

VILLAIN 281

Chapter 281: A Journey into the Unknow (2)

Time flew.

Only one day remained before the system's deadline.

We knew very little about the journey ahead .. not even how long it would last.

We were risking everything.

"There's a real chance we'll be gone for a long time ..."

That would undoubtedly put us at odds with the Temple.

Snow didn't seem too concerned. He said the Temple hadn't given him much anyway, and what lay ahead mattered more.

Ghost, on the other hand, said the Temple was never a place that helped him grow to begin with .. reasonable, considering he had spent his entire life in the Shadow Court

That night...

We packed everything we could: supplies, gear, rations. Enough to last us a long time. Enough to survive.

The three of us slipped away in secret, heading toward the Ocklass Mountain range, near House Starlight.

There, we met the mage I had arranged in advance.

He was a Rank S mage from one of the major guilds .. bringing him here in secret had cost me a fortune, but it was the least I could do to make this trip to the Shadow Sect possible.

The mage, wearing a loose robe and sporting a thick beard, stared at the three of us.

We were practically celebrities at this point ... especially the hero, Snow .. so he understood the weight of what he was about to do.

"Are you really sure about this?"

He was about to teleport the Empire's golden hero straight into the Nightmare Lands. No matter how he tried to justify it, it didn't sit right with him.

But I responded without hesitation, my tone firm ..

"I didn't hire you to ask questions."

The only reason I brought him here was to teleport us close to the Shadow Sect and make the journey easier. He was a money-hungry mutt who never said no if the price was high.

The mage nodded.

"Fair enough."

He raised his staff and began channeling his aura, expanding a glowing white circle beneath us.

"The coordinates you gave me weren't precise, but this should drop you somewhere near the place you're aiming for. Will that do?"

I nodded.

"Yes. Do it."

Without hesitation, he increased the spell's intensity. I turned to my teammates.

Ghost disappeared instantly into my shadow, while Snow stood calmly at my side.

We were all wearing the same armor we'd used during the Victoriad bringing a rush of memories with it.

We exchanged a look. A single nod between us was all it took.

"Let's do this."

SWOOSH

A piercing hum rang out as our bodies were hurled through the teleportation circle.

The world around me blurred, and a familiar sensation of nausea washed over me .. typical of spatial displacement. But then, as the world settled...

What entered my vision struck a chord.

Those towering trees... the overgrown vines creeping across every inch of soil...

"We're here," I whispered. "The Forest of Fear..."

The very place where my journey had begun, two years ago.

"So this is the Eastern Nightmare Lands," Snow muttered, clearly awestruck. It was his first time venturing this deep.

"Let's move," I said firmly, already taking the lead. Snow followed immediately behind, with Ghost covering our backs from within the shadows.

We advanced cautiously, prepared for anything.

And it didn't take long before we encountered our first threat—Nightmare creatures crawling out from every corner.

But...

BOOM!!!

With a devastating sweep of Balerion and Vermithor right after .. we cleared everything in our path.

Fast. Precise. We didn't even pause. Everything that stood in our way fell as we kept moving forward.

Scythe beasts, shriekers, and other horrors of the nightmare...

The monsters that once brought me to the brink of death .. reduced to nothing with a single swing of my sword.

I had changed.

Changed more than I'd realized.

"These nightmare creatures are weaker than I expected," Snow noted aloud.

"Stay sharp," I replied immediately. "We don't know what might be lurking."

Honestly, though ... I agreed with him.

Unlike the other Nightmare Lands, the eastern side had no Nightmare Lord ruling over it.

My father had slain the Amygdala long ago. That was the only being here that had surpassed SS rank.

Had beings like the Cosmos, The Lady of Eight Legs, or even the Abyss watchers been present, this would've been a far more brutal journey.

But to my surprise... none of those threats materialized.

It was so calm that I struggled to believe it was real.

Standing before the massive stairway ..the one I had once crawled up, bleeding and broken .. I stared at that darkness again.

Snow, still in awe, asked softly:

"Frey... is this it?"

I nodded.

"The Shadow Sect."

One hour.

That's all it took .. just one hour to reach the Shadow Sect and complete the mission.

It felt almost... anticlimactic.

Sure, the mage had teleported us close, and I knew the way... Something about how easily we arrived didn't sit right.

I knew it couldn't be that simple.

We climbed the staircase quickly, crossing the blackened, forgotten lands that once marked the boundary of the Shadow Sect.

I expected to see Smiley or Sad at the very least .. but there wasn't a trace of either.

"What's going on here?"

I asked quietly, my tone sharp with unease as Snow trailed behind, surveying the place for himself.

I opened the system to check for answers... but the emergency mission had vanished. In its place, a new section appeared .. one I hadn't seen before.

???

???

???

Three empty entries, marked only by question marks.

The mystery deepened. And so did my sense of helplessness.

"What now?"

Snow's voice came from behind after his quiet exploration of the sect he had only ever heard about in my stories.

"We keep going," I said.

It was all I could say.

We pressed forward until we reached the heart of the sect—where the old temple still stood, the one I'd once been sealed inside.

I glanced at Balerion instinctively, remembering the moment I obtained him—my first real companion in this world.

We stepped inside, expecting to find the altar where I had once shed blood.

But it was gone.

Something else stood in its place.

All three of us froze.

Snow stared, wide-eyed. Ghost emerged from the shadows, silent but just as stunned.

"This is..."

Snow's voice trailed off as I finally understood what the mission had meant all along.

The journey was never about crossing the empire to reach the Shadow Sect.

This place... was just the starting point.

I let out a bitter laugh and walked toward the object that was now flooding the room with radiant light.

A teleportation gate.

"A portal into the unknown..."

I had no idea where it would take us.

But I knew one thing for certain—the real mission would begin the moment I stepped through that gate.

And so, I stood there, staring into the ominous red light spilling from its center... silently praying I hadn't just led everyone straight into ruin.

Chapter 282: Far from home (1)

– Frey Starlight's Pov –

A crimson gate pulsed with astonishing aura fluctuations, tickling our senses and releasing an overwhelming pressure that made sweat slide slowly down my forehead .. I wiped it away with my elbow.

We had been circling this gate for an hour now, hesitating.

"Should we go in?" Snow asked, his face serious.

I knew we couldn't linger here forever. The real mission would begin the moment we stepped through that gate.

We didn't know where it would lead us .. or if returning would even be an option.

But I had no choice but to move forward. That much, I understood more than anything else.

"We move," I said, resolute in ending this.

"We should stay close. We have no idea where we'll end up," Ghost suggested. We all agreed .. it was the best way to proceed.

"Let's do it!"

Without warning, the three of us rushed forward and were swallowed by the crimson gate.

In less than a second, we vanished from the Shadow Sect, as if we had never been there at all. Silence returned to that ancient place.

A silence soon broken by the sound of heavy footsteps .. those of a massive statue dragging a long sword behind it, its face hidden behind a smiling mask.

The statue raised its blade and slashed violently at the gate.

With a single strike, the structure was completely destroyed. Its supports collapsed, the aura dissipated, and nothing was left.

The journey had become one of no return. As for the statue, it turned and left, its task complete.

...

...

...

This time, the teleportation process took longer than usual.

What had once happened in a blink now took several minutes...

Minutes spent drifting through a stream of aura .. until we finally reached the end.

The gate opened and spat us out onto soft ground. Our bodies slammed into it roughly.

Lying there on the sand, the three of us immediately got back up, dizzy from the strange journey. But what we saw next was even stranger.

Red sand. An endless land stretching out to a distant horizon.

But our eyes quickly turned to the sky.

A crimson sky. And a suffocating atmosphere, thick with a gloomy aura that made our skin crawl.

