once golden hair now turned black never appeared.

Instead, as a phantom-like projection of myself, I drifted through a realm of endless darkness.

Void. Absolute void.

Wrapped in a cocoon of shadows, I began to wonder if the ability had malfunctioned or if something was interfering.

It had never behaved like this before.

And the longer I remained trapped in that abyss, the stronger a certain feeling grew inside me ..

An unbearable sense of unease.

As if something... or someone... was watching me from beyond the veil.

To make matters worse, I couldn't deactivate the Third-Person Pov. I was stuck.

Minutes passed.

Then hours.

And the fear only grew.

"Something is wrong..."

Where was I? What was this place?

Being stranded in the dark for this long... it was torture.

It felt like I was sinking deep into the bottom of the ocean, cut off from all light.

I tried to break free.

I fought.

I clawed and thrashed and pushed against the void...

Until something grabbed me by the throat.

A sticky, black hand clamped down on my neck. Its claws dug into my skin, and I couldn't even comprehend what was happening.

I was supposed to be a projection. Intangible.

But this pain—it was real.

So real.

I tried to grab at the hand crushing my windpipe, but it was useless.

The thing crawled over my skin, and a whisper echoed directly into my ear.

"Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die..."

The word repeated endlessly, a hushed mantra of death as the grip tightened around my throat.

I began losing consciousness, unable to speak or move.

All I could see was darkness... a hand tightening around my throat, trying to steal my life. And something—something—whispering in my ear.

At some point, I stopped hearing it chant for my death. Instead, I heard only the pounding of my heart, thundering in my chest.

My awareness began to fade completely... but in the final moment, a surge of intense blue light exploded, wrapping around my body, tearing away the black hand, and dragging me back to reality.

Seconds later, I jolted awake, falling violently from my desk chair, drenched in cold sweat.

I clutched my throat ... right where that hand had gripped me only to feel something slick and damp still clinging to my skin.

"...What just happened?"

That was the first question I asked.

But I froze again... when I saw something crawling along my arm.

Something black. Laced with red.

"A shadow...?"

No. It was the same thing that had tried to kill me moments ago.

"...Impossible."

I was in a ghost-like projection. None of this should've been possible.

And yet... there it was.

The claws that dug into my neck... the sticky black hand...

In a panic, I unleashed a full-force wave of violet aura ... my full power condensed into a single burst that instantly obliterated the mass of darkness clinging to me.

It evaporated in a blink, leaving me stunned where I stood.

Not because of what had just happened—

But because I recognized it. I recognized that power. That place.

That shadow.

"The King's Shadow..."

No...

"There's no way...!"

That kind of power shouldn't be able to be mimicked by a human.

How could a mere human replicate a power that only one of the strongest high demons in existence possessed?

A power that came directly from him.

I couldn't even bring myself to say his name ... afraid that doing so might trigger something unforgivable.

I wanted so badly to be wrong... but the reality was too clear, and what I felt just now was far too real.

With something like that involved, I could no longer rely on the direct advice alone to deal with what was coming.

That thing... had just nullified a system ability right in front of my eyes.

I had to be sure.

I needed to confirm the truth of what I'd just seen.

Without realizing it, I found myself preparing to use another Future Snapshot—my second since all this began.

"This is going to cost more achievement points..."

But I had no other choice at this point.

"Show me the future... ten days from now."

I spoke to the system, and in an instant, another 1000 achievement points were drained.

The world shifted around me as I swallowed hard, bracing for what I was about to see.

I even questioned whether what I was seeing counted as "the future." I knew little about time and space... wasn't the future supposed to be uncertain?

Was what I saw truly the future... or merely one of countless possibilities?

I thought hard about it... even as the scene began to take shape.

Once again, I was flying high above the Moon Castle ... or what was left of it.

This time, the future showed no mercy.

"The Valerion Domain..."

An entire province reduced to ash... a bloody massacre had unfolded inside.

Among the corpses, inside the ruins of the Moon Castle...

Two mutilated bodies lay in a pool of blood, limbs shredded, wounds grotesque.

The first was Oliver Khan.

And the second...

Was me.

"...I'm dead?"

I couldn't even be surprised.

Not before a guttural, inhuman roar shattered the air like a thunderclap.

In the distance, I saw a monstrous figure rise ... shadow swirling around it , and clash against a man descending from the sky, wielding a colossal thunder spear.

Maekar was fighting that thing.

Their battle shook the heavens.

A shockwave of overwhelming power threw me backward and .. I returned to the present.

Back in my room, frozen still, trying to process what I'd just witnessed.

"...I died. Sansa killed me."

So much for the "direct advice." To hell with that.

"I'm dead, you bastard system..."

Was that really it?

That simple?

"...No."

It wasn't enough.

Darkness swirled in my vision as thoughts exploded in my mind.

I couldn't die yet.

Not like this.

Not without doing something.

I found myself sprawled in my chair, staring blankly at the ceiling, a strained smile curling my lips.

"Looks like... I really will have to kill you, Sansa."

Chapter 265: Born from Darkness (1)

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– Frey Starlight's POV –

-9 Days Until the Mission Ends-

I didn't sleep at all that night.

Sunlight crept into my room, casting its golden glow as I sat motionless, drained by everything I'd seen the night before.

If my fears were even partially correct, then this mission might be far beyond my reach. No matter how strong I am, I can't take on a monster wielding a power tied to one of the Ten Upper Seats

My only option now is to trust the system—the same system that's guided me this far. If it assigned me this mission, then there must be a way to complete it, no matter how overwhelming it seems.

After all, it's been classified as a main mission, not a final one.

"There has to be a way."

That thought echoed in my mind as I left my room and headed toward the temple.

