

VILLAIN 291

Chapter 291: From Nightmare to Nightmare

Time refused to move forward.

Frey and his companions could barely breathe as they found themselves standing before him.

The overwhelming pressure that crushed their bodies made it impossible to think—let alone act.

All they could do in that moment was freeze, awaiting his next move... like lambs patiently waiting for the blade.

Snow had lost all awareness, not even realizing he had knocked Frey over—Frey, who could no longer stand after his legs had been blown apart.

Now lying on the ground, Frey stared up at the demon before him.

But this wasn't just a demon.

It was death itself, standing at their doorstep.

Asmodeus didn't speak ... not even a single word. Whether he was capable of speech at all was uncertain. All that escaped the skeletal maw was a constant hiss, a sound that deepened their terror with every passing second.

Frey had once stood before the Demon King himself .. Agaroth.

But that had only been a distant echo of the real thing. A projection, diluted and incomplete.

The pressure Asmodeus unleashed now, however, made that memory seem insignificant. This wasn't a projection.

This... was the real thing.

'We're going to die'

That thought struck them all at once.

They were going to die ... unable to lift a finger in defense.

Only now did they realize how foolish they had been to ever believe they could face something like this.

The Lord of Graves extended his hand. Everything moved in slow motion. Frey and the others could do nothing but gasp for air as they awaited the end.

Swooooosh.

Their fear blinded them to the fact that the demon's hand had stopped.

Still outstretched toward them, it had been halted .. not by will, but by force.

In the same instant, a ripple spread outward, releasing a powerful aura that revealed a thin membrane—an invisible barrier separating Frey and the others from the abomination before them.

The air grew heavier as Asmodeus pushed harder against that barrier.

Frey, collapsed on the ground, stared in awe as he gradually began to regain his senses.

Slowly regaining control over his body, stared in disbelief.

The terror the Lord of Graves had buried in their hearts had dulled their senses—so much so that they hadn't even noticed how far they'd been pushed back during their desperate retreat.

Gradually, Frey and the others began to take in their surroundings.

Only now did they notice the transparent veil that split the world in two.

On one side .. the fertile, green ground they stood upon. And beyond the barrier .. a lifeless black wasteland.

Then it happened.

A surge of dark aura erupted skyward as the Lord of Graves launched a devastating strike, trying to shatter the barrier.

BOOM!!

His blows rocked the earth, making it tremble as if weeping over its own doom.

Asmodeus wasn't a creature to fight.

He was a calamity.

Each of his attacks far surpassed anything the trio had ever witnessed.

And he didn't stop at one.

He unleashed hundreds.

Each one strong enough to erase them from existence.

But the true miracle wasn't the demon's fury...

It was the barrier.

That fragile, translucent veil held.

"Unbelievable..."

That thought echoed in their minds.

Even knowing the barrier stood between them and the monster, they couldn't move.

They sat there, helpless, as the Lord of Graves rained down his wrath, the earth quaking beneath them.

Amid the chaos, as he lay on the ground, Frey glanced at his companions.

They were spellbound, completely overtaken by the monstrous display.

Frey closed his eyes.

'Look closely...'

He thought, even as the searing pain from his shattered legs failed to bring him back from the terror.

Look closely at the true power of a being that stands at the very top of this world...

It was time to wake up.

The humans who believed they had won the war centuries ago...

It was time to face reality.

Before a being that had surpassed even the SSS rank...

This was the moment to understand.

This one entity alone could wipe out humanity.

Before the embodiment of death, that delicate barrier was their only shield.

And they could only pray it wouldn't break.

Asmodeus's assault continued for only a few minutes—but the destruction he left behind was immense.

The good news?

He failed.

The monster couldn't breach the barrier that stood proudly before him.

Frey and the others were left in awe.

What kind of spell was this?

More importantly...

What kind of being had cast such a barrier—one capable of withstanding an assault from the sixth upper rank demon?

By now, Frey and the others had fully regained themselves, scrambling to put as much distance as they could between them and the nightmare that had shown them a new definition of fear.

Their desperate retreat hadn't gone unnoticed.

The Lord of Graves had seen everything through his hollow eyes.

His skull-like face showed no emotion...

But the aura around him told a different story.

He opened his mouth.

And from the depths of hell itself, a sound emerged.

A scream.

A wail.

A distorted, soul-chilling shriek.

Frey and the others couldn't even begin to describe that horrid sound.

But it never failed to make every hair on their bodies stand on end.

"What is he doing?!" Snow asked, but none of them had an answer.

Why was that thing... screaming?

As they waited for some kind of explanation, the ground beneath them began to shake again—this time, violently.

But Asmodeus wasn't the cause.

Something else was.

Frey was the first to realize what was happening—his Hawk Eyes catching the truth.

"That's not a scream..."

His eyes widened.

"That's a call."

From the distance, they saw them .. hundreds, no, thousands of nightmarish creatures emerging.

Those creatures that had once ignored them completely—allowing them to pass unharmed—were now charging at them like mad beasts.

Grotesque monsters, vaguely shaped like horses, sprinted toward them in a frenzy.

Nightmare beasts, completely mindless.

And the one who had driven them insane... was none other than the Lord of Graves himself.

"Is he trying to use that army to attack us?!"

There were thousands of them, and they were quickly closing in on the barrier.

But ..

"What does he hope to accomplish with this? Even that damned demon's attacks couldn't break through the barrier .. how would these creatures do it?"

If a being of SSS-rank couldn't shatter the barrier, then what hope did low-tier nightmare beasts have?

It wasn't a flawed observation.

But Snow's words made Frey realize something far more important.

"Demon...?"

Frey's expression darkened.

Because he finally understood something crucial.

That seemingly invincible barrier... had already been breached.

And not by some overwhelmingly powerful entity or monster.

The ones who had entered... were them. Frey and his companions.

They had passed through without even noticing it.

In other words—

With a sharp cry, Frey shouted:

"Run! As fast as you can .. now!!"

That barrier wasn't absolute.

It was designed to block specific targets.

And those targets could be summed up in a single word: Demon.

Meaning...

"Anything else can pass through !!"

And just like that—Frey's warning proved true.

Chapter 292: A Blade in the Blood

The nightmare beasts surged past Asmodeus and continued straight through the barrier, as if it wasn't even there.

The Lord of Graves vanished among the monstrous tide.

And Frey and his companions understood the scale of the disaster the moment they saw that army pouring in toward them.

They were in the thousands.

They had survived the ultimate nightmare...

Only to find another waiting for them.

Ghost immediately stepped forward while Snow grabbed Vermethor, channeling as much holy energy as he could in a desperate attempt to heal Frey's legs.

Ghost extended his hands, manipulating the void using his full power.

"space cleave!"

Unleashing the same strange force from before, Ghost tore through space and time, trying to wipe out the oncoming horde.

His strike was strong enough to cut down even the most durable of them—but in the face of an army that size, it was barely a scratch.

Ghost repeated the technique again and again.

But reality hit hard.

Even though he succeeded in killing some, the blood gushing from his eyes and nose was a brutal reminder ..

He wasn't strong enough to wield that power freely.

Meanwhile, after tending to Frey's legs, Snow looked up at the rapidly approaching army, his mind racing for a way to survive.

'Should I use the Void Step?'

He considered it.

But he quickly realized it was a bad idea. He didn't have enough aura left.

And as if reading his thoughts—

Frey placed a hand on Snow's shoulder, glowing with a deep violet light.

In the next moment, an overwhelming surge of aura poured into Snow's body.

"Don't hesitate. We have to survive. No matter what it takes!"

Drawing both Balerion and the Dark Sister, Frey stood tall as Snow nodded in response.

They knew now that escape wasn't an option. Those monsters would chase them to the ends of the world if they had to.

And so, Frey and Snow charged forward, unleashing their full power in a desperate attempt to survive.

Within seconds, the clash began.

The Champion of the Victoriad and the Hero of the Church .. the finest of the new human generation .. dived into the heart of the monstrous tide, tearing through them like madmen.

Frey unleashed wave after wave of dark aura, while Snow unleashed every elemental technique in his arsenal.