Above us, three massive moons loomed .. so large they looked ready to crash into the ground at any moment.

We stared at the scene, mouths agape, trying to process what we were seeing.

"Is this... an illusion?" Ghost was the first to voice what we were all thinking.

But it wasn't an illusion.

"This is real... We're far from home," I said, brushing my fingers through the soft red sand.

Snow Lionheart closed his eyes, trying to absorb the surrounding aura ..only to frown as soon as that sinister energy entered his body.

"This aura..."

I nodded.

"We're no longer on Earth."

It was an obvious conclusion... but still hard to believe.

The three of us wandered around the gate, slowly taking in the fact that we had left our planet behind.

We were far... far from Earth, and far from the seal created by the First Emperor, Kazis Valerion.

We had entered the unknown literally this time.

"But what's wrong with this cursed place? Everything... feels dead," Snow said, nauseated just from touching the surrounding aura. There was air, yes ..but the place felt utterly deserted, like a graveyard.

Observing the scattered signs and the land's eerie features, I narrowed my eyes, realizing what we were seeing.

"What you're looking at... is the final result of what could happen to our planet if we lose to the Ultras and let the demons return."

Ghost and Snow listened intently ... these were truths they were hearing for the first time.

"This place is just one of their countless victims. A planet that fell to that wicked race."

And it likely happened a long time ago.

Demons are creatures that live off life power ... draining it endlessly. That's how they were created.

Their home world, or what some call the Demon Realm, died a long time ago. That was when their kind began moving searching for new places to inhabit.

And so it began... They invade planets, strip them of all signs of life, and slaughter everything that breathes. They remain there until the planet dies ... then move on to the next.

And the cycle repeats... a never-ending loop that has continued for ages—ages far too long to count.

Perhaps even Earth, still underdeveloped, was one of their last victims.

"Judging by the signs around us... the race that once lived on this planet was wiped out a long time ago."

The planet we had set foot on had been dead for ages .. and the demons had already left it behind.

In other words, this place was nothing more than a graveyard.

I spoke indifferently, as if stating undeniable facts. But what I received in return were puzzled and curious expressions.

I smiled at them.

"What? Did you think demons and humans were the only races to ever exist in this world?"

We were nothing but a single dot in a vast universe.

Snow shook his head.

"No... but Frey, how do you know all of this?"

Until now, humanity had lived inside a black box ... shielded from everything beyond, trapped in an illusion.

Snow's question was valid. It even made me laugh bitterly.

"There's much I know... and even more I don't. But it's knowledge I never asked to have."

It was more like a curse that had been placed upon me .. one I was forced to live with.

I decided to drop the subject and walk ahead.

"I didn't expect us to end up in a place like this. If you two want to turn back now, I wouldn't blame you. In fact, I'd rather you did."

Facing the Eastern Nightmare Lands was one thing—but wandering a planet that had fallen to the demons was something else entirely.

I was certain that whatever awaited here... would be catastrophic beyond reason. That's why I preferred to continue alone.

But Snow and Ghost were already at my sides.

"What are you saying now, after we've come this far?" Snow said, and Ghost agreed.

"We didn't come all this way just to tuck our tails and run at the first real challenge. Besides... retreat isn't an option anymore."

Ghost raised his thumb, gesturing to the gate behind us.

"That thing stopped working the moment we set foot on this planet."

He said it casually ..but the weight behind his words was written all over our faces—mine and Snow's both.

"Wait, what? Are you serious?"

I rushed back to the gate to find that he was right.

It wasn't working anymore.

"He's right."

Disaster.

An utter disaster. Was this his way of telling me that escape was off the table?

We were stranded ...on a planet whose position we didn't even know in this vast universe. An unfamiliar tension began crawling through me as my mind flooded with possible scenarios.

Chapter 283: Far from home (2)

"There has to be another way."

Unlike me and Snow, Ghost remained strangely calm ... as if the current situation were nothing but a child's game. That unsettled me even more.

"Gates don't operate on a single path. So either it's malfunctioning... or someone tampered with it from the other side."

"Who? We wandered through the sect for hours and didn't see anyone," Snow replied, confident in his claim .. after all, he had scanned the entire place before we arrived.

But his words weren't absolute. He couldn't sense something vastly more powerful than himself. Besides, everything about the sect was cloaked in mystery.

I forced myself to stay calm and opened the system interface.

Just as Ghost said... there had to be a solution.

And if none existed .. I'd create one, through the power of the system. Everything would be fine as long as we completed the mission.

I opened the system, intending to learn what our next move should be ... where we were supposed to go in this barren red desert.

But my hand froze before I could tap the interface. And the same thing happened to Snow and Ghost.

It was like hundreds of filthy worms had begun crawling across my skin .. an overwhelming wave of dread and discomfort.

All three of us turned toward the same spot at the same time—the place where that threatening presence was coming from.

The desert was wide and flat, allowing us to see everything around us clearly.

And yet we hadn't seen it... until it was already near.

A sharp, metallic sound rang out.

Black hair drifting in the air. Something walking on all fours.

"A horse?" Snow asked.

"No..."

The dreadful feeling inside me intensified.

As that creature with a single eye approached, it resembled a deformed man ... twisted by dozens of mutations until it had taken on a grotesque form that walked on all fours. Like a feral horse made of rotting flesh...

The aura surrounding it radiated a dreadful aura that pierced straight through our souls.

The three of us took a step back unconsciously.

That thing... had already laid its eye on us.

"Ah! So you were at my side all along!!" The creature's mouth twisted into a grin.

"It talks?!"

We didn't even have time to be surprised. The moment it spotted us, the thing lunged forward with a shrieking, metallic cry.

"Blood... blood... give me some blood!"

"Get ready to fight!"

I shouted, drawing both Balerion and the Dark Sister at once. Snow and Ghost were focused too—so much so they didn't even notice the Dark Sister. All their attention was locked on that horrific creature.

It leapt through a cloud of aura, crashing down on us violently and kicking up a storm of red sand.

Its horse-like body began to deform grotesquely, sprouting hands made of rotten flesh ... hands that flew toward us.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Black cutter!"

"One-Sword Style: Absolute Zero!"

I unleashed dozens of black arcs, slicing through the grotesque hands, while Snow froze the rest with a massive surge of icy aura.

We managed to repel the initial wave—barely—which made me let my guard down for just a moment... a moment where that creature's reflection flashed in my Hawk Eyes.

"Frey!"

Snow's shout was the last thing I heard before the beast rammed into me, hurling me away. I felt bones crack under the force of impact.

The monster charged after me on all fours, trying to trample me while screaming incoherent words.

"Blood, blood! Just a little blood, please!"

Its hooves slammed the ground relentlessly as I dodged beneath them in a frenzy.

When I looked up, I saw what was beneath its lower torso—there was a swirling mass of sticky red fluid dripping toward me.

The first drop hit the ground.

The sand began to vaporize instantly.

"Acid...?"

"Please, the blood... just a little blood... why won't you give me any? I want blood... blood... blood..."

The monstrous voice mixed with shrill screeches as it tried to crush me, pouring down a stream of that strange, acidic fluid directly at me.

A single touch... and I'd melt into a rotten pile of flesh.

But the ground beneath me turned black just in time, and Ghost pulled me away into his shadow.

On the other side, the raging beast took a devastating hit ... Snow had descended upon it with a storm of strikes using Vermithor.

Starlight aura burned rapidly around him as he slashed wildly at the creature.

"Too bright!!"

The monster howled, shielding itself from Snow—who now looked like a literal radiant blue star.

Ghost and I reappeared away from the attack. As soon as we landed, I dashed back into the fray.