My daily routine was unchanged: I'd attend morning sessions at the temple, spend two hours visiting the princess, and then return to train with Melina and Snow.

That's what my life had become ... waiting for the obstacle the system's "direct advice" promised to throw in my path.

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– Sansa Valerion's POV –

Morning broke, ushering in another day.

I lay quietly on the bed in my small chamber—just one of dozens of empty rooms within the cold, deserted halls of Moon Castle.

The place was too quiet. And somehow, unbearably loud at the same time.

'Kill... death... blood...'

With a tired hand, I brushed my hair aside and looked at the strands between my fingers.

It was now jet black.

It felt like I was losing myself ... piece by piece. And that hurt. Because it meant losing the last fragment of her... my mother.

I couldn't even mourn properly. A chilling numbness had wrapped around my heart, stealing away everything except the void.

"Humans are not born equal."

I learned that the moment I came into this world as a princess—daughter of the most powerful man alive, the one who ruled above all.

People called it a blessing. A life to envy.

But the truth couldn't be further from that.

It was just another kind of curse.

Death... blood... kill...

"It started two years ago..."

On a bitter winter night, the winds howled through the Moon Castle... as everyone inside was taken ... kidnapped by monsters from the other continent.

They called me lucky to have survived.while the others died...

But—

"Did I really survive?"

The girl who returned that night ... was she still Sansa Valerion, the princess? Or something else entirely?

For two years, I couldn't sleep. I no longer needed food or water to survive.

These unnatural powers slowly separated me from the rest of humanity.

And I couldn't run from that reality anymore. I had been denied the world of dreams.

Until recently...

That familiar heaviness in my eyes... the urge to close them... it had returned.

And for a moment, I was happy.

"But even that simple gift came with a price."

I'd regained the ability to sleep .. but it came with voices. Whispers that sounded like a war raging inside my head.

'Blood... death... kill... destroy... TEAR THEM APART!'

Whose voice was it?

It never stopped.

It kept trying to plant those vile thoughts inside me .. even invading my dreams.

"Reality is a nightmare. And my dreams... are worse."

I resisted. I still do.

"I know I'm not alone..."

Oliver is with me.

I have friends.

The ones I met in the Elite Class...

"And Frey..."

I have a place to return to. Something to hold on to. Something that gives me a reason to fight.

But the drowsiness was stronger.

With bloodshot eyes, I tried to resist...

But I couldn't.

They shut at last .. and a single tear slipped down my cheek.

"I'm sorry..."

And just like that, the nightmare began again.

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Her body lay upon a cold, steel table beneath a piercing white light that blinded her golden eyes.

Surrounding her were dozens of masked figures, cloaked in black.

Their hands were soaked in crimson blood...

Lying on that cold surface... the princess was consumed by an agony beyond imagination. She had been forced to remain conscious as those monsters carried out their grotesque experiments on her.

They had sliced open her chest ... from just beneath her neck down to her stomach.

Her organs and torn flesh were strewn across the table, soaked in a terrifying pool of blood.

They cut so deep, their blades reached her barely beating heart. From above, a rounded object descended, placed directly atop it .. at that point, the pain had become so overwhelming that the princess could no longer grasp reality.

"She's enduring it better than we expected," one of the masked men remarked.

"Royal blood isn't something to take lightly," his companion replied.

They were thrilled.

At last, they had a subject who might survive their dark ambitions.

"But are we really placing something that valuable inside her?" one of them questioned.

"Do it. She's just a prototype. She'll die the moment her purpose is fulfilled."

The masked figures debated eagerly, while the princess heard nothing but a grating hum, a blinding light, and pain that devoured her soul.

At that moment, Sansa had no concept of what "pain" truly meant.

She had lived her entire life within the safety of the royal palace, cradled in her mother's warmth. She had known nothing but care and affection.

But now... she was shackled to a filthy table, wide awake, her chest sliced open.

Her skin was so delicate the scalpel glided through it like silk. The Ultras continued their savage procedure, cutting through her flesh as she watched, unable to stop the endless flow of her own blood.

Was it painful?

No .. pain was too mild a word for it. It was something far worse.

At first, she screamed, her voice echoing through the chamber ... until she nearly blacked out. But the Ultras didn't allow her that escape. They kept her awake, forcing her to endure it all.

Eventually, her throat went dry. The light faded from her eyes...

And something within Sansa died in that room.

She survived the experiment. Barely.

Afterward, they threw her back into her cell.

There, she clung to her mother like a lifeline.

The Ultras had abducted many ...Sansa, her mother, the servants of Moon Castle, and several distant members of the royal family.!

They all shared the same fate .. trapped inside a pitch-black prison.

Deprived of light. Stripped of all signs of civilization.

They endured... starving, unable to find even the smallest scrap to eat.

All they were given was foul, contaminated water.

And so the days dragged on... one after another.

Human bodies were resilient thanks to aura. But most of the captives were ordinary people. Non-combatants. They couldn't use their power .. not here.

As time passed...

The line between humans and beast grew thin. All that separated them were fragile mental barriers, barely keeping their primal instincts at bay.

But certain conditions can shatter those barriers.

Starvation to the brink of death ...one of the cruelest, slowest ways to die.

Paired with the psychological torment of isolation and darkness, they began to unravel, losing their minds piece by piece.

All it took... was one final push.

Just a spark to set the descent in motion.

After days of relentless hunger, the first to fall was a middle-aged maid from Moon Castle. Her body gave in to starvation ...and the poisoned water only hastened her death.

Her corpse was left there, lifeless. They didn't even have the strength to bury her.

Time continued its cruel march.

At first, they saw her as a person ... a familiar face they had lived beside.

But eventually... she became nothing more than a slab of meat.

Meat they had been denied for far too long.