They shone brightly.

But their light dimmed slowly amidst the endless swarm.

At some point—coated in blood and filth—they could no longer tell what their blades were cutting.

They simply struck at anything that came close.

As for Ghost, he fought to support them with everything he had.

Swinging his sword left and right ..

Frey turned suddenly, sensing something touch his back.

But he stopped—just in time—before cutting down the figure behind him.

It was Snow, now standing back-to-back with him.

They had nearly struck each other down... but froze instead, bloodied and breathless, as they realized the full extent of the disaster.

They were completely surrounded.

From the east and the west. From the north and the south.

From every direction ..

Nightmare beasts.

An unending horde of them.

Their eyes met. Frey and Snow exchanged a silent nod.

All Frey wanted to say in that moment was one word:

"Sorry..."

Not sorry for his own fate, but for leading Snow and Ghost into a death trap they never should've walked into.

But Snow's eyes understood. He didn't blame him. Men are responsible for their own choices—and Snow had come of his own free will, not anyone else's.

If he were to blame anyone...

He would blame himself .. for his weakness, and his powerlessness.

"If we get another life... let's try to do better."

With a bloody smile, Snow spoke what he believed would be his final words ..bracing for the end

But the end he was waiting for never came.

Instead, something entirely different did.

A sharp screech. The sound of metal grinding against metal.

It tore through the battlefield like a blade through silence.

And once more .. time itself seemed to freeze.

A savage storm descended, and blood exploded everywhere, raining down like a crimson flood.

Clean.

So clean.

That was all Frey and the others could think when they saw the nightmare creatures sliced to pieces—cut with terrifying precision.

Blue slashes of destructive aura, shaped like arcs, swept through the battlefield, turning the horde into shredded meat.

The strikes hit only what needed to be struck, never touching Frey and his companions at the center of it all.

Blood rained over their heads, soaking them until they looked like corpses themselves.

But their eyes—still very much alive—searched for the source of that stunning assault.

And soon, they found their answer.

From within the sea of blood and corpses, with slow, deliberate steps...

An old man approached.

Bent over with age, wearing an old black suit—still immaculately clean, a sharp contrast to the filth around him.

He held a katana in one hand, and a cane in the other. His wrinkled face rose to meet them.

Frey, without even thinking, ran toward him .. staggering through the pool of blood.

Snow and Ghost were stunned...

"Another human?"

But Frey recognized him.

His father had once met four individuals from the Shadow Sect.

A man with a spear. A dark-skinned woman. A strange child who floated in the air...

And a hunched old man.

The one standing before him now—was the fourth.

Frey rushed through the bloody lake. But as the danger faded, so did his adrenaline.

Pain rushed back in. The searing agony of torn muscles and shattered legs overwhelmed him.

He collapsed before the old man's feet, bloodied even more than before.

But the old man didn't step back.

Instead, he stepped forward.

Frey, shaking from everything he had endured, clung to the man's coat—staining it with his blood.

Barely able to speak, he looked up at the elder and pleaded.

"Please..."

He clutched him tightly, afraid he might vanish.

The old man gently ran his hand over Frey's body, searching for his face.

That's when Frey realized...

"He can't see..."

The powerful old man was blind.

He had lost his sight long ago.

Frey asked him ..

"What do you want from me?"

Why had the system forced him through this journey?

"What the hell was I supposed to find in this pit of hell?!"

He demanded answers, desperate and angry.

But the old man only continued to trace Frey's face .. before offering a calm, deep smile.

A smile of peace.

As if a great burden had finally been lifted from his shoulders.

He said nothing.

Instead, he simply pointed behind him.

He had given Frey his answer.

"There?"

If you want your answers... then go there.

The old man, who had just displayed power on par with the SSS-rank, had completed his mission.

Frey still clung to him, trying to extract more—more answers to the questions tormenting him.

Who is the Engineer?

Who were those four?

What happened more than 300 years ago?

But the old man said nothing.

He simply patted Frey's shoulder.

Then gently helped him to his feet.

As if to say ... don't fall. Keep going.

The old man's smile was the last thing Frey saw...

Before he vanished.

Like he had never been there at all.

But the sea of blood, and the carefully dissected remains of the nightmare beasts, proved otherwise.

Standing in that ocean of carnage, Frey and the others finally understood.

They had found their next destination.

Chapter 293: Crownlands (1)

Slowly... the sky shed its crimson veil and donned the black cloak of night, marking the end of yet another hellish day—

here, in Londor.

As darkness settled, the only source of light for the three battered warriors came from the three colossal moons overhead.

Exhausted, they dragged their broken bodies away from the lake of blood and corpses .. now a feast for the circling crows.

The elegant armor that once covered their bodies had been torn to shreds, along with their flesh, leaving behind deep wounds and grotesque bruises.

They were drenched in filth, as if they'd been rolling through mud for hours.

In that miserable state, Frey and his companions climbed a hill—slightly higher than the surrounding terrain.

The moment they reached the top, they collapsed.

No longer able to move.

They sat in silence, staring at one another.

The only sounds were their heavy breathing, and the harsh caws of the crow-like creatures devouring the nightmare beasts below.

Looking at each other now, Frey couldn't help but remember their first day in Londor—how they had arrived with excitement, in full strength, clad in vibrant armor...

Now, they looked worse than beggars.

"Hehehe..."

Frey was the first to break the silence, laughing under his breath.

"Pfft."

Snow followed, sharing the same thoughts.

"They really got us, huh?"

"You said it."

Both of them burst into tired, bitter laughter ... a kind of mournful amusement at their pitiful state.

"Where's your usual charm now? That signature white hair and those golden eyes of yours... You look like a street rat. I bet the girls would run away the moment they see you."

Frey mocked Snow, whose hair had turned reddish from all the blood that had soaked him.

"Oh, look who's talking," Snow smirked. "One glance is enough to see you're the most pitiful one here."

He lightly tapped Frey's leg, earning a groan in response.

"You can't even walk properly! How do you plan to keep going in that condition?"

Laughing despite the pain, Frey bent his legs with effort, looking at Snow.

"Even when I can't walk... I'm still faster than you."

"Bullshit. Look at yourself, oh mighty Champion of the Victoriad. If I were you, I'd bury my head in a hole."

"You're no better, promised Hero of the Church. That so-called divine light of yours was pretty dim back there."

They exchanged jabs, mocking each other, while Ghost sat silently between them, eyes closed, not saying a word.

The laughter lingered a while longer... before fading into quiet.

Their loud voices slowly diminished as they sat in stillness, eyes fixed on the ground.

"We were completely defeated," Snow finally said.

"...Yes," Frey replied.

"We overestimated our strength."

"...Yes."

"We're just insects crawling in the dirt, beneath monsters that soar across realms and dimensions."

Frey stared at the ground for a few seconds before answering.

"...Yes."

Truth had a bitter taste.

A very bitter one.

To be weak in a world ruled by power .. was a curse.

Frey and the others now understood just how painful it was to be powerless—so powerless that their lives meant nothing, mere toys in the hands of others.

The Lord of Graves had decided their lives would end. And there was nothing they could do to stop him.

It was luck and that blind old man who had saved them.

And once again, it wasn't their will... it wasn't their choice.

Frey slowly raised his head, fully grasping that cruel truth.

"...So what now?"

What do you do when you finally realize your own insignificance?

Do you turn back? Tail between your legs, burdened by shame and defeat?

Do you accept the dark fate that awaits, and bow before those titans looming above?

Frey and Snow looked at each other—then smiled at the same time.

A weary smile.

No words were needed.

Snow rose to his feet, gripping Vermithor, and walked with heavy steps toward the center of their small camp.

There, at that precise spot, he drove the blade into the ground.

Vermethor immediately released a wave of holy energy, enveloping the three of them in a circular dome that glowed with a soft green light—gently beginning to heal their wounds.

Despite their shattered bodies, despite the blood, the pain, and the filth—

Their eyes still burned sharper than ever.

After all... if there was one thing they had grown used to, it was despair.

No matter how many times it crushed them—slamming them into the dirt—as long as life still clung to their bodies,

they would rise again.