"Wait for the right moment!" I shouted at Ghost, igniting both my blades with dark aura as I charged toward the monster and Snow, who were still locked in fierce battle.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Black Meteor!"

Focused on defending against Snow, the beast groaned in pain as a black beam struck it from the side.

With Snow on its right and me on its left—we exchanged a glance, understanding each other instantly.

Pouring every ounce of power we had, we launched a flurry of savage slashes.

Black arcs from my left, and radiant white arcs from Snow's right.

The creature howled, bleeding profusely under the onslaught of our twin assault.

It tried to escape .. but dozens of black threads coiled tightly around it, courtesy of Ghost's shadow manipulation.

It was completely trapped.

The beast didn't scream.

It wept.

Its sobbing was audible as tears streamed from its lone eye.

"Why? Why won't you give it to me...?"

It was utterly insane. We were literally carving it apart without stopping, yet we had barely pierced through its putrid flesh.

Gasp.

"All I wanted... was just a little blood... fresh, clean blood... that's all this rotting body needs..."

The monster cried while we continued our relentless assault ... until its sobbing stopped, and its hair rose sharply toward the sky.

Then it opened its mouth ... and screamed.

A piercing, explosive cry that felt like someone had stabbed my ears from the inside. Blood poured from them instantly.

The scream was accompanied by a wave of violet aura that sent both Snow and me flying, hurling us far away from the beast.

I immediately regained my balance, attempting to charge at it again—only to be blindsided by a beam of concentrated aura shooting toward me, fired straight from the monster's gaping mouth.

There was no time to dodge.

I crossed my swords, trying to withstand it ... and moments later, the impact struck.

I fought to stay standing as the aura beam scorched my body at an alarming rate.

"Graaahhhh!!"

The creature didn't stop. That metallic screech echoed once again.

Suddenly, the ground beneath me exploded—dozens of giant mouths made of decaying flesh burst upward, all trying to devour me.

Preoccupied with fending off the overwhelming assault, I failed to notice that the beast had already found a new target ..Snow.

He fought back, but the raging creature clung to him tightly as more mouths formed across its grotesque body.

They bit into him relentlessly, causing blood to spill profusely.

Snow cried out in agony, while the monster—ecstatic—let out another wild scream.

"Ahhh! Blood! Blood! Delicious! So delicious! Finally!!!"

It drank Snow's blood at a horrifying pace. Snow struggled, but his expression turned grim the moment he realized the aura inside his body had stopped moving ... something had paralyzed it.

He couldn't fight back. And I was still too busy dealing with the mouths to help.

I realized I wouldn't make it in time.

Chapter 284: Far from home (3)

Snow Lionheart felt his life being drained away...

It was all reflected in Ghost's eyes.

The silent killer assessed the situation quickly, grasping the severity of our predicament.

He closed his eyes for a brief moment, knowing that none of his usual techniques would be enough to separate that thing from Snow.

His thoughts accelerated ...

"Sometimes... even the smallest things can cast the largest shadows."

Words he had heard long ago.

Ghost acted instantly, throwing his daggers away and claspings his fingers into the shape of a weapon.

His eyes locked onto the beast that threatened to consume Snow.

What he was about to do went against every teaching of the Shadow Court. But that didn't matter anymore.

He drew his hand through the air in a sequence of slashes ..four in total. Two vertical. Two horizontal. Forming a square.

The space around him trembled. The ground itself shivered as his dark eyes began to glow.

"space cleave."

With just a few words...and a series of erratic gestures ..

Space froze. Time, reality, and matter twisted as filthy blood rained through the air.

Everything within the zone Ghost had targeted distorted violently. The beast's body was torn apart within the crude square Ghost had drawn.

As a result, the mouths clinging to Snow were sliced away cleanly ...along with two of the monster's limbs.

What Snow and I failed to accomplish together... Ghost did with a single strike.

With a weary smile, Ghost collapsed to the ground, blood trailing from his nose.

I had no idea what Ghost just did, or what that power even was ... but he had done something incredible.

Snow, now freed and seething with fury, gripped his sword tightly—Vermithor, already healing his wounds at a terrifying pace.

His eyes glowed as he raised his blade, all twelve aura types swirling around him ... merging into one devastating force.

Then he roared ... releasing his strongest technique:

"Grand Cosmic Formation!!"

Snow's personal version of Ignition. A devastating wave of light engulfed the monster, which had barely recovered from Ghost's attack before Snow followed up with a cataclysmic blow.

The explosion of light was so intense, it illuminated the crimson sky for an instant... leaving behind a massive crater in the red sands.

Snow was the first to appear, breathing heavily and using his sword for support.

At his feet lay the creature's mangled corpse ... disfigured beyond recognition. Its head had rolled to the side, cleanly severed from its body.

Snow stared at the fallen monster, his expression mixed with triumph... and unease.

We had won.

But he had hit it with everything he had. Grand Cosmic Formation erased everything in its path.

And yet even after all that .. the creature's body was still mostly intact.

Fortunately, Snow had targeted its neck. That was the only reason its head came off ... otherwise, the battle might have continued.

Supporting Ghost, I joined Snow within the crater, standing over the monstrous thing that now lay at our feet.

It was finally over.

"...Ahh."

Or so we thought.

The three of us leapt backward in unison as the creature's eye suddenly opened ... and a moan escaped its mouth.

"Seriously?!"

"Your head is cut off, damn it!"

How is it still alive...?

Terror gripped us at the thought of that thing rising again. But thankfully... it didn't show any signs of movement, even after some time had passed.

Slowly, we approached it .. and the moment we did, it glanced at us with its single eye.

"Humans...?"

For the first time, the creature spoke a word we recognized.

We looked at one another, stunned. None of us knew how to respond ..

Or whether we should even respond to a creature that had just tried to kill us moments ago.

But I decided to step forward.

"You know about humans?"

I asked, not expecting much. But it answered.

"Of course I do... Humans... humans are good."

Its voice was deep ... and weary.

Its confusing words left us wondering... how did it know about humans?

The monster tried to look around but couldn't move, slowly realizing its condition.

"What... happened? Why am I like this?"

It asked in confusion .. fear lacing its tone.

"Where am I? Do you know, Good humans? Where did everyone go... and who did this to me?"

His questions only deepened our confusion.

Was he pretending? Had he forgotten what happened just moments ago?

What was I even supposed to say to that?

"...I don't know."

That was all I could manage.

"I see..."

After all that madness, the creature suddenly seemed oddly... understanding.

I exchanged glances with the others.

Now that it had come to this, I decided to go beyond small talk.

Sitting down next to the severed head, I asked:

"What happened to this place? And where exactly are we?"

The monster stared at me silently for a moment before answering in a calm voice.

"This place is called... Londor."

"Londor?"

"Yes ... We lived peaceful lives... but everything changed when he came... that monster."

"Who are you talking about?"

"...The Lord of Graves."

He mentioned a name that left both Ghost and Snow puzzled.

But unlike them ... I recognized it.

"One of the upper Seats..."

The creature began weeping as soon as it spoke of that person.

"We held out well... We fought hard. We fought with honor until the very end... but everything collapsed when he joined the battle."

The sorrowful monster broke down, sobbing uncontrollably as it recalled those memories.

"He didn't just kill us... he turned us into these forms. How can a being like that be allowed to live? It's not fair... it's not fair at all. What did we do to deserve this fate...?"

"Everyone's dead. All of them... hehe... they're all gone."

"Hehe... hehehehe... hehehehehehehehehehe..."

"Hey!"

I shouted at him, but he had gone completely mad, laughing hysterically with that grating, metallic screech.

"He's completely lost it..."