Chapter 266: Born from Darkness (2)

One day, Sansa opened her eyes, having dozed off in her mother's lap ...only to be met with a nightmare.

Four men crouched over the corpse, tearing into it like starving beasts.

Their bloodstained mouths. Their monstrous, twisted expressions.

She saw everything with her own eyes ... eyes that had long grown accustomed to the darkness.

It was grotesque. Incomprehensible. Especially to someone like her, who no longer even felt hunger or thirst.

She buried her face in her mother's arms, unwilling to look any further.

But she was startled when she felt saliva drip onto her from above.

"Mother...?"

She whispered ...only to find her mother staring at the scene with eyes full of longing.

Sansa wasn't the only one whose body had been tampered with.

But she was the only one who survived it intact. The others... were left with nothing but bestial urges, stripped of reason.

And after one more week...

The prison descended into total savagery. Friends turned on friends. Companions tore each other apart.

With frail bodies, broken by starvation, they resorted to cannibalism ..blood spilled, mixing with the filth of the cold dungeon floor.

Even Sansa and her mother weren't spared.

The princess watched her mother turn into a ravenous creature, fighting over scraps of human flesh.

They slaughtered one another before her eyes.

And the worst part...

Was that her mother had joined them.

They devoured each other. They drank human blood without end.

They had numbered over a hundred in the beginning, but now... only a few dozen remained. As corpses piled up, the survivors turned the carnage into a feast .. gnawing on flesh, licking bone clean.

And when the meat was gone... and madness had fully consumed them... they became monsters .. creatures far removed from anything human.

They fought one another like beasts, and some even had sex in front of everyone...They raped one another, as screams echoed and hell consumed the place under the gaze of Sansa, who had long been abandoned by her mother.

With nothing left to hold on to, she found solace only in the darkness that wrapped around her like a shroud.

What her eyes beheld was nothing short of vile.

A sight she could neither accept... nor comprehend.

She rejected it.

Denied its reality.

And in response to her plea... the darkness awakened.

That same darkness they had lived in for so long came to life ..twisting, rising around her.

It had fangs... hands... and eyes that glared at the depraved husks that once called themselves human, before tearing through them one by one.

Blades of pitch-black shadow, swift as death itself, slashed through the mad crowd ...tearing bodies apart and splattering blood in grotesque torrents.

They all died.

All but her mother, who collapsed to the ground, trembling, paralyzed by what she had just witnessed.

"Mother..."

Sansa whispered through tear-filled eyes, reaching out with trembling hands.

She stepped toward her ... only for her mother to crawl back, shaking violently.

"N-No... Stay back!"

"Mother..."

"Don't come any closer!!"

Her mother screamed with a hoarse, broken voice.

Sansa's eyes were fixed on her mother... but her mother saw nothing except the entity looming behind her daughter ... arms outstretched, eyes glowing with crimson light.

Sansa extended her arms to embrace her.

And the black shadow behind her did the same ... its sticky limbs mirroring her movement.

Blinded by that overwhelming power, Sansa's only desire was to hug her mother. The same mother who had stayed by her side all that time...

Step by step, she approached her ..until her mother's back hit the wall, with nowhere left to run.

And then came the scream.

A deafening shriek from the woman who was lifted into the air by invisible force...

Sansa embraced her mother tightly.

Or so she thought.

In truth, it was the shadow that wrapped its crushing limbs around her. It lifted the woman high, her legs dangling in the air...

She died in that grasp .. her bones crushed, her organs pulverized .. until her limp body was dropped at her daughter's feet.

Sansa stared at her mother's corpse with hollow eyes... until tears began to fall... and the voices rose.

'Kill... Blood... Death...'

The nightmare reached its end. And the princess collapsed into the darkness once more.

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Back in reality ..

She still lay in her bed... until her eyes suddenly snapped open, glowing with a radiant red light.

From beneath her, a black ooze began to spread .. dark, viscous, and alive.

It swallowed her entire room before flooding through the rest of the palace at terrifying speed .. like a plague devouring everything in its path.

The princess rose, a haunting smile on her face, eyes glowing red as she stepped forward barefoot ..

And vanished.

Like a ghost, she flickered from place to place ...as if searching.

Searching for blood.

The darkness threatened to consume the entire castle.

Then, from the edge of that abyss... a man emerged .. wearing a mask and holding a lantern in his left hand. The blue glow from the flame lit up the blackness around him.

He stood, bathed in the only light that remained.

Oliver Khan set the lantern down and drew his daggers .. blades blazing with aura.

"You again... human."

The voice that echoed was deep and dreadful .. nothing like the gentle one he had once heard from the princess.

Oliver didn't respond.

He charged toward the place where Sansa was hiding.

But his blades struck nothing but empty air.

"How long do you think you can stop me here?"

Without warning ..

The shadows rose, forming hundreds of black blades around Oliver Khan.

Each one pulsed with terrifying power.

"Time is running out for you... human."

The blades shot through the air, ripping the ground apart, tearing the chamber to shreds .. but Oliver vanished, narrowly evading their deadly strikes.

He dashed toward Sansa, only to be blocked by a barrier of shadows, which deflected his flaming daggers.

With a twisted grin, she conjured more tendrils—black, writhing limbs that clawed through the air.

"You cannot kill the one who owns this body."

That thing... it knew too much.

Oliver Khan kept fighting.

And he wondered ...

How many times?

Every day... every night...

Sansa kept losing control like this.

And each time, he was the one to stop her.

But her power was growing ... relentlessly. Stronger with every night.

Meanwhile, the masked guardian had long reached his limit. He hadn't slept. He hadn't rested. He couldn't afford to ..not when she needed constant watching.

His wounds piled up. His strength had long since peaked.

"How many times could I have killed you?"

