

VILLAIN 311

Chapter 311: The next step (2)

Status :

Host: Frey Starlight (Dual Soul)

Class: Swordsman

Talent Grade: S

Current Rank: B+

Strength: B

Speed: A-

Agility: A-

Endurance: A

Aura: SSS

Magic: —

[Swordsmanship: Level 5]

(Limit broken — user can now reach Level 7)

Talent's:

{Swordsmanship}, {Aura Manipulation}, {Poison Resistance}

Combat Style: Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow

Skills:

[Hawk Eyes] – Grade A

Grants the user enhanced vision in darkness, the ability to zoom in and out on distant objects, and long-range sight.

Additional Effect: Slight time dilation when under attack.

Also allows the user to see through lower-tier stealth abilities.

[Phantom Steps] – Grade A

Doubles the user's movement speed and renders footsteps completely silent.

Additional Effect: The user briefly vanishes from sight when moving at high velocity.

[seduction] – Grade F

A basic skill that stimulates the target's sexual desire. Stronger when used on the opposite sex.

The effect diminishes if the target's rank exceeds the user's by more than two tiers, and may fail entirely.

[Ascension] – Grade S

Grants access to a heightened state of focus, known among athletes as "the zone."

This form eliminates all distracting thoughts, allowing the user to fight at 120% of their capabilities.

Abilities:

Shadow Adaptation – Level 3/7

Anti-magic – Tier 1

Allows the user to nullify magic through physical contact.

System Note:

"It's been a while. Did you miss me?"

Just wanted to remind you...

You're still a bug."

Achievement Points: 1500

Memories: Nameless Mask – Grade ???

Weapon: ???

Armor: ???

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I stared at my stats ... so much had changed recently.

Shadow Adaptation at Level 3... I still wasn't sure what its full capabilities were. But with the knowledge I gained from that mask, something inside me stirred.

For some reason, I felt like I could do so much more now.

And that's exactly what I needed, because crueler battles were fast approaching.

Especially now... that something had returned.

Frey Starlight – Dual Soul

As if to crown all my fears, the phrase "Dual Soul" had reappeared—the very same designation that once belonged to my father.

"So... who is it this time?"

Nameless? Or something else entirely?

"What kind of game are you making me play now?"

What struck me most wasn't the revelation itself...it was my expression. Unchanging. Blank.

Somewhere deep inside, I already knew what triggered this.

The moment it all began was the moment I wore the Nameless mask.

Without a doubt, that was the turning point.

I didn't know exactly what happened... but the system had confirmed the presence of two souls within my body.

And the system had never lied to me before.

Unlike my father's soul—just a remnant of willpower meant to support me—this time, the intruding soul might not be here to help.

It might be here to take over.

Out of curiosity, I decided to test something...

Following the system's advice feature, I asked the question:

"How do I remove the Dual Soul?"

System advice wasn't absolute, but it had answered many questions before—so I tried once more.

And it answered.

"You can't."

Blunt. Unforgiving.

A direct message from the system.

It was as if it were telling me:

"Don't waste your time. You'll never get rid of it."

So that's it, huh? I'm just a temporary soul, waiting to be replaced by the real one?

And strangely enough... I didn't feel sad.

"I'm going to vanish, and Nameless will take over? The being powerful enough to rival Agaroth?"

Instead of despair... I felt something else.

Relief.

Didn't this mean I had been granted extra time to live ... time I never would've had otherwise?

And in the end, the true hero would awaken. One who could do the impossible and fix this broken world.

In other words...

My death would become the key to salvation—

The ending millions have waited for across generations.

"A death like that...

It's worth it, isn't it, Father?"

He once asked me to live my life to the fullest...

But what if my death was the key to something far greater?

I was certain ... even my father would be satisfied with such an outcome.

"Yes... I will accept this fate."

Accepting my fate without resistance, I laid down that night, finally able to close my eyes, with nothing left to ponder.

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Days passed swiftly.

Frey Starlight and his companions returned to the temple, resuming their ordinary lives once again.

The Elite Class had become more active than ever, driven by the changes shaking the Empire to its core.

There had been no recent movements from the Ultras, and Nightmare Beasts had completely vanished from the Empire's borders.

A stillness took hold—but it was an ominous calm... the kind that comes before a storm.

A storm whose scale no one could predict.

Both the Empire and the Ultras were preparing for war in their own ways.

And this time, it would likely be far more devastating than the last great war seventeen years ago.

As a result, the Elite Class had begun training its talents intensely, knowing they might soon be forced to play a pivotal role.

Among those talents, several prodigies began to stand out... but one in particular raised the most questions.

Phoenix Sunlight, the young lord of the Sunlight family, stood silently atop the viewing stands of a massive closed training arena, watching the battle unfold before him.

Melina, the claymore-wielding warrior and proud SS-rank combatant—known as the Iron Woman and hailed as the strongest duelist in the Empire—was locked in a fierce battle against a much younger opponent.

Flames sparked as their blades collided violently, scorching the arena around them.

But despite her explosive strikes and lightning-fast movements, Melina couldn't land a single blow.

"What are those movements...?"

Phoenix murmured in disbelief as he watched Frey Starlight evade her every strike with flawless precision.

His form, his rhythm—everything was perfectly tailored to counter her style.