I backed away from the severed head, realizing that all I'd gained from this exchange was a splitting headache.

"What was all that talk about... this Lord of Graves?" Snow asked as I let out a tired sigh.

"If that thing is here, don't even think about facing him. Don't approach him... at all."

Ghost and Snow caught the serious tone in my voice. And I meant every word.

Leaving that lifeless monster behind, I climbed out of the crater of destruction.

Thankfully, the war on this planet had ended long ago. Which meant the chances of us encountering that monster were extremely low...

But not zero.

And that meant I had to act ... to avoid him at all costs.

With that in mind, I opened the system, hoping to find a path forward.

But as the name of a single enemy appeared ... one name, already weighing me down after just one battle ..

I realized that this was only the beginning.

Chapter 285: Light and Shadow (1)

– Frey Starlight's Pov –

Our journey had just begun .. into a place called Londor.

And to be honest, I had no idea what this place was.

Trapped with no way back, we barely survived the first trial... and that was just the beginning.

I stepped away from Snow and Ghost, who remained near the corpse of the beast we had just slain, and opened the system interface. I needed to know why the system had brought us here. We couldn't afford to wander aimlessly and hope to stumble across what it wanted from us. This place... it was an entire planet.

So once again, the system was my only guide.

The familiar blue screen appeared.

I was expecting a quest. A hint. Anything.

But instead... the three locked slots had been revealed:

Puzzle Pieces:

– Memory: ???

– Sword: ???

– Shield: ???

I read the words again and again.

Puzzle pieces?

Was this some kind of riddle I needed to solve?

No matter how I looked at it, it felt like the system wanted me to find these things.

The sword and shield sounded like material items .. maybe weapons. But "memory"... I had no idea what that one meant.

Still, I had a hunch that one of these pieces would be here, in London.

The sword...

That word stuck with me.

I already had Dark Sister and Balerion .. they were supposed to be among the strongest weapons out there.

So was the system really asking me to find another sword? Or was "sword" meant to be metaphorical?

I sat down on the red sand and sighed, giving up for now.

Overthinking it was only making things worse.

The real issue was: how was I supposed to find any of these pieces?

There wasn't even a hint from the system this time.

Which meant I only had one tool left .. the one that had saved me countless times before.

System Advice.

My own personal compass.

Resting my chin on my palm, I debated how to approach this.

Usually, I'd just use the "direct advice," but I was too afraid of what kind of obstacle it might throw at me this time.

In the worst-case scenario... I might end up facing Lord of Graves, who I recently discovered could be on this planet.

There was absolutely no way ..even if the heavens flipped and the earth shattered .. that I could survive an encounter with one of the Top 10 Demon Lords, especially since each of them possessed one of Agaroth's destructive abilities. And among them, Lord of Graves was easily one of the worst... a monster that brought death wherever he walked.

I had to avoid him at all costs.

Which meant grinding my brain over the vague nonsense of the random advice instead.

Using the achievement points I'd earned from my last mission, I bought one random advice.

– Where should I go if I want to complete the system's mission?

I asked the system, and the screen lit up, revealing the answer to me.

Ding!

— Oh? A random advice ! It's been a while! But what can I say? The dumb user finally decided to use his head!

— Listen closely, and try to understand the words you're about to read! They might just save your life!

— The answer to your question is: The Starborn, Heart of Darkness, The Villainous Hero... the Unlucky Lucky One! And the Crazy Idiot!

— Get it? Of course you don't. But hey .. maybe those words will save you from doom. Who knows?

...

I'd like to say I was surprised by the advice .. but I'd long since gotten used to the system's nonsense.

Still, I couldn't begin to understand how that mess of a description was supposed to point me in any direction.

Scratching my head, I sighed in defeat. That was 250 achievement points... wasted.

And as always, the price changed however the system pleased. A total scam.

With no clue what that string of vague words was supposed to mean, I had no choice but to use the direct route.

Honestly? I hesitated.

I really didn't want to trigger a challenge that would summon The Grave's Lord himself...

But I was running out of options.

Despite everything, I hadn't given up on deciphering the riddle behind the system's random advice. I'd keep searching for answers .. but we couldn't afford to stay idle forever.

For now, I'd move forward, relying on the direct instruction, hoping I'd find the real answer before the "obstacle" showed up.

Direct advice

– Head north.

Straightforward. Easy to understand.

I nearly cursed at the absurd contrast between this and the cryptic nonsense from earlier .. but I had no other option.

"North..."

I got up and made my way back to Snow and Ghost.

They had tried to reason with the deranged creature we'd just fought, but it had only spiraled deeper into madness the moment he uttered the name Grave Lord.

In that state—headless and broken—he left us no choice but to put him down. A merciful end.

"Let's move, guys."

We couldn't stay here any longer.

"Which way?" Ghost asked.

I raised my sword and pointed to the horizon.

"This way."

All three of us stared toward the vast expanse of barren crimson sand stretching into the distance.

We didn't waste time ... we set off immediately, keeping a fast, steady pace.

There was silence for a while, until Snow finally spoke.

"Never thought I'd be running across the surface of another planet."

"Neither did I," I replied shortly.

"But... it looks like we're not the first."

Snow made a good point .. something that creature had said earlier stuck with us.

"He knew humans."

And not only that .. he spoke our language.

"Could there really be humans here?"

If so, the real question was—how?

It was a headache just thinking about it, but not entirely impossible. Many powerful warriors had vanished without a trace in the past ... especially during the old era, when SSS-ranked humans still existed.

"Whether they're here or not... we'll find out eventually."

I had a strong feeling that the existence of humans on this world was directly connected to what I was searching for.

In fact, I was willing to bet on it.

There were too many unknowns, and overthinking it wouldn't help .. so I shifted the topic.

"That creature put us in a tough spot."

Snow nodded. "Yeah... he was insanely strong."

Strong enough that Snow had to use his own version of Ignition ..the Grand cosmic formation formed through Vermithor.

"I didn't know you had another weapon, Frey."

In response, I lifted the black katana still in my hand.

"It belonged to my father."

"Abraham Starlight, huh... that explains the power boost. Impressive."

The Dark Sister definitely enhanced my strength .. but the real surprise wasn't me or my sword. It was someone else I'd been thinking about for a while now.

"I think the real shock here is our quiet friend back there."

Sharing a look, Snow and I both turned to the assassin walking behind us.

"Agreed."

Chapter 286: Light and Shadow (2)

Once all eyes were on him, Ghost knew what was coming.

After all, he had pulled off something neither Vermithor, Dark Sister, nor Balerion could do.

He had thrown his daggers, then unleashed a strike that cleanly sliced through that creature.

"How did you manage to cut him like that?" Snow asked.

Ghost stayed silent for a moment—then finally spoke.

We all had our secrets. Some we'd started sharing lately, and others we still kept hidden.

This time, Ghost chose to reveal a bit of his own.

"I didn't cut him."

"What?" Snow and I asked in unison, confused.

Ghost matched our stride as he explained something we'd never heard from him before.

"All I did was isolate the portion of space he was in. The parts of his body inside the sealed zone remained intact. but the ones outside were simply severed."

He said it without emotion, but what he had done was far from ordinary.

It was complex .. but in simple terms, he had manipulated space itself.

By isolating the exact area he targeted from the rest of the surrounding space, anything outside the boundary was instantly sliced .. erased.

A strike that cut through the very fabric of reality, destroying anything beyond the limit Ghost set.

That ability was absolutely insane!

"Since when did you have something like that?!" Snow asked in disbelief.

If Ghost had used something like that back in the Victoriad, who knows how things might've turned out. The outcome of the entire arc could've changed.

Snow's question seemed to stir something in the silent assassin's memory.