Hundreds of chances.

If he truly wanted to...

He would've ended it.

But he didn't. He couldn't. Because he didn't want her dead. He wanted to save her. That's why he endured—again and again—meeting her darkness with his blades, hoping she'd come back to herself.

"Please... Sansa..."

He pleaded.

"Fight it..."

Oliver's daggers tore through the shadows faster than sound, each slash laced with desperation.

"I'll stop you every time .. so fight it!!"

With precision and will, he ripped apart the veil of darkness, revealing her smiling form underneath.

"Time is running out, human," the demon hissed. "Soon... you'll die by her hands."

"By the hands of the one you're trying so hard to protect."

Then her body collapsed.

The shadows evaporated, as though they'd never existed.

Exhausted, Oliver Khan dragged himself toward her, finding her asleep once more .. peaceful and unaware.

It was a sight that had become all too familiar.

He caught his breath, then gently lifted her into his arms, holding her close.

"Please... don't make me kill you..."

Don't make me destroy the last person I have left.

The last thread of my family.

Chapter 267: Beneath the Mask

– 4 Days Until the Mission Deadline –

Oliver Khan had once again subdued the princess. Barely standing, he staggered under the weight of exhaustion as he carried her limp body back to her room.

He had to hurry and clean up the destruction from their fight before she woke. But the scale of these nightly battles was growing by the day, and it was only a matter of time before it could no longer be concealed.

As he held her in his arms, a crushing pressure bore down on his broad shoulders.

He had kept her locked in an illusion .. one where everything was still fine.

Guarding the princess by day. Battling her by night. A cycle that had repeated endlessly over the past few weeks.

Oliver couldn't even remember the last time he'd slept. Yes, he was an SS rank warrior. A man revered as the equal of Mist Umbra, master of the Shadow Court .

But even he had limits.

The solution was simple: kill her, and everything would end.

But that was the one thing Oliver could never do.

Worn down by physical exhaustion and mental strain, his thoughts wandered back.

Sansa had once asked him: "What are you to me?"

Why did he care so much?

He never gave her an answer.

But now, as he placed her gently on the bed and collapsed beside it, he laughed bitterly to himself.

"It's nothing special, girl..."

He reached up and removed his mask, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Beneath the mask was a pale, handsome face .. perhaps in his early thirties. His most striking features were his eyes: one crimson red, the other a brilliant golden yellow.

He lowered his head, finally allowing himself a moment of rest.

"I'm just an illegitimate son... your mother's half-brother."

In other words .. her uncle.

He had been cast aside from a young age, abandoned as a child no one wanted.

He suffered in silence, swallowed by a world of pain .. save for one single memory. The only one where he had been treated like a human being... by Sansa's mother.

She was the only light he had ever known.

After being thrown away and left to die on the cold streets, fate stepped in. A powerful organization found him .. the Shadow Court..

They saw his potential and took him in. But salvation never came .. only more torment.

He endured brutal training no ordinary person could survive. From childhood, he was forced to kill to stay alive, thrown into an environment where rats devoured each other until only one remained.

And he survived. Trial after trial, court after court.

He and Mist Umbra were the only ones to reach the Ninth Court. But neither made it to the Tenth. Both were deemed failures.

Still, he carved out a name for himself. Gained power. Built a reputation.

Oliver Khan became a name feared throughout the empire.

But he chose to return .. to the one place he had ever called home.

So much had changed. His sister had married Emperor Maekar and given birth to a daughter.

Those were the best days he could remember.

Yes, the Court still demanded blood from his hands, but he had a place to return to.

During Sansa's childhood, he would visit often, spending time with her and her mother, always hiding his face behind a mask.

At first, he wasn't allowed near them. But the moment her mother recognized him, she welcomed him with open arms .. as her only brother. That was the first warmth he had ever felt in a life drenched in cold.

Those few years were truly happy ones. But nothing good ever lasts.

It ended the moment the Court sent him away on a mission.

As soon as he left... it happened.

The abduction.

Sansa and her mother were taken.

The empire went into full-scale panic. Oliver personally joined the rescue force, unleashing everything he had against the Ultras.

After a fierce battle, they finally arrived. But all they found was the princess ... alive, amidst a mountain of corpses.

And she was no longer the girl he once knew.

Something had been done to her. Something implanted deep inside.

Blinded by fury, Oliver stormed the imperial palace, demanding answers from the one man who had done nothing ... Emperor Maekar.

If only he had protected them properly...

If only he'd kept his family close. If he had acted like a husband... like a father.

Maekar Valerion—strongest man in the empire.

And yet, what had he done? Nothing.

Worse ... he planned to dispose of her.

That's when Oliver snapped. He attacked the emperor.

They clashed in a brutal battle inside the Northern Imperial Palace.

The battle ended in a crushing defeat for the masked man .. he was no match for Maekar, the greatest spear-bearer in the Empire.

Lying broken and bleeding on the ground, all he could offer the emperor... was hatred.

"You're nothing but a king rotten to the core."

Those were his words.

A selfish man who cared only for his own gain. Someone who wouldn't hesitate to discard anything or anyone that no longer served his purpose, even if it was his wife... or his only daughter.

But unlike him, Maekar saw value in Oliver Khan.

"Despite your crimes, Masked One... I acknowledge your skill."

The man once called Mist Umbra's rival. The one who reached the Ninth Court and survived it.

"Let's make a deal, Oliver Khan."

A deal that would change his life forever.

Instead of dying a meaningless death...

Oliver Khan forged an aura contract with Emperor Maekar.

He pledged his loyalty to the very king he despised above all, becoming his High Guardian and sworn protector. In return, the girl—Sansa—would live, and Oliver would take full responsibility for her and everything concerning her.