Again and again... until the bitter end.

The three of them sat there as their bodies slowly healed.

None of them slept.

Fueled by fury, they turned that seething emotion into the fire that kept their broken bodies moving.

None of them looked back.

Retreat was never an option.

Even if they chose to run... the Lord of Graves still waited beyond the barrier.

And even if they somehow made it past him ..

There was no road leading home.

Their path had remained the same from the beginning: the one the strange old man had pointed them toward.

Time passed.

The sky turned red... then black... then red again, three full cycles.

None of them knew how time worked on this wretched planet.

But they waited.

Patiently.

Until the soft green glow emitted by Vermithor faded—its light disappearing when there was nothing left to heal.

That pure light had mended torn flesh and broken bone, restoring Frey and the others to a state where they could at least fight again.

Once healed, the three of them cleaned themselves up one last time before changing their armor and gear.

As he pulled his new armor from the dimensional ring, Frey realized something.

Looking inside, he saw food and water—just enough to keep them alive.

But what caught his attention was the piece of armor in his hand.

It was the last one.

How long had it been since they arrived in this land?

He'd stopped counting after they passed the one-month mark...

But it was far more than that for sure.

In that moment, Frey realized ..

They were approaching their limits.

Whatever awaited them at the end of that dark path, they had to reach it—soon.

"Let's move," Frey said quietly, before surging forward with the others.

Their bodies, now vessels of aura, surged across the land at speeds that left nothing behind but afterimages—blurs like bullets cutting through the wind.

The terrain ahead was wide open.

A vast plain with nothing on it.

It stretched out before them like a ceremonial carpet, as if welcoming them toward the main event.

From the look of the land .. and the strange barrier they had passed .. Frey guessed this was Crownlands, the one spoken of by those whipped corpses.

And despite their incredible speed, the scenery ahead never changed...

A testament to how immense this land truly was.

They ran.

And ran.

Chapter 294: Crownlands (2)

Frey kept his Hawk Eyes active, constantly surveying the distance far ahead.

But the view remained the same.

Until the third day on Crownlands.

Frey's subtle unease was enough to alert both Snow and Ghost, who quickly asked:

"Something ahead?"

Frey responded immediately.

"Something's waiting for us... and a lot of it."

He could barely see it .. a distant mirage. But what he was certain of was this:

a massive number of strange beings lay in wait.

"Worst-case scenario, it's another army," Frey said, worry evident in his voice.

Snow and Ghost tensed, their expressions hardening.

Frey didn't say it out loud, but the size of the army he saw was far greater than the one they had faced before.

So vast, he couldn't see its end.

He wondered what kind of battle awaited them now...

That question lingered for quite some time as they continued running.

And then .. after what felt like an eternity, with their nerves frayed and dread mounting under the weight of anticipation...

They finally arrived.

Frey and the others came to a stop, eyes wide as they took in the sight before them.

The army was enormous.

So enormous that what they had mistaken for ground in the distance... had been them all along.

They all wore the same tattered black robes. Their bodies were slightly larger than an average human's.

All of them lay sprawled on the ground.

Prostrated.

Face down.

Motionless.

Frey approached one of them cautiously, curious why they hadn't reacted to their presence.

The moment he touched the figure ..

It crumbled.

Collapsing into ash.

The wind scattered it like dust.

Stunned, Frey checked the others—eyes wide—while Snow and Ghost did the same.

And that was when the three of them finally understood.

The massive army before them...

Was nothing more than a field of skeletons.

Corpses so ancient that time had reduced them to nothing but dust.

Confused, the three of them looked at each other...

"They're all dead," Frey said, and Ghost confirmed:

"And they've been dead for a long, long time."

Whatever era these skeletal beings had once belonged to ... it was long gone.

But what caught their attention... was the way they died.

"They died while bowing..."

From the remnants left behind .. the posture of their bodies, the way their heads were lowered .. it was clear they had died prostrating before something.

Before someone or something.

"They waited... until their veins dried, until their bodies withered away..."

Whatever strange race they once belonged to...

They had died here. On their knees. Waiting for something to come.

It hadn't been demons that killed them.

Protected inside this barrier, their killer had been time itself.

Realizing this truth sent a chill through Frey and the others.

"What kind of loyalty is that...?"

Who was this great king that compelled such devotion ... devotion so absolute that an entire people remained kneeling until nothing remained of them but bone?

To Frey and his companions, that level of loyalty seemed like pure madness.

Frey turned his gaze forward—toward the direction every single corpse had been facing.

But all he could see...

Was more bodies. More bowed skeletons. More of the same.

"Let's go," he said flatly, beginning to walk through the field of kneeling corpses.

They wove their way between the fallen.

The scene repeated itself endlessly.

All of them had died the same way.

Driven by a growing curiosity to uncover what lay at the end of this graveyard path, Frey and the others continued.

But the corpses never stopped.

And that only deepened their unease.

After walking for what felt like an eternity, they realized they had become a speck ..a single drop in an ocean of death.

Their numbers...

Had reached the millions.

"Maybe..." Snow said, stunned,

"Maybe this is where all of London's inhabitants ended up."

Frey nodded, remembering what that lashed corpse had told them.

It had said clearly: they waited for so long that some eventually chose to fight, while the rest remained behind... still waiting.

"Those who chose to fight met a fate worse than death... forced to face the Lord of Graves himself."

Understanding that grim truth, Frey continued:

"But those who chose to wait... died here, kneeling—waiting for a king who never returned."

Between death... and a fate worse than death...

The three of them finally grasped the full extent of Londor's tragedy.

And with that realization, there was nothing left to do but keep moving.

Step after step... they passed through this ancient, forgotten mass of mourners.

Then ..

Without warning, a strange shiver ran down Frey's spine.

His heart pounded.

That same feeling from before returned—but stronger this time.

And that was when something else appeared before them.

For the first time, something other than corpses.

It stood in the distance, but they could see it clearly.

A towering structure... looming ahead.

"A castle?" Frey murmured, staring at the massive building forged from a strange black stone that shimmered like metal.

The moon hovered above that monolithic castle, casting pale light across the one place every single corpse had been kneeling toward...

Like pilgrims... who had finally found their sacred destination.

From every direction, the bodies surrounded it .. making the fortress look like an island in the middle of a vast, lifeless sea.

The castle was larger than anything the three of them had ever seen.

So massive, it made the Emperor's palace look like a worthless shack by comparison.

And the feeling growing inside Frey's chest...

Confirmed that this place—this castle—was their true destination.

Step by step, they moved forward ..

Until at last, they reached the edge of the sea of corpses.

It was there, at the final line of skeletons, that Frey and the others realized something else:

The kneeling dead had left a clear space between themselves and the black castle.

A wide, circular gap.

Untouched.

No one had dared cross that final threshold.

Beyond it stood the castle gate.

But that wasn't all.

Frey's eyes went wide as he saw what stood before it.

Guarding the entrance...

Was a statue.

A towering figure, over four meters tall, gripping a double-edged scythe.

His body was made of a dark, metallic material .. like forged shadow.

A statue.

A statue with a face Frey had never seen before.

He had seen smiles.

He had seen sorrow.

But this one...

This one wore rage.

There it stood .. the statue of fury.

An ancient sentinel, standing guard over a timeless castle.

Chapter 295: Angry (1)

"An angry mask... Angry?"

Without realizing it, Frey gave one of his signature nicknames to the strange statue with the furious expression.

Standing amid the sea of kneeling corpses, both Snow and Ghost stared at the massive figure that stood between them and the castle beyond.

"Do you know what that thing is?" Snow asked, eyes still fixed on Frey.

"I know his brothers."

Frey's answer was the last thing Snow expected to hear.

"Brothers?"

"On second thought, he looks more like their father... I don't remember Smiley or Sad being this big."

Faced with Frey's cryptic nonsense—impossible to decipher—Snow gave up on extracting any useful information from him.

"It looks dead to me."

Ghost, ignoring the pair's exchange, offered his own take as he observed the statue.

Angry hadn't moved an inch. The hollows in his furious mask revealed nothing but blackness ... void of light or life.