"I came from the Court of Shadows," he said.

Naturally, we were familiar with that organization of assassins .. though only the bare minimum.

Ghost continued.

"The Court exists... and doesn't, at the same time. You can't reach it through conventional means."

Snow and I listened closely.

After all, nothing on the map ever mentioned a place called the "Court of Shadows."

So, as paradoxical as his words sounded... they somehow made sense.

"The Court of Shadows is a brutal training ground that produces the fiercest assassins, as I'm sure you both already know. But those assassins aren't equal. They're ranked and classified under a system .. the Court system."

The Court was unlike anything else.

"There are ten Courts in total. The first five are manageable, but from the sixth to the ninth... they're pure hell."

Was it something like a trial system? A series of missions or death matches?

That's what I imagined. I never fleshed out the Court of Shadows properly in the past .. it was just a concept I introduced on the fly.

But then something caught my attention.

"Why only up to the ninth?" I asked. "Aren't there ten Courts?"

Ghost answered calmly.

"The tenth was always thought to be a myth. No one in history ever reached it. The trial at the end of the ninth is simply... impossible."

His voice held weight. A memory soaked in blood.

"The ten Courts have always existed, shrouded in mystery .. some even believe they weren't created by humans. Over the years, top assassins have tried to reach the final stage. Not a single one succeeded."

"But then..." Ghost paused for a moment. "A few years ago... that changed. I reached the Tenth Court."

At those words, Snow and I looked at him with newfound respect.

I didn't fully understand what that meant, but Ghost had just claimed he achieved something no one else ever had.

Ghost Umbra... was far more important than he let on. And Imhe had learned that the hard way, not so long ago.

He broke the rules of the Court during the Victoriad .. an offense punishable by death. But he lived... while others died.

Because his life was too valuable to lose.

"I can't tell you what I found in the Tenth Court," he said. "But that ability I used earlier... it's something I learned there. And it's not a power I can afford to use in front of too many eyes."

He made it clear that he wouldn't say another word.

But he'd said enough.

"You're incredible, man," I said without thinking.

Snow nodded with a smile.

"I'm glad to have someone like you watching my back... Ghost Umbra."

Knowing our comrade was far stronger than we thought .. it was reassuring. It boosted our chances of survival significantly.

Because who knew what horrors still lay ahead...

...

...

...

Frey and his team continued their journey into the unknown.

Among the three, Ghost's eyes quietly followed Frey's back. His mind drifted to the words he hadn't spoken... the rest of the story.

What he found in the Tenth Court.

What shaped the Ghost Umbra of today.

It wasn't a grand treasure... nor a legendary place.

It was a room.

Just a single dark room, with a wooden chair in the center.

A chair upon which a man sat.

Ghost had only been thirteen when he miraculously passed the Ninth Court.

And what awaited him in the Tenth... was a man.

A man in a long coat and wide-brimmed hat. What stood out were his arms .. arms that were as long as he was tall, over two meters in length.

A strange being. Eerie, almost unsettling. But he smiled when he saw Ghost and welcomed him.

And those arms... were impossible to ignore.

That's why Ghost referred to him as the man with the long arms.

A being unlike anything he had ever seen before.

After surviving the hellish trials of the Court, Ghost found himself face to face with an ending he could've never imagined.

The man with the long arms was calm ..welcoming even as if he had been waiting for Ghost all along.

That mysterious figure... became his mentor. His guide.

"You have no idea, Frey..." Ghost thought quietly as he looked at his friend.

The shadow that follows the light .. Ghost's obsession with finding someone to fight beside, someone to serve from the shadows... it didn't come from nowhere. It wasn't something passed down by Mist, or anyone else.

No.

That ideal... was planted in him by the man with the long arms.

He told Ghost many things. Things that shaped his beliefs. Things that made him search for a "light" whose shadow he could fight from.

And the one Ghost ultimately chose... was Frey.

He tried to hide it as much as he could.

But deep down, Ghost always knew.

That one day, this moment would come.

Because the man with the long arms had already told him what fate awaited him. What he was destined to do. Why the Court of Shadows even existed in the first place.

Ghost had been confused at first. But as he watched Frey's journey ..

Watched him defy logic, change fate, and rise through fire and blood .. he grew certain.

It was him.

Frey Starlight.

Everyone plays their role in this world. And Ghost... he had simply played his part from the very beginning.

Chapter 287: Unveiling the Path (1)

– Frey Starlight's POV –

BOOM!!

Under the night sky lit by those glowing moons above us...

The sound of deafening explosions was the perfect anthem for that night.

After entering what looked like a forest hidden within the endless desert, we found ourselves under attack by Nightmare creatures erupting from underground.

Giant worms with spinning maws of hundreds of razor-sharp teeth, like living buzzsaws.

Exhausted from the battles we'd fought day after day ..

Snow and I leapt at the cursed creatures, which kept diving back into the earth after every strike.

There was only one way to deal with them.

"Ignition!!"

"Great Cosmic Formation!!"

Unleashing our strongest attacks at once, Snow and I launched nuclear-grade assaults, tearing the entire ground apart and reducing those damned worms into scattered pieces beneath the soil.

Once we were done, we both collapsed to the ground, panting heavily.

Hair disheveled, blood dripping from every part of our bodies, armor shattered completely ..

We were in a miserable state.

"One full month..."

It had been a whole month since we entered this land. The desert I thought we'd clear quickly... turned into a month-long trial, and we hadn't even reached its end yet. We were already pushing beyond the limit I'd set for this mission.

It made me question—how massive is this planet called Londor?

What made it worse was that we'd found nothing. All we encountered were relentless attacks from nightmare creatures the likes of which I'd never seen before...

"Are you both alright?" Ghost asked. He was in slightly better shape since he fought from the shadows, but even he had taken a beating from this land.

I waved weakly.

"I'm fine..."

With a motion, I activated the dimensional ring I brought with me and pulled out another set of light armor. This was my fifth change already.

"We can't keep going like this," Snow said, stating the obvious.

"There's no other choice..." I replied simply, the weight of dead ends heavy on my shoulders.

"You said head north, and that's what we've been doing for an entire month ..but all we've found are stronger nightmare creatures than the ones on our planet."

Snow stepped closer, those golden eyes burning with the same determination I'd come to expect from him.

"We've survived so far, but we're reaching our limits, Frey... How much longer can we keep going? A day? A month? And what if the next enemy is the one who ends it all?"

It had taken the full effort of all three of us to survive so far ... and barely at that.

I knew this already. But still...

"Then what do you suggest we do?!" I snapped, a bitter taste filling my mouth.

"Our only lead is to keep heading north. Like it or not... that's the only option we have."

I couldn't turn back now. I had no other choice but to press on—even if we found nothing.

I couldn't allow despair to win just because I'd failed for a month. I had to keep moving north. No matter how long it took.

Trapped in a spiral of negative thoughts, Snow could clearly see the storm inside me.

In a swift motion, he grabbed my head and lifted it to meet his gaze.

"Get a grip, Frey. I'm not saying we should stop. But in our current state, the path ahead might not be the right one either."

I understood what he meant, but it didn't matter .. my only clue was the system's advice.

"As I said before, this is the only—"

"No, it's not."

He cut me off before I could finish.

"There's still that riddle you told us about earlier."

He pointed to the random system advice I had shared with them as a backup—though it had gotten us nowhere so far.

But Snow had another take.

"'Son of the star, heart of darkness, the villainous hero... the cursed lucky fool and the mad idiot...! No matter how I look at it, these are just traits. Descriptions of a person .. not directions.'"

Resting a hand under his chin, Snow began pacing around the area, deep in thought.