Maekar Valerion's move dealt a heavy blow to the Shadow Court, whose influence had been growing rapidly. He stripped them of their second-in-command, and they couldn't retaliate .. because Oliver had become part of the imperial bloodline.

From that day on, Oliver protected Sansa in his own way, forced to serve the man he loathed more than anyone .. Maekar Valerion.

And now, here they were.

The princess stood on the brink of becoming a monster no one could contain. And Oliver... was the one accountable.

He no longer knew what he was supposed to do.

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– Frey Starlight's POV –

I rose, drawing in a deep breath.

With a strained smile, I examined the damage littering my body ..bruises, cuts, strangulation marks etched into every inch of my skin.

"But now I finally know the truth."

I pushed past the throb in my head and stepped out of my room, unfazed by the pain.

There was no time to waste now.

After my last use of Third-Person Pov, after coming face-to-face with that thing, I didn't stop.

I kept diving back in, over and over, confronting it again and again... until the moment it turned its attention to Oliver Khan.

With him occupied, I finally got deep enough to witness Sansa's nightmares .. and the truth buried within them.

I lived her memories. I saw what she endured.

How the Ultras tortured her. How they planted that... thing inside her.

Sansa probably didn't recognize it. She had never seen anything like it.

But I had.

It was unforgettable. A central piece of the tragedy I had once written.

That thing inside her... it was a Demon Seed.

A sliver of a powerful demon's will, embedded into a vessel to draw out its power. Once its mission was fulfilled, the vessel would break.

Now I understood what the Ultras had done.

They let the Empire retrieve her .. on purpose. So that she would erupt near the Emperor and kill him... then die.

The Demon Seed is a fragment of a demon's will. It grants overwhelming power .. but only temporarily. It's programmed with a single objective, and once that goal is achieved, it fades... taking the host with it.

They intended to assassinate Maekar Valerion through his own daughter.

A perfect plan.

The Demon Seed is a curse. And curses like this... have no cure.

I knew that better than anyone. I was the one who created it.

But the Demon Seed wasn't supposed to appear now. Not this early.

It was something destined for much later in the story. Which meant... whatever was placed inside Sansa wasn't a full version.

An incomplete prototype.

An unstable version of a Demon Seed, holding a fragment of one of the most powerful demons to ever exist—Vayne, the king's shadow, third upper seat of the Ten.

And precisely because it was unstable... there was still hope.

A chance to save her without killing her.

To do that, I needed something that countered demonic power .. its exact opposite.

Only the Bearers of Light possessed such force. The race the Lord of light came from.

But I won't find any of them here on the earth, nor is there any way for me to reach them.

Fortunately, some humans carry traces of that power.

Heroes like Snow, the Sword of Vermithor... and the Saints.

And that's why... I was now looking for Uriel Platini.

I needed sacred power—any kind I could get—if I wanted even the slightest chance against what's coming.

With those thoughts driving me, I climbed the Elite Dorm stairs in search of Uriel Platini.

Chapter 268: The Devil's Seed

I reached the sixth floor quickly, passing door after door until I reached the one I was looking for.

I couldn't stop myself ...I pounded on it hard enough to nearly break it.

It was bound to attract attention, but I didn't care. I was out of time.

All of this... because of the final twist in the Direct Advice.

Now, I finally understood why the system told me to visit Sansa every morning... except on the very last day.

Throughout these past days, Oliver Khan had been fending off the princess every night. And with each encounter, Sansa's power grew .. reaching closer to its peak. On the final day, she would be at her full strength... while Oliver would be at his limit.

That meant I would be forced to face her at the highest level of difficulty .. and that was the hidden trap laid by the Direct Advice I had followed blindly.

"I need to act before it comes to that."

Uriel Platini flung the door open in a panic after my loud knocking. She stood there startled, wearing nothing but her nightgown .. which revealed quite a bit. But I didn't care. I stepped into the room without hesitation.

"F-Frey! What are you doing here at this hour?!"

She gasped, taken completely off guard.

After getting past the shock of my unannounced visit, Uriel's eyes darted over the wounds scattered across my body.

"You're injured ..what happened to you!?"

"That doesn't matter right now. Listen, Uriel, I need your help."

I grabbed her by the shoulders, my face mere inches from hers.

Seeing the desperation in my expression and with a faint blush .. Uriel finally began to take things seriously.

"What happened?"

"I can't tell you everything... but soon, I'll be fighting a monster .. a terrifying one that uses demonic power on a massive scale."

"Demonic power...?" she muttered, and I nodded.

"To deal with it, I need your help."

She probably didn't realize it, but her powers were derived directly from the Lightbearers .. making her sacred aura the most effective weapon against demons.

"How exactly can I help?"

"I'm glad you asked."

I extended my hand, and dark aura began to coalesce, slowly forming a black sword with a runed hilt. The moment it materialized, the pressure in the room spiked.

Uriel's eyes widened in shock.

"That's—!"

"It's the Dark Sister."

"Another legendary sword..."

She began to realize the truth .. that I was wielding not one, but two blazing blades. But I cut her thoughts short and got straight to the point.

"I need you to imbue your sacred power into it."

"What?!"

She looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. But I was dead serious.

"I want to give my sword the attributes of holy aura."

The Dark Sister constantly amplifies aura. And with the system's inscription function combined with Uriel's power... I should be able to pull it off .. even if it would cost me every last Achievement Point I had left.

Uriel was still struggling to process what I was saying.

"A sword with sacred traits... like the Vermithor?"

I shook my head.

"Not quite."

The Vermithor couldn't be replicated. That was impossible.

"I only need it to unleash sacred power once .. just once."

All I needed was one strike. One single chance.

"That's all I ask from you. Please, Uriel. Just this once .. help me."