"Whether it's alive or not doesn't matter. We need to enter that castle."

What Frey sought was inside. He could feel it now more than ever ... the fire in his chest burning brighter, guiding him to this place.

"Then let's move."

At that moment...

The trio took their first step into the empty ring that separated the castle from the ocean of corpses.

One step...

Then another.

They moved deeper into the void between the kneeling dead and the silent fortress.

That's when the earth began to shake.

A massive tremor froze them in place as Frey grinned with wild delight.

"I knew it..."

As if some hidden mechanism had been triggered ..

Angry lit up with a violet glow, and his metal body began to tremble violently, unleashing a crushing wave of aura.

"Shit..."

Snow cursed, drawing Vermithor, as all three prepared for battle.

The statue pulled his giant scythe from the earth, twirling it effortlessly before assuming a battle stance.

"Wait! I know your brothers!"

In an absurd gesture, Frey waved at Angry.

"We're not enemies!"

He pleaded with the massive figure before him, using logic that wouldn't convince a sane human—let alone a statue with a face carved in rage.

But to everyone's surprise, Angry didn't move.

Still. Silent.

Snow and Ghost stared in disbelief.

"Did... did that actually work?"

Was it even possible to reason with that thing?

Their confusion was written all over their faces.

Frey half-smiled—surprised at his own unexpected success.

But that smile vanished the moment his Hawk Eyes reflected the gleam of the statue's massive scythe.

He barely reacted in time ...

In a blink, Angry had vanished and reappeared right in front of him.

"When did he get there?!"

Frey barely blocked the swing with his swords—

and was sent flying, crashing through the earth, leaving a trail of destruction behind him.

"So be it! No choice but to fight!"

Snow launched himself at Angry, unleashing a blazing star-infused aura as he swung his blade with all his might.

The clash of metal echoed for miles as Angry parried the blow effortlessly, dispersing all the explosive aura in an instant.

From beneath the statue's feet, Ghost's shadows emerged...attempting to bind it.

But with a single violent stomp, Angry shattered the ground—and Ghost's shadows along with it.

Then, wielding his scythe at blinding speed, the furious statue unleashed a barrage of devastating strikes on Snow, who struggled to defend as the earth crumbled beneath him.

Ghost, now in his Reaper Form, joined the fray—wielding a scythe of dark, potent aura.

But the moment his weapon clashed with Angry's...

It shattered.

"Too strong!!"

Completely outmatched, Ghost adjusted his stance.

"In that case... how about this!?"

With his fingers moving like blades, Ghost sliced through space itself—launching his strongest spatial cut.

The ground split violently as the strike slammed into the statue's body.

A move that had once cleaved through nightmare creatures with ease...

Didn't even leave a scratch.

All it did was force Angry to take a single, reluctant step backward.

"No way..."

At that moment, Ghost finally began to understand just how much he had underestimated the power of the statue.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Black Meteor!"

From behind Ghost, a dark beam erupted—crashing violently into Angry and unleashing a surge of destructive aura that shattered the ground beneath them.

"You damn statues all prefer to do it this way!"

Frey had returned to the battle.

BOOM!!

"You want a fight? Then you'll get one!"

To Frey, every memory of statues was a blur of endless beatings ... brutal training sessions where they had taught him how to fight, day and night.

And from the look of it, Angry was no different... except for one critical detail.

As the clash went on and their strikes continued, Frey started to notice the deep, vicious wounds spreading across his body.

Angry wasn't playing.

He was truly trying to kill him.

Wielding that massive scythe like it was weightless, Angry completely overpowered him.

Snow joined as well, attacking from behind.

Yet the statue remained calm, effortlessly spinning its scythe to parry every attack, as if toying with them.

A wave of violet aura blasted out, sending them flying—slamming face-first into the earth.

Still, Angry didn't stop.

He kept advancing, relentlessly tearing them apart as their blood spilled across the dirt.

"This is insane..." Frey cursed under his breath, finally grasping the gravity of the situation.

Angry was far stronger than both Smiley and Sad.

He wasn't even fighting seriously... and yet Frey could tell—his power was at least on par with Maekar.

SLASH!

A sudden blow snapped Frey out of his daze .. blood spraying from his body.

"FREY!!" Snow shouted in horror as he saw Frey's right hand fly through the air, severed cleanly by Angry's scythe.

His hand hit the ground—along with the Dark Sister—just as Angry raised his weapon again, this time aiming for Frey's neck.

"Void Step!"

Snow appeared between them at the last second, his body flaring with blinding light as he shoved Angry back.

"Cosmic Formation!"

Unleashing his most powerful attack, Snow's explosive aura clashed with Angry's scythe in a cataclysmic burst.

The collision sent shockwaves tearing through the air.

Snow's nuclear strike hit Angry head-on—blasting the statue backward, carving deep trenches through the ground as he skidded across it, struggling to stay upright.

Snow's strongest move had finally pushed the statue back a few meters.

But that was all it did.

There wasn't even a scratch on its armored body.

Realizing the overwhelming power gap, Snow conjured a massive wall of ice between them and the statue, then fled—rushing back to Frey and Ghost, who had already begun retreating.

Frey, barely able to think clearly, clutched his severed arm—still in shock from how close he had come to death.

All three of them knew now ...

Death was the only thing waiting for them in this fight.

And so, they ran.

But Angry chased after them at terrifying speed.

They leapt, dodged, and rolled between the kneeling corpses—now turning to dust underfoot—desperate to escape the statue's reaping scythe.

He was faster. Far faster.

They were certain he'd strike them down at any moment.

But then... he didn't.

Collapsed between the skeletons, the three of them stared in disbelief as Angry froze in place—his scythe just centimeters from Frey's face.

The statue stared at them, glowing with violet light from the slits of its mask...

Then slowly lowered his weapon...

And began walking back—step by step—toward his original position.

Back to where it had all started.

"What... just happened?"

Frey asked, breathless, struggling to understand why the statue had suddenly retreated.

Snow and Ghost were just as baffled.

With his golden eyes, Snow was the first to notice something strange.

He looked down at the ground beneath their feet...

"We're outside the circle..." he said quietly.

But the others heard him clearly.

"You're right..."

They had run without thinking ...and unknowingly stepped outside the circle.

And the moment they did...

"He stopped."

Frey finally understood the mechanism behind the statue.

He would never attack unless someone stepped onto the forbidden ground.

In other words... that circular space surrounding the castle ...

Chapter 296: Angry (2)

Frey understood it.

But a searing wave of pain tore through him, yanking him out of his thoughts and back to the empty space where his right arm used to be.

Groaning in agony as blood poured from the wound, Frey channeled all his focus into his limb, trying to reattach it.

Snow rushed toward him immediately, using Vermithor to assist in the healing. Ghost, with a swift movement of his hand, began stitching the arm with incredible speed—trying to reconnect it before it was too late.

When they finished, Ghost stepped back.

"Even with all that... there's no guarantee you'll be able to use it again," he said with concern.

Frey just smiled.

"No need to worry. My body's... a little different from the average human."

He had never feared losing an arm.

It wasn't the first time he'd lost one anyway ..

and he could already start to feel his fingers again.

Ironically, the last time he lost an arm had also involved statues.

A strange coincidence.

"The Shadow Sect... and now this black castle..."

Frey wondered what exactly it was these statues were guarding this time.

It was an answer he wouldn't get ...

not unless he could get past his angry friend.

"He's way too strong..."

"Yeah ,and he hasn't even shown everything he's capable of yet."

Frey stood just outside the edge of the circle.

"But he won't attack us... unless we step inside it."

It wasn't an absolute rule, but their recent survival was enough of a clue.

"Even if he doesn't attack us outside... that doesn't help if we want to enter the castle."

The only way forward... was through the furious statue that now blocked their path entirely.

Ghost, who had been silent for a while, finally spoke ... having reached a conclusion.

"Our goal is to get inside the castle... not to defeat him."

There was no need to kill the statue.

They just needed to get past it.

"You're right," Snow said, stepping forward with a confident smile.

"Frey's faster than me when it comes to combat .. but overall, I've got the edge."