"Got something?" Ghost asked, having already given up on the riddle and seated himself on the ground.

"I have a theory... but for now, I'd like to change our course."

Snow suggested.

"Where to, then?" I asked this time.

Although we hadn't found anything yet, that could easily change tomorrow—or maybe even the day after.

I couldn't bring myself to stray from our current path just to try something else...

But Snow had a different opinion.

"For now... we'll head South."

"But—!"

I was about to object, but Snow saw it coming.

"Frey, we've spent an entire month heading north. There's no harm in trying something different. If it fails, we can always go back. That path isn't going anywhere."

With his typical heroic composure and convincing logic, I found myself losing the argument entirely.

"I want you to trust me."

After hearing that, I had no choice but to agree. I couldn't say no .. especially considering he had followed me this far based solely on faith.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I nodded.

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

Snow smiled in return as Ghost rose from his spot.

"South this time, huh?"

"So it seems."

We took a few minutes to recover before setting off again—this time, toward the South.

We moved swiftly through the sandy plains, doing our best to avoid the nightmare creatures. We'd encountered many types so far .. flying beasts from above, feral ones from the front, and even those monstrous worms that attacked from beneath the ground.

The one thing they all had in common... was that even the weakest of them surpassed Rank S.

A ridiculous power scale, even by nightmare Lands standards.

"So this is what it looks like..."

After hours of running and evading nightmare beasts .. creatures we'd grown more adept at dealing with .. Ghost was the first to break the silence.

"What do you mean?"

He scanned the lifeless, barren terrain around us.

"The land that lost to the demons..."

In other words .. this is what humanity's world would look like if we lost.

In fact, maybe that's already happening. Nightmare lands like this... they might be just the beginning.

Time flew by, and I grew more and more convinced that heading South was a mistake.

The system doesn't make mistakes.

I was sure of it.

That thought consumed me .. until something suddenly shifted inside me.

A flutter, like butterflies in my stomach. As if my insides were being stirred by something far away.

I clutched my chest and came to a halt.

Snow and Ghost stopped as well.

"What's wrong?" they both asked.

But I was too focused on the strange sensation to respond.

I couldn't explain it.

It felt as if... something was pulling me.

Like...

"I've been here before..."

A sudden sense of familiarity. Of belonging.

It was powerful .. overwhelming, even.

Before I knew it, I had started running. My eyes glowing faintly with violet light.

Seeing this from behind, Snow nodded with a faint smile.

"Looks like you've found your path."

He said it calmly, but I hated to admit...

He was right.

"The answer to that riddle... was you."

Yeah...

Honestly, I'm still not sure if this feeling is real or not.

But it's strong—so strong I can't ignore it.

In the end, I was the answer.

The moment I neared my goal, I could feel it.

I was the map.

Realizing that, I finally understood what the system's "direct advice" had done to me.

The obstacle... was the advice itself.

By heading north, I was moving away from my destination .. making it impossible for me to sense it.

My blind faith in the system would've led me straight to death this time.

But now that I had a thread to follow...

We pushed forward .. twice as fast.

The feeling inside me kept growing stronger and stronger.

It made me wonder .. what was I about to find?

What was wrong with my body?

I was certain I'd never set foot in this place before...

Yet somehow, the feeling inside told me otherwise.

As if I'd been here not too long ago.

All of it only deepened the confusion clouding my mind...

Chapter 288: Unveiling the Path (2)

The journey dragged on for several more hours.

But this time .. for the first time .. we stepped onto solid ground.

"We're finally out of that damned desert..."

We exhaled in relief as we entered a completely new region.

A forest ..but not just any forest.

Trees with pitch-black bark. Leaves darker than night.

A suffocating atmosphere thick with tainted aura.

If anything, this place felt even worse than the desert we just left behind.

For now, we decided to stop briefly .. just enough to recover some strength and get a bit of sleep.

We did it in shifts.

Two hours of rest per person.

That was the most we could afford before moving out again.

"How's it looking, Frey?"

"We're getting closer."

I didn't know why .. but the feeling kept growing stronger.

Deep inside that black forest...

We finally saw signs of civilization.

But it was buried ... long gone.

We barely made out what looked like old homes, ancient ruins...

But no bodies.

Only destruction.

Among the wreckage, we found remnants of strange carvings—old writings none of us could understand.

"This is strange..." Ghost said, scanning the surroundings.

"There's no trace of any corpses."

As he made his observation, Snow spoke up.

"I guess it makes sense if this place has been abandoned for a long time."

But Ghost shook his head.

"Bodies don't vanish this easily. There's always something left behind..."

Spoken like a true assassin.

Whoever once lived here ... they didn't just die.

They were erased.

That was the message Ghost was trying to get across.

Whatever happened here was a mystery...

But I had no time to dwell on it.

"Let's move," I said to the others—and we surged forward again.

Speeding through the trees...

The three of us stopped at the exact same moment .. forced to, in fact.

The earth trembled beneath our feet. A furious roar shook the skies above.

It was a thunderous sound that made us instantly reach for our weapons.

Whatever was coming... it came from above.

"One of those cursed birds again?" Snow muttered.

We'd fought nightmare beasts shaped like giant eagles with canine heads before.

Naturally, we assumed it was one of them.

But those expectations were crushed on the spot.

Eyes wide open, the three of us stared up at the majestic figure descending from the heavens—

With wings that cast massive shadows and skin covered in glimmering white scales, the creature came crashing down.

Ghost and Snow were just as stunned as I was when they shouted at the same time:

"A dragon?!"

A creature they'd only heard of in old, forgotten legends...

And yet, there it was—flesh and blood, right before our eyes.

But that wasn't the real problem...

What truly paralyzed us was the pressure it radiated.

Our awe had distracted us from noticing the severe wounds covering its body.

He wasn't flying toward us.

He was falling ... injured.

He's massive frame crashed into the ground like a meteor, shaking the entire forest.

The impact carved a path of devastation straight to where we stood.

Groaning in pain, the dragon struggled to rise .. his crimson, glowing eyes locking onto us the moment he steadied himself.

The second he saw our figures .. his pupils narrowed in rage.

And then he roared:

"Filthy humans!!"

His roar shook the earth beneath us, forcing all three of us to instinctively leap back.

"He speaks?!"

Snow shouted in disbelief.

He wasn't just speaking .. he recognized us as humans.

And more than that... he was furious.

His jaws parted wide, revealing the swirling crimson blaze within. A devastating beam of fire erupted forth, and we barely evaded it by diving into Ghost's shadow.

The inferno carved a burning path across the landscape, reducing everything in its wake to ash.

"Why do you humans insist on tampering with powers you cannot control?!"

The dragon bellowed in rage, his flames setting the blackened forest ablaze. The corrupted aura surrounding him grew heavier, thick with fury.

Then, with a powerful surge of his aura, he tore us out from hiding.

Staring him down, my mind raced—but found no answers.

This wasn't just a dragon.

He was a being of the Pantheon .. a species that stood at the apex of all others.

There was no obvious way to harm him. His scaled body was like armor forged by the gods themselves.

And yet, he could burn us to cinders with a single breath.

As he opened his jaws again, ready to finish us off, I summoned all the strength I could.

But I stopped.

My Hawk Eyes caught something ... a flicker in the eastern sky. A spatial ripple, almost imperceptible.

A projectile?

No...

"An arrow..."

A black, high-velocity arrow sliced through the air and struck the dragon's neck with terrifying precision.

A pained roar escaped him as a surge of blood followed. The blow had been devastating—lethal.

I stood frozen, stunned, as a creature of the Pantheon fell before my eyes .. felled in a single strike.

His enormous frame began to shrink, his divine form reverting to something more human-like.