I pleaded with the girl standing before me. She was my only option.

I couldn't drag Snow into this .. using the Vermithor openly would stir the powerful forces behind him. Which meant Uriel was the only one left.

She was destined to become the next Saintess after Yurasha. Her sacred power was strong enough to rival even the energy infused into the Vermithor's blade.

Uriel took a moment to process everything I'd just said .. and the weight of the request I'd made.

With a resigned sigh and a crooked smile, she finally responded.

"You sure ask for a lot, you know that? And I doubt what you're asking is even possible."

Asking this of her without having built much of a relationship between us... it was unreasonable.

"I know what I'm asking is insane. But I'll do anything in return. I owe you."

I couldn't afford to fail this mission. And Sansa was someone worth going this far for. I had decided .. I would live in this world, hadn't I?

This was the least I could do to make that happen.

"Anything, huh..."

Uriel shrugged in defeat.

"Remember your words well, Frey, because I'll drain you dry in the future."

"I'm fine with that. I trust you enough to make that vow."

"Hmmm."

She ignored my words and focused on the Dark Sister.

"Let's get started. I assume you have a plan?"

I nodded.

"Yeah. All I need is for you to place your aura here."

I'd make it possible with the system's support.

"Then let's begin."

Uriel tied her hair back and placed her hands on the sword's cold edge while I gripped the hilt.

"Keep it steady while I connect my power into it. An SS rank sword won't accept external aura that easily... so this is going to take a while."

Time... It was the one thing I didn't have much of.

"How long exactly?"

Uriel smiled.

"A few days, at the very least."

I couldn't hide the surprise on my face after hearing that .. especially knowing I didn't even have that much.

"What? Surprised? You should've expected to invest at least that much time for something this unrealistic."

Only four days remained.

But I had no other choice.

"...Fine. Let's do it."

Uriel nodded and began channeling her holy power into the sword.

The room lit up with her pure radiance as I focused as well, praying I'd make it in time... that this would be enough to finish the mission.

As her holy aura poured into the Dark Sister, the blade released a wave of dark aura .. resisting, rejecting the foreign force.

My job was to suppress its resistance and guide Uriel's power inward.

We both concentrated intensely, sweat dripping down as the process dragged on.

The Dark Sister was a unique weapon .. its core trait being its ability to amplify aura, unleashing over 200% of the original power.

That was why I chose it over Balerion.

Once it absorbed Uriel's holy aura, I'd be able to redirect it—magnified tenfold—against the demonic entity I was about to face.

Time passed quickly, both of us completely absorbed in the task.

Eventually, the resistance began to wane. Channeling the power became easier and smoother.

We could finally breathe again.

"Frey... What did you mean by demonic entity?"

With the pressure lifted, Uriel finally spoke, her hands still resting on my sword as she continued pouring her power in.

I couldn't tell her the truth about Sansa... so I gave her the best excuse I could manage.

"I'm about to fight someone wielding immense demonic power."

"Like the Ultras and their demonic powers?" she asked.

I gave a weary smile.

"Exactly."

Though in truth, Sansa's condition was far worse than most of them.

Thinking on my answer, Uriel sighed .. clearly frustrated.

"I just don't get it, Frey... If you're going to face something like that, why not just take me with you? I could lend you my holy power directly instead of going through all this chaos."

"...Uriel."

Was she really willing to go that far for me?

I knew. I'd always known how kind Uriel was .. so kind she'd risk herself for others without hesitation.

Which is exactly why I couldn't bring her along. Not against a foe that could very well kill her.

"...I'm sorry."

It was all I could say.

No excuses, no lies. I just didn't want her involved.

"You really are selfish," Uriel said with a small smile, her pure blue eyes meeting mine.

"But once this is over, make no mistake .. I will be selfish too when it's time for you to repay this debt."

I nodded with a soft smile.

"Do whatever you want. I'm yours."

Once I finish this cursed mission that's been weighing on me... I'll be more than happy to play that role for you, Uriel.

And so, the two of us spent those long but fleeting hours together .. sharing our powers in pursuit of a nearly impossible goal.

Chapter 269: The Battle of Moon Castle (1)

– Frey Starlight's POV –

"Hufffff"

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself as sweat poured down my body.

Clutching the Dark Sister tightly, I struggled to control the wild fluctuations of aura emanating from it. Uriel wasn't in much better shape .. her body drenched in sweat as she funneled every drop of her holy power into the blade.

The entire room remained bathed in radiant light throughout the process, and time passed so quickly we barely noticed it .. too focused on the task before us to feel its weight.

"Just a little more..." Uriel said, blood trickling from her nose and staining her lips crimson.

"Don't push yourself," I said instinctively, to which she gave a faint smile.

"It's far too late for that. There's no turning back now."

I watched in silence as Uriel continued .. her hands never stopping as she poured holy aura into the blade like an endless reservoir. White lines began to spread across the black surface of the sword, like veins etched into steel.

To make Dark Sister compatible with holy power, I had to spend every single one of my achievement points .. over 5,000 in total. I was completely broke now.

It was a sacrifice ... one I had made willingly to obtain this strength.

The process took a long time. So long that the room door was knocked on multiple times by those seeking Uriel. But we had sealed ourselves off from the outside world.

And then, after what felt like an eternity .. Uriel finally stopped. The divine glow vanished completely.

She collapsed, her body drained of all strength, and I caught her instinctively.

"Did we succeed?"

Even in her condition, she prioritized the mission. I had always known there were still kind souls in this world.

Uriel was one of them.

I smiled down at her, exhausted.

"Yes. We did it."

Holding Dark Sister in my hand, now glowing with white light, I could feel the overwhelming divine power she had infused into it.

It was a complete success .. but one that hadn't come easy.