With his signature ability, Void Step, Snow was confident he could at least reach the gate.

"Wait," Frey interrupted, raising his hand.

"We don't know if he'll stop chasing you even after you enter the castle."

There was always a chance he'd follow them inside.

"You're not wrong... but standing here doing nothing won't change a thing."

"In that case..."

Frey raised the arm he had just lost moments ago.

Normally, there was no way it should be usable again so soon.

But his body was far from normal.

The holy energy of Snow's sword had already brought him close to a near-perfect recovery.

"Go. We'll support you from behind."

Snow nodded and stepped forward—Frey and Ghost flanking him.

He took a deep breath.

His golden eyes lit up.

"Void Step."

Time halted.

Everything froze in place ..

Except Snow.

Bathed in pure blue light, he surged forward, his body like a beam of energy racing across the ground.

He passed the statue.

He passed his companions.

And made it all the way to the castle gate.

For a brief moment, he exhaled in relief.

But then his golden eyes widened ...

Someone else was moving.

Someone who had ignored the frozen world completely ..

and was now right behind him.

Bathed in glowing violet aura, Angry was in pursuit ...

and he was faster.

Snow realized, too late, how naïve he had been.

The statue possessed a technique stronger than Void Step.

Their weapons clashed mid-sprint—Snow tried to push back, but Angry's scythe buried him into the ground.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Eternal Darkness!"

Frey intervened at the last second, releasing a wave of pure shadow that swallowed Angry whole.

Using that veil of darkness, he and Snow retreated once more to the safe zone.

Angry emerged from the cloud, returning silently to his place...

His glowing violet eyes locked onto the three of them.

Snow, panting hard, let out a laugh at his miserable state.

"The gate is right in front of us... and we still can't reach it."

After everything they'd endured, they stood right at the finish line ...

yet it remained just out of reach.

"What now? Do we keep playing with this thing until it kills us?"

It was clear.

They couldn't defeat it.

"We have to find a way..." Frey muttered, racking his brain, remembering everything he had learned under Smiley and Sad.

He had never beaten them.

And now he was up against an even more advanced version.

But this time... he had to get through.

With that determination burning in them, the three of them charged toward Angry again.

And once more..

A devastating battle broke out.

Each exchange released shockwaves of aura that tore through the land.

The ground shattered beneath them, and blood splattered as they fought.

The first clash failed—

forcing them to retreat with serious wounds.

Then, after recovering—

They tried again.

And again...

BOOOOM!!

The ground shook harder than ever before .. more violently, more blood-soaked.

The three fought with everything they had, trying to breach the towering black castle...

But the statue was too fast. Too powerful.

Every attempt was shut down—crushed—until they were left with no choice but to retreat to the safe zone.

It was either that, or death.

That same scene—Angry mercilessly overwhelming them—played out over and over.

So many times, in fact, that they had lost count.

They were in shambles.

And one thing became clear: the statue wouldn't budge.

Despair began to creep in.

Angry was simply impenetrable .. without weakness.

Breaking through him felt utterly impossible.

Caked in dust, blood, and exhaustion,

Snow looked down at his battered comrades, then up at the motionless statue.

He stared for a long moment before raising his fist to his face, thinking deeply about his next move.

He released his aura.

From a distance, it might've looked bright—brilliant, even.

But in front of someone like Angry, it was faint.

Flickering.

In their current state, giving 100% wasn't enough.

They needed more.

Much more.

Snow understood that completely.

And so...

He made his decision.

"Frey ... when I give the signal, run toward the castle with everything you've got."

His tone was serious.

Frey narrowed his eyes.

"What are you planning?"

With a crooked smile, Snow answered:

"I'll hold him off while you make it inside."

It sounded insane.

They had already tried that—again and again.

And every time, they failed.

But this time... it was different.

Snow took a shaky breath as a golden aura enveloped his body—

symbols began forming, etched into his skin like ink made of molten gold.

His face.

His arms.

His legs.

Covered in divine marks.

The pressure coming off him was staggering.

Both Frey and Ghost could only watch in awe.

"That's...!"

"The War King's Form."

Snow answered with effort—barely able to contain what was building inside him.

"Ghost—I need you to support me from the shadows. But whatever happens, don't reveal yourself."

"What are you talking about?" Ghost asked.

But Snow kept going—time was short.

"Hurry! This form always comes with one thing: an uncontrollable thirst for blood!"

A thirst he would direct solely at the statue.

Once the War King's Form was activated, there was no stopping until the enemy was dead.

"I'll throw everything I have at him .. so use that chance, Frey, and get inside!"

He shouted as his aura surged with every word.

He didn't know how far this power would take him ..

but he was betting it would be enough.

Enough to create an opening.

Even if he had to face it alone ..

someone had to make it through.

"Understood," Frey replied, nodding.

He finally understood why Snow hadn't fought with everything he had in the Victoriad finals.

Because he couldn't control this terrifying power that enhanced him to unnatural levels.

Enduring the pressure that felt like it would split his skull ..

Snow slammed his foot against the ground—

And in the blink of an eye, appeared before Angry.

His speed caught the statue off guard for just a fraction of a second.

A fraction was all he needed.

Snow unleashed a devastating star-charged strike.

A massive slash tore through the earth—launching Angry backward, his scythe dragging along the ground as he struggled to regain balance.

But Snow gave him no time to breathe.

Taking full advantage of his enhanced speed and strength, he closed in for close combat ...

pressuring the statue with a relentless flurry of attacks.

Ghost, from the shadows, sealed the area in a dome of darkness—concealing both combatants from view as they tore into each other.

And in that moment ..

With everything he had ...

Frey Starlight charged toward the castle, leaving a blur of afterimages in his wake.

Angry noticed the movement and immediately tried to intercept him.

But Snow, unleashing an even stronger attack, kept him pinned down.

"COSMIC FORMATION!!!"

Snow's ultimate technique—now empowered by the War King's Form—

was like a miniature sun erupting at point-blank range.

It detonated directly in Angry's face.

And Frey Starlight ..leaving that nuclear explosion behind him ..

took his first step...

Into the heart of that dark castle.

He didn't look back.

He couldn't.

Not if he wanted his friends' sacrifice to mean something.

With that thought ...

Frey walked forward.

Into the place where everything would end.

Chapter 297: Echoes of a Forgotten Self

– Snow Lionheart's pov –

It had been a long time...

Since I last felt like this.

Those golden symbols—whose meaning I never truly understood—had grown stronger ever since I obtained Vermithor.

As if it had been the key that unlocked a new realm of power.

Everything was connected.

The War King's Form burned through my aura at a terrifying pace, allowing me to wield levels of power I was never meant to reach.

And that was what let me face the furious statue head-on.

Locked in a vicious clash with that entity, the two of us spun in a whirlwind of metal—sparks flying with every violent collision.

The explosive auras from our battle drowned out all my senses,

but I was certain of one thing:

Frey had made it through.

There was no longer any need to hold back.

With a bloody grin, I poured more and more Star Aura into my sword,

each strike landing with greater weight, hammering against that giant scythe.

Barely able to hold myself back now, I was fighting to keep the bloodlust in check.

I had to finish this quickly.

Clutching Vermithor in one hand, I raised the other to summon a storm of elemental force—

a barrage of razor-sharp ice spears.

Without hesitation, I hurled them at the furious statue's head.

But he twirled his scythe like a massive fan, shredding the spears into dust.

I didn't give him time to breathe.

Using a surge of black lightning, I unleashed a horizontal cut—aimed directly at his torso.

Preoccupied with blocking the hail of ice, he reacted too late to stop my lightning strike—

empowered by Void Step.

The blow landed clean, forcing him back as the lightning detonated across the ground beneath him.

But even then—on his iron body—

It left barely a scratch.

"Tch..."

I held back a curse, wondering what on earth this thing was made of.

Despite everything, he didn't falter.

He simply stared back at me with his glowing violet eyes, as if he was trying to figure out what I was made of.

Time was slipping away...

"In that case..."

How about this ..

Swoooooosh!