White hair.

A body carved with strange glowing runes.

But blood... there was so much blood.

He was dead.

Snow and Ghost stared at him in silence, their eyes wide.

But mine immediately turned to the sky, to the horizon .. tracing the arrow's path backward.

Using my Hawk Eyes to their absolute limit, I searched... until I found her.

Distant, blurred .. but unmistakable.

A lone figure.

A woman.

Dark skin.

A massive bow that dwarfed her height.

A skull mask veiling her face.

She stared directly at us for a moment...

Then vanished .. without a trace.

There was no doubt in my mind.

I narrowed my eyes, turning back to the crater the dragon had left behind.

She was human.

But not just any human.

My memory was far from perfect, but I could never forget her face.

I had seen her before—in my father's memories.

That woman...

She was one of the four he encountered on that fateful day .. on the shadow sect ..

And now, it seemed...

They were much closer than I ever imagined.

Chapter 289: The Lord of Graves (1)

The dragon's body collapsed .. its colossal form crashing down before gradually morphing into something disturbingly humanoid.

Standing around the lifeless creature, Frey and his companions could barely resist the urge to collapse themselves. They had touched the edge of the world.

They were just ordinary humans .. born and raised on a planet they once believed to be the entirety of existence.

The Gate Cataclysm, centuries ago, had opened new horizons... but only slightly.

For people like them, "the world" had always meant the land beneath their feet.

But that land was nothing more than a black speck on a canvas far grander than they had ever imagined.

After stepping foot on a new world and encountering beings beyond their understanding, they now stood before something that had existed only in myths.

"I'm not hallucinating, am I?" Snow said, his voice unsteady. "That was... that was a dragon, right?"

He was still trying to grasp the impossible .. especially the part where the dragon had taken on a human-like form.

"In truth, their kind is called the Pantheon," Frey replied, his voice steady. "But yes... that was a dragon."

He stepped forward to examine the black arrow that had felled the creature.

The moment his fingers neared it, Frey felt an intense surge of aura still radiating from the shaft. The arrow pulsed with raw power .. unfazed even after delivering a killing blow.

Just from that pressure alone, Frey could tell—the one who fired it had long surpassed SS+ rank. Possibly far beyond that.

Which only raised more questions.

Who were they?

That strange group, the ones aligned with the blue-eyed Engineer...

Frey wanted to find them ... at least talk to them. He had a hunch they were nearby. But locating them at his current level was a fantasy.

For now, all he could do was wait... and hope they'd be the ones to make the next move.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Frey returned his focus to his two traveling companions.

Snow and Ghost were still processing the surreal sight, occasionally murmuring the new word that had left Frey's mouth.

"Pantheon..."

They continued forward, making their way through the scorched forest. The flames hadn't stopped burning.

Frey kept his gaze lowered, unable to meet their eyes.

He had no valid excuse for how he knew so much .. no story that would explain it all. When they'd asked before, all he could offer was: "I'll explain when the time comes."

But what could he possibly say? That he was a reincarnated author with knowledge of the future?

It sounded laughable even to him.

Unable to tell the truth... lost on a foreign planet with no way back... hunted by the most powerful being in existence...

Chaos.

Total, utter chaos.

And Frey was barely holding himself together .. walking a path carved out by someone else.

In moments like this, he longed for the days when his only goal was returning to his family. and his world.

Back then, things had been cruel... but at least they were clear.

Now? He was stuck in a maze he never chose.

And that strange sensation inside him .. an invisible pull ... was growing stronger with each step.

As if countless hands were pushing him forward, urging him to move faster.

"We're close," he finally muttered. It was all he could say.

Leaving the inferno behind, the trio continued their journey, venturing deeper into the heart of the forest.

And then .. they stopped.

They didn't mean to. Their bodies just... froze.

How many times had this happened during their journey?

Frey had lost count. But again, they stood paralyzed by the sight before them.

Ahead lay solid black earth. Above it, a blood-red mist churned, heavy with ominous aura that clawed at their skin.

And within the mist .. hundreds of glowing eyes.

Twisted abominations drifted aimlessly. Hair floated unnaturally upward, and their forms were grotesque mirrors of the nightmare creature they'd once barely defeated.

"Frey... don't tell me that is the way forward," Snow said, voice tight.

Frey nodded slowly, unease etched across his face.

"It is."

The force guiding him pointed directly into the swarm.

"What now?" Snow asked. "We barely took down one. And now we're facing an entire horde?"

It was suicide. Even someone like Maekar Valerion would fall against odds like these.

"Fighting isn't an option," Ghost said. His tone made it clear—this wasn't up for debate.

And neither of them argued.

Normally, Ghost would've followed his instincts .. those instincts screaming at him to turn around and leave this cursed place behind.

But that wasn't an option. Not when they'd already chosen to follow Frey to the very end.

With a heavy sigh, Ghost expanded his shadow and motioned for both Frey and Snow to step closer.

"Our only option is to try and sneak through."

"Is that even possible?" Frey asked.

Stealth was a logical choice, sure .. but how, when they were up against hundreds of nightmare beasts that walked on four legs like monstrous warhorses?

Ghost didn't sugarcoat it.

"To be honest, our chances are slim... but that's the only shot we have."

Relying on his stealth abilities, Ghost was betting they could slip between the beasts and push through while the creatures moved ahead just enough to leave an opening.

It wasn't a perfect plan .. far from it. But it was all they had.

Moving behind the towering creatures, the trio followed Ghost's lead as he spread his dark aura like a cloak over their bodies.

His shadow field masked their presence completely—one of the many assassination techniques he had perfected over the years. But this wasn't like the others.

This time, he was hiding three people—not one.

And their enemies weren't human.

Step by step...

Every meter they covered felt like miles.

They pressed forward, drenched in sweat, the only sound echoing in their ears was the pounding of hooves against the hardened ground ...endless, thunderous.

The crimson fog thickened with every step, swallowing everything in a haze of blood and shadow.

They couldn't even see the beasts clearly anymore ... only silhouettes, only hoofbeats.

Ready to sprint for their lives the moment they were discovered, they pushed forward, inch by painful inch.

Time passed—slowly, agonizingly—but it passed.

And they weren't found.

A rare stroke of luck, one they didn't dare take for granted.

Frey allowed himself a flicker of hope.

That hope vanished the moment his eyes locked .. briefly, unmistakably—with one of the monstrous horse-like creatures.

He froze.

Just for a second. But a second was more than enough.

The beast had seen him. Of that, Frey was sure.

Panic surged through his limbs. He nearly shoved Ghost and Snow to run.

But...

The creature didn't attack.

Instead, it turned its massive head and walked away—completely uninterested in their presence.

Frey blinked, stunned.

Had it really seen him?

Ghost and Snow had felt it too.

"They're... ignoring us?"

"It's hard to believe," Snow murmured.

Carefully, Ghost withdrew his shadow aura.

Step by step, they approached the towering beasts again .. closer than before.

They waited for something—anything—to happen.

But the monsters didn't react. Didn't even flinch.

"It's like we don't exist to them..."

Confused but unwilling to waste the opportunity, they continued forward—slipping unnoticed through a crowd of nightmares.

They walked for what felt like hours. The beasts didn't stop. The red fog grew thicker, heavier, as if bleeding from the sky itself.

There were thousands of them—each stronger than an S-rank creature. All wandering aimlessly through the haze.

Frey found himself wondering the same question that was etched across Snow and Ghost's faces:

What would happen if an army like this descended upon Earth one day?

And worse...

This army had lost—utterly—to just a fraction of the demons' true power.

Frey had come here searching for answers.

So far, all he'd found was despair.