"Hehe... that's amazing," she laughed faintly as I carried her to her bed.

"It took three full days..."

Tonight was the final day before the deadline. I had used every moment I'd been given .. barely making it in time.

To be honest... I could barely stand after all the effort I'd poured into this. But I had no choice but to keep moving.

Lying down, Uriel looked at me with tired eyes.

"I'm going to make you work hard to repay me, Frey."

I nodded.

"You can do whatever you want. You've earned it."

If I survive, that is.

"You can start by giving me your hand."

I didn't quite understand the sudden request, but I offered her my hand anyway.

She grabbed it with both of hers, and her body glowed one final time .. transferring a gentle light into me.

Immediately, I felt the fatigue fade, the exhaustion melt away .. replaced by a renewed strength.

"Uriel..."

"You'll need to be at your best for the battle ahead, won't you?"

She looked at me with weary eyes, fighting the urge to fall asleep.

In moments like that, there was only one thing I could say:

"Thank you... for everything."

It was genuine gratitude.

"Good luck. Don't die."

I nodded.

"I'd win."

With those words, I watched her finally drift into unconsciousness .. falling into dreams after three days of pouring every piece of herself into the blade now resting in my right hand.

Her task was complete.

She could rest now.

As for me...

"...I'm just getting started."

After gently laying Uriel in bed, I rushed out of the temple, moving at full speed toward Valerion territory.

Night had already fallen.

Which meant the time had come.

Tonight... The fate of the empire will be decided.

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– Sun Castle –

Within a west-facing balcony, a young man with sharp features, golden eyes, and blond hair sat quietly.

Aegon Valerion rested in his usual chair, his gaze fixed on the distant Moon Castle ... the place where a long and bitter tale was about to end.

"My lord... it has begun,"

said one of the men who appeared from the shadows around him.

"Good,"

the prince replied calmly, as the knight carrying a greatsword on his back asked,

"Shall we intervene?"

The knights were, quite literally, waiting for the green light... to kill his sister.

But Aegon shook his head.

"No. We won't be the stars of tonight's show."

Though he had long opposed his sister, who was he trying to fool?

Sansa had never been his equal. Never once had she posed a real threat to his claim to the throne.

Thinking of her... brought back memories from long ago.

"We used to play together... all the time."

She was his sister.

A sister he had once been willing to do anything for.

But now... what did the prince feel in his heart when he thought of her?

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

He laughed bitterly, speaking into the air around him as if addressing an invisible presence.

"Isn't that right?"

"My lord?"

asked one of the guards, confused.

Aegon waved his hand without even looking at them.

"Pay me no mind. I'm just talking to myself."

The knights said nothing.

They stood in silence, obedient as ever.

Aegon was the one who had brought them together .. the one they trusted above all.

Their stillness was proof of his absolute control.

The prince smiled faintly... as the final battle began, far away on the other side.

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– Moon Castle –

A hollow, lifeless fortress.

Its cold, lonely walls had once echoed with warmth, filled with people who brought life to it .. even amid winter's chill.

But now those walls were drowning in shadow. A creeping darkness devoured the light, inch by inch.

The shadows moved quickly, consuming everything in their path.

Today, more than any day before, they were stronger... more hostile.

The darkness swallowed the castle whole, reaching even the grand gates that led outside.

There .. seated in a wooden chair, surrounded by three lanterns casting a powerful blue glow .. sat Oliver Khan, head bowed in silence, as he exhaled slowly... feeling the shadows closing in from every side.

The light from the lanterns dimmed instantly the moment it touched that suffocating power.

Oliver Khan, exhausted and worn, stood up slowly, fixing his gaze on a single point within the abyss.

And there—through the void—those crimson eyes appeared, accompanied by a monstrous smile.

"Sansa..."

But it wasn't the reply he hoped for.

"Your time has run out, human," she answered coldly.

Her voice cut deeper than any blade could.

At once, he drew his daggers, now cloaked in blue aura .. twin flames burning fiercely in his hands.

"Why?"

He asked...

But received no answer.

His body, which had been running nonstop for over a month, and his soul, weighed down by endless burdens ..

The High Warden had already reached his limit, both physically and mentally.

But he kept going.

Chapter 270: The Battle of Moon Castle (2)

He fought.

To the bitter end.

He took one step. Then another.

Then he began to run .. rushing into the consuming dark like a falling star hurtling through space.

With breathtaking speed, he appeared before Sansa, attempting to strike her down immediately.

But she vanished ..swallowed by the shadows.

The darkness raged around him, manifesting into thousands of black hands reaching to grab him.

Yet with masterful movements, Oliver shredded through them .. cutting the shadows apart at incredible speed, unleashing countless strikes that carved glowing blue trails into the void.

He charged after Sansa, who weaved freely through the darkness, untouchable, unreachable.

All the while—on every side—the black tendrils and shadow blades formed again and again, ceaselessly surrounding him...

Wherever he went ..wherever his feet carried him .. Oliver Khan found only darkness closing in from every direction.

Bit by bit, he could no longer chase the princess. All he could manage now was defense .. spinning a web-like cocoon with his blindingly fast strikes, a shell that held back the razor-sharp blades and shadowy tendrils lunging to impale him.

Trapped within, even with all his skill and inhuman speed, Oliver Khan began to take hits. The number of attacks raining down on him was simply endless.

Sansa attacked from every shadow, from every angle, relentlessly. Blow after blow pushed him further back.

Had he been in peak condition, Oliver could have blocked every strike. But he was far from that now.

His daggers—once weightless—now felt like they weighed tons.

Something was pressing down on his entire body.

Deep inside... he just wanted to stop.

To rest.

Haven't I done enough?

Haven't I given everything?