I unleashed a blinding wave of light from Vermithor

an eruption so intense it blanketed the battlefield, even obscuring the entire black castle behind it.

"Void Step."

Using the boosted form of the technique, enhanced by the War King's Mode,

I coated my blade in a blazing stream of blue fire, and hurled it forward like a devastating energy beam.

At the same time, I activated Void Step again ...this time channeling black lightning.

The crackling surge tore through the earth, striking from behind the statue.

"Void Step!"

Everything happened in an instant.

This time, I pushed my ice aura to its limits—

igniting a white frost along my sword's edge, unleashing a wave of subzero energy across his exposed flank.

Alongside it came a high-frequency sonic blast, shadow aura chains to bind him,

and even gravity itself—to pull him to the ground.

To destroy that statue ...

I brought out everything I had.

Surrounded by a storm of overwhelming elemental forces ..

Angry widened his glowing eyes as the light finally cleared...

only to see nature's wrath crashing down on him from every side.

The explosion tore through the battlefield—

an elemental catastrophe that shattered the terrain and sent shockwaves through the sky.

But of course...

He survived.

Bathed in violet light, a shimmering aura clung to his body like armor ..

shielding him from the full brunt of my attacks.

But this was the moment ..

The exact moment I'd been waiting for.

As the smoke and chaos cleared ..

and the statue dared to believe the attack was over...

He saw me standing directly in front of him.

Just centimeters away.

My stance wide open.

My sword aimed straight at his chest.

This was the moment I'd been waiting for—

The moment the enemy lets down their guard.

When the real attack begins.

Using the War King's Form and Vermithor,

I pushed my aura to its absolute limit.

Elemental particles danced wildly around my blade.

Drawing in a breath of fire ...

the golden markings on my skin blazed to life as I swung with everything I had.

"COSMIC FORMATION!!!"

This time, it was ten times stronger ..

No.

Even more than that.

A colossal explosion of light swallowed the statue and the entire castle behind him.

A pillar of pure white aura surged into the heavens, piercing the clouds ...

a nuclear beam unleashed at point-blank range.

And in the midst of that radiant inferno,

the furious statue was finally obliterated—

reduced to nothingness by the full force of my power.

In that moment...

I wished with all my heart ..

That this would be enough to end it all.

...

...

...

– Frey Starlight's pov –

I had finally entered the castle.

The black castle...

The one that made my entire body tremble without end.

I glanced at my hand, trying to steady myself ..

but the way my fingers shook made it clear how utterly I failed at that.

Step after step,

I wandered through the towering fortress.

What I stood upon was the grand entrance to this terrifying place ..

a hall with walls adorned in symbols and carvings I couldn't understand,

and ceilings so high that even the largest giants could walk—or run—through with ease.

But what truly caught my attention, aside from the incomprehensible symbols,

were the murals that accompanied them.

Illustrations that depicted, as far as I could guess, the life of the one who had once ruled this castle...

The scenes on the walls showed glimpses of brutal wars.

Battles that raged across land and sky on a scale I had never seen before—

a scale that managed to send a chill down my spine through images alone, without me needing to live them myself.

The enemy in these wars was familiar—

always the same.

Demons.

But the mystery lay in who fought the demons.

Unlike the demons .. who all belonged to one race and were easy to recognize ..

the other side was chaos incarnate.

A gathering of countless different beings and creatures I had never seen or heard of.

I couldn't help but wonder if what I was seeing was real...

or just some imagined depiction crafted to embellish this place.

Completely captivated by the murals ..

my senses returned when the ground suddenly shook beneath me.

A violent tremor rocked the castle as the thunderous roar of an explosion echoed through the walls.

"That aura..."

Stunned, I recognized it instantly.

It was familiar ..

yet far stronger than I had ever felt it before.

The source of that attack could only be one person—

Snow, still battling Angry outside.

That blast reminded me—again—

that I had to keep moving.

That I needed to end this, once and for all.

It was the least I could do for my comrades, who were fighting in my place beyond those walls.

To bring an end to all this madness ..

To find the answers I'd been searching for.

Answers to questions that had long haunted my life.

With those thoughts burning in my mind, I charged deeper into the castle ...

hungry for the truth.

And the further I went,

the more I realized how vast this place truly was.

A massive citadel, built like an ancient museum...

But completely empty.

Other than the decorated walls carrying those paintings,

there was nothing.

Nothing at all.

Like a ghost house of ancient wars,

left alone in the middle of a sea of kneeling pilgrims ..

worshippers of a king who never returned.

The more I advanced,

the higher I climbed the grand staircase...

The slower my steps became.

That fire inside my chest grew hotter and hotter .. until it felt like my insides were burning.

My pulse pounded.

A splitting headache roared in my skull.

I started breathing heavily,

clutching the wall just to keep moving.

"What... is happening to me?!"

My vision blurred.

I could barely keep my consciousness from slipping.

The long corridor ahead of me began to twist and ripple ..

like an old painting fading with time.

Then the pain struck.

Blinding.

Searing.

Even I—someone well-acquainted with agony—

screamed from the depths of my soul.

I writhed on the ground,

unable to see,

as visions flooded my mind ..

as if the murals had come to life inside my head.

People I had never met.

Places I had never seen.

All accompanied by torment I couldn't fight.

All I could do was scream ..

and pray for it to end.

But it didn't.

It never stopped.

It was like someone was crushing my skull with a giant hammer,

again and again and again.

For the first time in my life—

I cursed the strength of my mental resilience.

That ability...

which once felt like a blessing,

now felt like a curse.

A curse that kept me conscious through every moment of that pain.

I twisted on the ground for hours ..

like an insect...

Until finally, my eyes rolled back into empty white,

and I lost consciousness at last.

But even in that unconscious state,

the visions didn't stop.

They followed me into my dreams.

Haunted me through that endless train of torment.

And after what felt like an eternity..

I finally opened my eyes.

Chapter 298: The One Battle You Can't Win

After that relentless spiral of pain,

I stared forward for a few seconds,

my thoughts still scattered...

Until my senses slowly returned.

And that's when I realized ..

I was no longer inside the black castle.

"Where... am I?"

That was the first question I asked myself.

But the answers ..

They were starting to take shape... on their own.

I was sitting on a wooden chair... inside an ordinary room with a single bed, a desk, and a few simple pieces of furniture. Things that made it obvious the space belonged to a guy in his twenties.

Right in front of me ...

another person sat.

Also in his twenties, with a look so familiar I recognized him instantly.

We were face-to-face.

I started laughing—quietly at first.

A hollow laugh, wondering if I'd finally lost my mind.

After all...

This room was mine.

These were my things.

And the person sitting across from me...

Was me.

Or rather—

The version of me I used to look like, long ago...

before the reincarnation.

Before everything began.

My past self smiled as I laughed like a madman.

"Welcome back,"

he said, using my old voice.

And something about it felt deeply, fundamentally wrong.

"Welcome back where?"

I asked, still smiling uncontrollably.

"Home," he answered calmly.

The moment I heard that word, I sighed.

Exhausted.

Tired of all this illusion.

"Home? Did you people go and recreate my old house? Turned it into one of your little trials?"

I wouldn't even be surprised if the walls suddenly exploded and monsters came crawling in to devour my brain.

My past self chuckled at my reaction.

"So cynical... life really hasn't been kind to you, has it?"

His words were simple ..

but they hit harder than I expected,

especially coming from an old version of myself.

A version that once lived a peaceful life,

far removed from the endless spiral of blood and death I've endured since then.

If I were still the same person from back then...

I probably wouldn't be thinking this way at all.

That realization left a bitter taste in my mouth.

It made me angry ..without even knowing why.

"Who are you? What illusion have you trapped me in this time?"

To be honest, I'd already tried to strike him multiple times.

But neither Balerion nor the Dark Sister answered me ..

no matter how hard I called for them.

Powerless, I was left with no choice but to play along with this absurd play.

The smile on my former self's face slowly widened,

as if he could hear every thought racing through my head.

He looked around and said:

"This isn't an illusion.

It's what you call 'home,'

but not your real home."

Annoyed, I cut him off.

"What are you even talking about?"

"This place is the safe haven your mind created.