It was as if he'd been forced into a game where losing was the only outcome.

At some point, the ground beneath their feet changed.

No longer solid, it turned soft ... sticky.

Their boots squelched against something they couldn't see. Something that resisted beneath every step.

Chapter 290: The Lord of Graves (2)

The fog had thickened so much, it completely blinded them. They could barely breathe through the weight of the corrupted aura pressing down from every direction.

Every step stirred the stench of rot and decay—an unbearable odor that clung to their lungs and minds like poison.

Frey tried not to ask the question.

But he couldn't stop himself.

"What exactly are we walking on?"

Driven by a surge of curiosity, Frey slowly leaned forward, trying to get a better look at the blood-slick ground beneath them.

With the help of his Hawk Eyes, everything came into sharp focus—and his face darkened with every passing second.

That wasn't just some slimy terrain.

The solid black earth was still there underneath...

What they were walking on... was flesh and blood.

The tension spiked violently when he realized it.

They were treading over corpses.

Thousands—no, far more than that.

Twisted, mutilated bodies had been laid across the ground like some grotesque carpet.

They were skinned, featureless... just raw muscle and hints of mouths and eyes that had once belonged to living beings.

The red fog, the wandering beasts, the absolute silence ..

Frey couldn't help but wonder.

Had they stepped into a nightmare crafted to resemble hell itself?

Because it certainly felt like it.

Luckily, the three of them were used to blood. If not, they might've broken long ago.

But even they were starting to reach their limit.

"What the hell happened here...?" Snow muttered, his voice shaky as he took in the most horrifying sight of his life.

"A massacre..."

That was the only word that fit.

A grotesque genocide, where creatures that once lived in peace were torn apart, mutilated beyond recognition.

Words could no longer express what they saw.

The only thing they could do now—was get out.

They pushed forward...

And then, things got worse.

Frey suddenly froze—something was clinging to his leg.

Panicked, he looked down and saw a pair of hands gripping his ankle.

The corpse beneath him let out a soft, broken moan.

He tried to kick it off instinctively .. but everything spiraled into madness the moment all the corpses beneath them began to twitch.

Weapons drawn, hearts racing, they braced for the assault.

But the attack never came.

Instead, the corpses began to crawl... trying to flee.

"Mercy..."

The word came from every direction.

"Mercy... please... have mercy."

They were begging.

"Have mercy upon us"

These things—these skinned, broken bodies—were pleading for their lives.

Frey immediately dropped to one knee, grabbing the one that had held onto him, desperate for answers amid the chaos.

"What happened here?!"

The corpse trembled, voice raw and low.

"Oh, oh .. you...help me. He is...the hideous, Aah, Have mercy..Have mercy upon us... H-he... the Great Evil... the Nightmare... the Beast of Beasts... he did this to us..."

Whoever this was—whatever he had endured—Frey could feel the agony radiating from his voice alone.

"Mercy... mercy..."

The cries grew louder. Louder than ever. The dead were awake, scrambling in terror, dragging what was left of their bodies away like insects.

A moment ago, there had been silence.

Now, it was madness.

He'd mentioned a great evil.

"Who?!" Frey shouted. "Who did this?!"

What could have possibly caused such a massacre?

The answer came with a name that turned his blood cold.

"The Lord of Graves..."

Him again.

Frey cursed under his breath as the screams around them intensified.

The corpse in his arms began sobbing ... wet, choking cries that turned to blood.

"We waited... waited for so long... for his return... but he never came back."

The corpse grieved aloud.

"So many of us chose to fight rather than wait... but all that awaited us... was something worse than death..."

Frey could barely hear him anymore. Between the screams, the reeking air, and Ghost and Snow yelling at him to move, everything blurred.

"Who did you wait for?!"

He shouted with all he had.

"Our king..."

The corpse replied.

"But he never came. We should have never left the Crownlands... It was the only haven, the only place safe from the Lord of Graves..."

And then—

As if summoned by his name ..

A pressure swept through the land.

A monstrous aura, unlike anything Frey—or even Snow—had ever felt before.

A suffocating force that stole the air from their lungs.

"...Too late."

The corpse whispered.

"He's already here."

Those words hit like a falling star.

The pressure rose ... overwhelming, inescapable.

Something was coming.

Something terrifying.

"FREY!!"

Snow and Ghost shouted in unison, panic lacing their voices as they prepared to flee.

But the presence ...they couldn't outrun it.

"FREY!!!"

They called again.

"SHUT UP!!!"

Frey roared back, face twisted with rage and something deeper—something primal.

With both hands, he drew his blades.

Blood surged.

Aura exploded.

He entered his full ascension—activating every ounce of power he had left.

Channeling the ocean of aura within him, Frey stood firm as the earth beneath them began to tremble.

He was close.

Time was running out.

Without hesitation, Frey shouted at Snow and Ghost, ordering them to use the latter's ability and retreat into his shadow.

Given the terror of the moment, neither of them argued.

As they vanished into the darkness, Frey clenched his teeth, bracing himself for what was coming. His worst fear had come true—the enemy he never wanted to face was approaching fast.

There was only one option left...

Run.

Lowering his stance like a sprinter at the starting line, Frey focused all the aura in his body into his legs. With a roar:

"Ignition!!!"

This time, he didn't ignite his blades—but his legs.

The ground shattered beneath him as a massive explosion of violet aura launched Frey Starlight like a missile through the air.

The spot where he'd stood moments ago turned into a crater of pure devastation. The moaning corpses were obliterated in an instant.

As for Frey... he was nowhere near the impact site anymore.

With his legs nearly destroyed, blood dripping like water from pulverized muscle, Frey rocketed through the landscape, tearing through stone, terrain—even mountain ridges—until he finally crashed down, far, far away.

Collapsed on the ground, his breathing labored, Frey's feet were nothing more than a mangled, bloody mess.

But his face didn't relax for even a second—because that monstrous aura... it was still coming.

Whatever that thing was, it hadn't stopped hunting them.

Snow and Ghost emerged from the shadow immediately.

The sight of Frey horrified them—but they didn't have the luxury to react.

Snow grabbed both of them, summoning every ounce of power he had left.

"Void Step!!"

Activating his strongest ability ..

Snow vanished, then reappeared, then vanished again in rapid succession, teleporting them as far away as he could, again and again.

"Void Step!!"

How many kilometers had they crossed?

He didn't know.

He only knew one thing:

He couldn't stop.

The pressure behind them made his heart feel like it would burst. A sensation he hadn't felt in a long, long time ..

Fear.

A fear deeper than anything he had ever known.

A monster among monsters.

"Void Step!!"

Over and over, Snow pushed further, farther, faster—refusing to look back.

Because if he did... he might've seen the land itself turn black behind them, as death spread and consumed all life in its path.

"Void Ste—"

Snow halted mid-step.

Frey and Ghost froze with him.

Beads of sweat rolled down their skin. Their bodies wouldn't move.

The suffocating aura was gone...

But the dread—it had never been greater.

Because beneath their feet, a massive shadow began to swell and stretch.

The shadow of something standing right behind them.

-Thump-

-Thump-

-Thump-

Their heartbeats became the only sound in their ears.

With excruciating hesitation, they slowly turned their heads—

—and heard it.

A sharp, piercing hiss.

What stood behind them defied reason itself.

Shrouded in a cloak of corrupted aura, with a face like a skeletal mask carved from bone, its hollow eye sockets glowed with crimson light.

He had come.

The last being they wanted to meet.

The air itself froze as the creature slowly extended his hand toward them.

None of them could move.

Even Frey, barely holding himself together, felt his mind slip at the sight.

Rank Six of the demon's upper Seats...

The Lord of Graves... Asmodeus.