Those were the thoughts that filled his mind after countless battles, after endless struggle.

He was still parrying the ruthless onslaught when he looked toward Sansa in the distance.

"How many times?" he muttered.

How many chances had he had to kill her .. to end it all?

But he never did.

And here he was , still fighting. Exhausted. Bleeding. Worn thin.

"I'm begging you... Sansa..."

BOOM!

Explosions erupted around him as Oliver dashed at full speed, trying to escape the abyss of black shadows.

"Please... fight it..."

"Fight it... like I fought for you..."

That was all he wanted.

But what answered him instead was deafening laughter .. echoing from every direction, crushing his hope.

"It's useless, human... that girl has sunk too deep into the dark."

Beside Sansa who now raised her hand toward Oliver .. a black sword materialized, radiating power so intense it shattered the ground beneath her feet from pressure alone.

Sansa's crimson eyes locked onto him, her face twisted in a terrifying smile.

"She knows the truth now... the truth of what her own hands have done. She's finally realized that those weren't nightmares , but a grim reality she brought upon herself!"

He had shown her the souls he helped kill.

"I warned you..."

SWOOSH!

Like a missile, the dark blade fired at a speed beyond sight .. scraping across Oliver's right side and carving a devastating gash into the wall behind him.

Staggered, the masked warrior fell back in shock—but the shadows pursued him instantly.

"Maybe you thought you'd win this time too."

More explosions. More darkness.

Oliver was being pushed to the edge.

"How foolish you are... human."

Now that her power had awakened, the chance of defeating her was 0.

"This power will keep growing .. every minute, every second."

The shadow would spread until it devoured the world and everyone in it.

"Look, human."

"Look closely... at the monster that's grown inside me!"

That voice—through Sansa's body—howled, unleashing a wave of darkness to finish the battle once and for all.

The shadows surged to slice Oliver Khan into pieces ..

But suddenly, they froze .. forming a barrier around Sansa.

A shield that caught a devastating beam of aura that had exploded against its surface.

The attack had been blocked.

And Sansa turned her head toward the castle gates—now flung wide open.

There, a young man stood.

A black sword clung to his left hand.

His eyes burned with a fierce violet glow as he stared at her coldly.

"You..."

The thing inside Sansa recognized him.

Frey Starlight had entered the battlefield.

"Mirage."

In an instant, Frey moved .. splitting into over a thousand clones that tore through the shadows surrounding Oliver with surgical precision.

The clones converged, forming into one man standing at Oliver's side.

The masked warrior, regaining his balance, stared at Frey as he stepped into the heart of the storm.

"What are you doing here?!"

he asked urgently.

Frey answered quietly.

"I'm here to help."

"Get out of here! This isn't a fight you can handle!"

Oliver stepped forward, trying to push Frey away as the aura radiating from his body surged once more...

"I'll be the one to end this madness..."

Oliver Khan was determined to be the one responsible for whatever happened to Sansa... and Frey knew that all too well.

From the very beginning, Oliver had cleared out the entire area for this exact reason.

That's why Frey had been able to sneak in so easily back then.

But now... there was no turning back.

From behind, Frey spoke calmly.

"I can save her."

Just a few simple words—yet Oliver froze in place.

"What?" he asked, barely able to form the word.

"I have a way."

Frey answered with unwavering confidence.

But before he could say more, laughter erupted from the thing inside Sansa.

"A way to save her?"

The tendrils of darkness surged around her, stronger than ever.

"What a joke..."

The tendrils shot toward Frey instantly... blades of pure shadow moving at terrifying speed.

But Frey saw them clearly with his Hawk Eyes.

Before they could reach him, Oliver Khan intercepted .. unleashing a barrage of blinding blue slashes to shield Frey, placing himself between the two.

His eyes remained locked on the young man.

"Kid... what did you just say?"

Frey didn't hesitate.

"I can save her from the thing inside her."

His voice was firm ... utterly certain.

Normally, Oliver wouldn't believe such a claim so easily.

But given his current state ... after all the time, the exhaustion, the hopelessness...

Something in him wanted to believe.

"You'd better be right..."

"You can count on me," Frey replied, stepping forward.

"Step back. I'll take this fight. You're not strong enough to endure it."

"I can handle myself."

Frey raised his other hand, and a radiant aura flared ... reflecting in Oliver Khan's eyes.

A fearsome sword manifested in Frey's right hand as he stood beside Oliver, a destructive pressure radiating from his slim frame... The dark sister .

"Twin blazing blades..."

Oliver muttered, recognizing a glimpse of Frey's power.

The true Starlight...

Even in their situation, Oliver couldn't hide his astonishment .. watching a mere youth wield not one, but two legendary swords.

But the pressure Frey gave off was no joke.

At the very least, he had proven he was more than qualified to stand here.

Side by side, they now faced Sansa.

The masked warrior stepped forward.

"I'll lead the charge. Support me from the rear," Oliver said.

Frey smiled .. acknowledging the recognition at last.

"You got it."

One wielded blazing blue aura.

The other, a blackened violet.

Together, they rushed toward her .. toward Sansa.

The girl who had drowned everything in shadow.

An endless, consuming darkness.

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In the meantime, here's some insight into the current volume for those curious:

The current volume, *Convergence*, is made up of three arcs.

The first arc—the one unfolding now—is *The Fallen Princess Arc*. It serves as the opening act and is the calmest of the three. From here, the pace will accelerate as we enter a far more intense arc titled *Secrets of the System*.

Then comes the final arc: *The Hunt*—the climax of Volume 2, rivaling the *Victoriad* in scale and impact.

The full story is planned across seven volumes.

You already know the title of the current one, but as for the next volume ...its name is *The War of Darkness*.

See you again in the next chapter very soon.