The place you feel most at ease.

And me?

I'm the version of yourself you long for more than anything."

Silence settled for a few seconds as I tried to process his words.

"So in other words... all of this is happening inside my head?"

He nodded.

"That's right."

Once I got my answer, I leaned back into the wooden chair.

"I really have lost my mind this time, huh?"

With a smile, my past self agreed.

"You lost it a long time ago."

Sitting here,

talking to myself inside my own head without restraint...

I couldn't help but wonder ..

When did everything start to slip from my hand?

When did I change this much?

"You haven't necessarily changed,"

my other self said,

"And yet—you have."

He pointed at himself.

"My existence is proof of that."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Like I said... I'm the ideal version of you.

The one you wish you could be again.

And this place is the sanctuary your mind has built around that wish.

This is where your 'family' lives."

"And what's wrong with that?" I asked.

"These choices of yours mean you're still trapped in the past...

You still see me as the better version of yourself ..

not the person you are now, Frey."

"And this place..." he said, casting a thoughtful glance around him before continuing,

"...this is still the place you call home ...

but not the Starlight estate, where your reincarnated father lives... and your sister resides now."

He looked genuinely sorrowful as he said those words.

"In other words... you're still stuck in the past, Frey.

You've changed ..

and at the same time... you haven't."

Between past and present...

A lot had changed.

That much was inevitable, given the life I had lived since my reincarnation.

And yet...

deep inside, parts of me remained exactly the same.

Deep down inside...

I was still yearning for the life I had lost—

a life I knew I could never return to.

Just thinking about it stirred feelings I didn't want to face.

So I shut his words down with cold detachment.

"Hey."

With the same cold gaze I'd always given my enemies, I looked straight at him.

"Isn't it time you told me why I'm here?"

The moment I asked, my other self looked surprised ..

then smiled again, faintly... with sorrow in his eyes.

"So... time's up, huh?"

"Time for what?"

"You're about to get answers to some of the questions that have haunted you."

As soon as he said that, I felt my curiosity stir—despite myself.

"But you're not ready to hear them yet...

which means you'll have to face what's waiting behind that door."

"Door?" I asked, confused ..

only to realize that a strange door had appeared behind him.

His expression grew more sorrowful as he glanced at it.

With a half-smile, I looked at him.

"So there's another test, huh?"

Nothing new.

I've never gained anything without a struggle.

But my other self only looked more pained.

"This time... it's different."

He stammered slightly, his eyes locked on mine.

"You won't be able to overcome what's behind that door."

Lowering his head, his shoulders trembled.

"That's why I brought you here... Please, Frey... don't open that door."

With every word he spoke,

the cracks in the closed door behind him began to glow brighter.

"There has to be another way... you don't have to do this..."

"Please... don't go."

Lowering his head toward me,

I stared at the man who was supposed to be me.

And though he tried to stop me,

he truly was worried for me.

I could feel it.

Because he was me.

But ..

He lifted his head when I placed my hand gently on his right shoulder,

offering him a faint, bittersweet smile.

"I'm sorry."

I didn't need to say more.

If he truly was me,

he already knew the answer.

With sorrow, he nodded.

"There's no other way... is there?"

There were no shortcuts.

No easy paths.

If I wanted to reach the end,

I had to face whatever waited for me—no matter what it was.

And so, with resolve,

I stepped forward.

And opened the door.

A brilliant light erupted, swallowing me whole.

My other self remained where he was,

watching with a pained smile.

"You won't win this time, Frey..."

The light faded slowly,

allowing me to see what was on the other side.

"This time, your opponent... can't be defeated."

The place I now stood in ..

was hauntingly familiar.

But it wasn't the room itself that made me tremble.

It was the people inside.

"You won't win... not against them."

Darkness swallowed the previous room—

my old self vanishing along with it.

And the space I had just entered lit up fully.

There, inside that room, stood four figures.

"Welcome back..."

They spoke in unison.

And I stood frozen, completely stunned.

"...W-What?"

In the blink of an eye,

my mind went blank.

Everything faded.

Everything I had been until now was erased—

memories slipping away like water through fingers.

Before the people I had chased for so long ...

like chasing a mirage...

My family.

They were all here.

With a mind too empty to even process it properly,

I smiled—

a smile I hadn't worn in a very, very long time.

"I'm home."

Home... at last.

Chapter 299: Welcome Back, Frey Starlight

— Frey Starlight's Pov —

Home...

I was sitting at a table with the people I had longed to see more than anything else.

Each of them welcomed me with a warm smile ..

a smile I had nearly forgotten after all this time.

"I'm home."

My mind went completely blank, consumed by the moment I had wished for so desperately.

"It's been hard, hasn't it?"

my mother said, placing a hand gently on my back as she sat beside me, trying to comfort me.

I opened my mouth to respond ..

but no words came out.

I didn't even know what to say.

I simply nodded, lowering my head.

I'd held back those buried emotions until the very end ..

the ones clawing their way to the surface, threatening to explode at any second.

"It was hard... so incredibly hard..."

I looked down at myself, afraid of how much I had changed.

But there was no need for that fear ..

my family accepted me instantly, just as they always had.

That warmth I had missed for so long...

"I suffered so much..."

I fought, and fought, and lost...

then stood up again... and again..."

With a shuddered breath, I couldn't hold the tears back any longer.

I clenched my teeth hard, digging my fingers into my palm so deeply they drew blood.

But no matter what I did ..

I couldn't stop the tears.

As if on instinct, they all gathered around to comfort me.

My father placed a hand on my shoulder.

My younger brother hugged me tightly.

Even my middle brother—whom I'd never been especially close with—stood beside our father.

"It's okay, son."

"You're safe now."

Those words...

They were like a drug.

They made me feel drunk with relief.

When I finally calmed down,

I found my little brother still clinging to me—just like he used to in the past.

"Tell me about your adventures, big brother!"

I blinked in surprise.

He wanted me to talk about everything I'd been through?

"Stop! Do you want him to relive all those horrible things?"

As expected, my mother stepped in immediately ... still thinking of my comfort before anything else, scolding the youngest as he shrank back in guilt.

That's when I decided to step in.

With a gentle smile, I reassured her:

"It's okay..."

I've always wanted someone I could tell my story to."

And in that moment ..

who better than my family?

Sitting beside my little brother and surrounded by the ones I loved most,

I began to tell them my story.

"It all started when I opened my eyes in a wide room that looked like it belonged to the Middle Ages..."

From the beginning.

I told them everything.

A long tale that spanned hours—

but I didn't leave out a single detail.

How I woke up in the body of Frey Starlight.

The Starlight family.

The journey into the Eastern Nightmare Lands...

My suffering inside the Shadow Sect...

How Frey Starlight was rebuilt from zero.

Every event brought a different reaction from my family.

They listened to every word.

My entry into the temple.

My battle against the Moonlight family.

All the way to the fated Victoriad...

The fight with the princess...

Then the journey to another planet, as the final act.

A story of bitter struggle ..

of blood spilled,

a body that withstood countless horrors just to make it here.

It took me several hours to tell it all.

By the end, I had lost my voice.

But they listened until the very last word—

and I was deeply grateful for that.

"That was amazing!!" my younger brother exclaimed, wide-eyed with excitement.

He was completely captivated by the tale I had told.

Both of my parents nodded at the same time, clearly in agreement.

"Your brother's right," my father said.

"Even we, as adults who don't understand much about these kinds of novels...

We still found it fascinating."

Stories like that could grab the attention of a massive audience.

"Why not publish it? I'm sure it would be a huge success."

Even my middle brother chimed in, encouraging me to turn my life into a novel.

Saying it could bring me fame—and maybe even fortune.

I agreed with every word they said.

But something... stirred my curiosity.

"A novel?"

I asked, confused .. staring at their smiling faces.

At the same time...

a strange buzzing sound had been ringing in my ears for a while now...

"Yeah, your novel really is amazing."

They all said it at once.

I stayed silent for a moment, listening to the buzzing sound that had gradually grown louder in my ear.

A novel?

The story of Frey Starlight.

The story of my struggle.

Or rather—his struggle.

I tried to gather my thoughts, but they slowly slipped away.

All logic I had relied on until now was unraveling, as if it had never existed in the first place.

So I simply nodded with a faint smile.

"Yes... it really is a great story."

Maybe I should publish it on Webnovel or something?

Who knows—maybe I could even earn a little money from it!

The idea excited me.

"But how did you come up with something so wild, son?"

My mother's question gave me pause.

Since she asked...

How did I come up with all of this?

With an awkward smile, I answered:

"You know me... I've always had a vivid imagination.

It all just... came together in my mind."

From nothing, I had built an entire world—

a vast and intricate story from scratch.

"Well, it's great to follow your passion,"

she said,

"but don't neglect your work. Writing is fine as a hobby—just remember that."

"Of course. You don't need to worry,"

I reassured her, standing from the dinner table and heading back to my room.

That night,

I slept better than I had in years.

Truly, deeply rested.

But for some reason...

the buzzing in my ear never stopped.

I tried smacking the side of my head a few times,

but it was no use.

"Maybe I should see a doctor?"

I made a mental note to check on it later, then headed downstairs.

It was already 7:00 a.m.—

time to get to work.

The company I'd been with for over a year wasn't far from home,

but my father still drove me every morning.

It had become a tradition—one he always followed for his children.

I was the last to get dropped off, after my brothers had been taken to school.

"See you later," my dad said with a smile.

I waved back.

"Yeah, see you!"

I started walking toward the office building,

but paused when I heard him call out to me:

"Frey!"

I turned, startled.

Did... did my father just call me by the name of my novel's protagonist?

"Did you call me?"

I shouted back, confused.

But he just shook his head and waved again before driving off.

I scratched my head, wondering if something was wrong with my hearing,

then entered the building where I worked.

Most of my day was spent inside my office ..

not too big, not too small.

Comfortable enough.

The job wasn't hard,

but for some reason,

I found myself completely unable to focus.

No matter how hard I tried,

I couldn't stop thinking about the story.

The events ran through my mind in vivid, overwhelming detail—

not like a fantasy,

but like a reality I had lived.

I truly began to wonder ..

How did I even come up with something like this?

Lost in thought,

I opened my laptop and found my fingers flying across the keyboard.

I began writing the story that had filled my mind from beginning to end.

I wasn't exactly a master of language or grammar,

but I managed to express every chapter clearly ..

each one delivered with growing satisfaction.

Little by little ..

Days passed.

Happy days.

Days spent wrapped in the warmth of my family ..

a feeling I hadn't realized how much I'd missed.

At the same time,

my novel began gaining traction online, building a name for itself around the world.

"A fantasy so vivid, it makes you feel like you're the main character."

That was one of the most common comments I received ..

and one I couldn't agree with more.

Because, to me,

I've always felt like I truly was Frey Starlight.

Chapter 300: Once More, Into the Nightmare

Good things kept happening.

For months, the buzz in my ear eventually faded completely.

And I lived a peaceful, fulfilling life ..

surrounded by a loving family,

and a novel that had turned me into a globally recognized author.

That success ..

it felt like a gift.

A gift I made the most of.

And for once...

I was truly, deeply content with both myself—

and the life I had been given.

The smile never left my face.

Not even when I walked the streets at night.

I was truly grateful—

grateful for the life I had been given.

That was what I was thinking...

as I made my way home late at night,

after spending time with friends I'd known for what felt like forever.

Quietly ..so as not to wake my parents, who usually slept early—

I opened the front door and slipped inside.

I expected to find my younger brother awake,

as he often stayed up late playing games.

But tonight,

he wasn't in his usual spot.

"Did he go to bed early?"

I wondered, climbing the stairs to check.

But I stopped abruptly when my foot stepped in something wet.

"Did someone spill something?"

The house was dark,

so I pulled out my phone and turned on the flashlight.

And what I saw ..

froze my blood.

I dropped to the floor, panicked,

my hand reaching into the dark substance I feared was exactly what I thought it was.

"This is..."

I wasn't wrong.

"Blood."

A lot of it.

At that very moment ..

the buzzing in my ear returned, louder than ever before.

Terrified,

I ran forward,

each step squelching in more of the blood that soaked the floor beneath me.

I didn't want to know the truth.

I was afraid to find out ..

Whose blood was it?

Panicking, I flung open the door to my parents' room ..

and time itself seemed to stop.

My world collapsed in an instant.

Blood.

Everywhere.

The room looked like a scene torn straight from a horror movie.

Their bodies—

my parents—

were lying headless on the floor.

And their heads...

were neatly placed at the doorway,

staring at me with empty, lifeless eyes.

For a moment ..

I couldn't breathe.

I staggered back, gasping for air,

nausea rising until I threw up everything inside me.

My body shook violently.

My mind refused to accept what I was seeing.

Tears spilled out on their own—

but the nausea was stronger.

Still trembling, I stumbled away from the room,

unsure of what to do.

Unthinking.

Unfeeling.

Overwhelmed by grief.

But beneath that grief ..

was something even more powerful:

Dread.

Desperation drove me to my younger brother's room ..

to cling to any shred of hope still left in this house of death.

It felt like a dream.

No ..

a nightmare.

A nightmare that had turned my world upside down.

"Please... please let them be okay..."

With a heart ready to burst,

I opened the door to my brother's room.

And I found him ..

alongside my other brother.

But this time...

the scene was even worse.

Far worse.

Their bodies...

were unrecognizable.

What remained of them didn't even resemble human forms.

And then,

past the carnage—

I saw it.

Him.

A towering figure over two meters tall,

shrouded in a black aura that flowed like dark fire.

His face was blurred for some reason—

obscured beneath long, waterfall-like black hair.

But the most vivid, unmistakable part of him...

were those crimson eyes.

I stared at the being who had turned my home into this nightmare—

and he turned slowly to face me.

Just one look from him

made me feel like I had already died a hundred times.

I couldn't even think of revenge.

I couldn't muster anger toward the one who had slaughtered my entire family.

All I could do...

was freeze in place.

Shaking.

Powerless.

Too terrified to take a single step toward the killer of my blood.

"It's a painful thing, truly..."

he said in a deep, echoing voice.

And I ..

still trembling—asked the only question I could manage:

"What... are you?"

There were so many questions I could have asked.

Why did he do this?

Was this all even real?

But the most urgent question in my heart was ..

What is this thing standing before me?

This being...

it couldn't be human.

It couldn't be real.

It was something else.

Something that made even the idea of this being a nightmare feel far more believable.

When was the last time I felt this helpless?

When was the last time I couldn't cry,

couldn't scream ..

when I choked on grief so thick it stopped me from breathing?

The creature with the red eyes said nothing else.

He simply extended his hand toward me.

And with a voice that felt both distant and familiar ..

he whispered:

"Once more."

The performance failed this time.

As his words echoed—

I was forcibly ejected from my own body,

as if something was pulling time itself backward.

"You're not good enough... Frey Starlight."

The moment he uttered that name ..

Its echo reverberated endlessly in my mind.

Frey Starlight...

Frey Starlight...

Clenching my teeth, I fought the urge to scream

as I tumbled through the current of time—

cursing everything.

How could I forget?

How did I dare to forget?

I am Frey Starlight.

That wasn't a novel.

It never was.

It was a life I had lived ..

every moment,

every breath.

"Send me back!!"

I screamed with everything I had ..

furious at whoever dared to desecrate the memory of my family like this.

Furious at myself for believing that illusion was ever real.

What's happening to me?

I tried to call out to my swords,

tried to unleash everything and tear the illusion apart ...

But nothing answered.

Time rebuilt itself ..

and the image returned.

A familiar table...

a familiar room...

My family sat around it once more,

smiling at me,

offering that warmth I had missed so much.

"Welcome back."

They said it again, in perfect unison.

And I...

I smiled—weakly.

I wondered,

what was I blaming myself for just a moment ago?

It felt like something important had been ripped away from me.

But that didn't matter.

Because something more important had returned.

Standing before the family I loved ..

I smiled, genuinely this time.

"I'm home."

Home, at last .