Wielding Dark Sister and Balerion with expert control, Frey managed to sustain his Blood Form barrier far beyond fifteen minutes.

Phoenix could see it with his own eyes ... Frey was no longer just holding his own against Melina.

He was pressuring her.

"How did he do it?"

None of this made sense.

The explosive growth in such a short time—it defied all logic.

Frey felt like an entirely different person.

After hundreds of lightning-fast exchanges—dark aura clashing violently against radiant gold—Melina finally stepped back, ending the fight.

Frey tilted his head slightly, confused by her sudden pause.

"Shall we stop here?" she said, her voice empty.

"Why? I could've gone longer," he replied.

"That's the problem," she muttered.

"Your growth is far beyond what I expected. If I push you any further... I'll have to try to kill you."

Melina realized it ... Frey was no longer the boy she could teach.

How could she teach someone whose movements she could no longer understand?

"We're done here."

With swift steps, she walked past him.

"I have nothing left to teach you."

Just like that... she declared his training complete.

Frey didn't respond. He simply offered his gratitude in his own way.

"Thank you—for everything."

Her guidance had been valuable once.

But compared to what that mask had given him... it felt like nothing.

All of this unfolded under Phoenix's watchful eyes ... he had been assigned to observe Frey.

And yet, without even realizing it...

That frail boy from the Starlight family had become something else.

A monster the likes of which he had never seen before.

Chapter 312: The Calm Before the Storm (1)

"Another bowl!"

Danzo shouted, slamming his empty plate down and demanding more of the spicy stew.

"Another one? Since when did you start loving spicy food this much?"

Leaning on his elbow, Frey asked, still not halfway through his own meal.

"This is your fault! Why do you only eat spicy stuff?"

Danzo glared, having developed a strange habit of copying Frey's taste.

"I never asked you to follow me around. As for the reason I eat this much spice..."

Frey smiled faintly as a distant memory surfaced—one of the few he could proudly call a good one.

"Let's just say I miss a friend who used to make this kind of food."

"Old man Shaheen?" Danzo asked, broth dripping from his chin.

"You still remember him, huh?"

"Of course. I visited him with you a few times... I wonder where that weird old guy went."

Danzo remembered the strange dishes the man used to make. They weren't popular ... barely anyone ever visited his place.

But the food wasn't bad. In fact, it was... unique.

"I suppose he's living somewhere out there . I haven't seen him in a long time, but he's the one who left me with this spicy habit."

Frey pointed to his bowl.

"Let's hope he's alright... things are looking grim with the upcoming war."

"Yeah. I heard there have already been some skirmishes along the border..."

It had been a few weeks since Frey returned from London.

While he resumed life at the temple, the Empire continued to drift back and forth in a tense deadlock with the faction known as the Ultras.

"War could break out at any moment."

That line was being echoed everywhere—among guild leaders, officials, and those in power.

War always brought chaos, but for some, it was a golden opportunity.

Destruction for the masses... profit for the few.

This upcoming chapter of death and ruin wasn't as straightforward as it seemed.

"Thanks to that, the temple training has gotten more intense than ever before."

"Really?"

Frey asked, face blank as ever. Danzo slapped him on the back, annoyed.

"You're pissing me off. Are you so strong now that you don't even notice anymore?"

Lately, some individuals had begun to shine, far outpacing their peers.

Frey Starlight and Snow Lionheart were among the most notable—especially Frey.

Ever since his hair turned white again, he'd become... different.

No one had seen him lose. Not even to the instructors.

In fact, no one had even seen him sweat.

His rapid growth had reached levels that drew comparisons to Abraham Starlight, though Frey never agreed with such praise.

"You're exaggerating."

The young lord of the Starlight family barely reacted to anything these days, which only fueled Danzo's frustration.

"There it is again! That old-man vibe you give off. Show some damn energy!"

With a louder thud, Danzo smacked Frey's back with full force.

Frey didn't mind. He just chuckled softly, barely budging from the blow.

"I'm not the old man here, Danzo. You're just the one who hasn't grown up yet."

Danzo scowled at Frey's calm smile.

"I don't get you anymore, Frey Starlight. Should I call you the effeminate prince? Or the ancient geezer? Pick one already, damn it!"

He grumbled about Frey's ever-shifting demeanor.

"Just call me Frey, like everyone else does."

"Yeah, like I'd ever do that."

They continued talking while eating—a daily routine at this point.

Sometimes, Ghost and Snow would join them. Even Sansa dropped by now and then. But today, it was just the two of them.

"Come to think of it... the princess has been hanging around you a lot lately. Maybe your crush isn't as one-sided as the rumors say?"

Danzo teased, remembering whispers about Frey's feelings for Sansa.

She had left the temple for a while but returned later with a dramatic change in demeanor—almost like a female version of Frey.

"We're just friends."

Frey replied, thinking quietly of Sansa.

The princess had indeed grown closer to him lately, especially after everything they'd experienced together ... but he would never go as far as to call what they shared love.

Sansa wasn't the type of girl who'd fall for someone just because he saved her.

Still, it was enough to make their bond stronger than ever.

"Friends, huh..."

With a swift motion, Danzo slung an arm around Frey's shoulder, pulling their faces close.

"Listen, since the princess is on your good side, why don't we, you know..."

"What?" Frey asked, not catching the drift. Danzo continued.

"It'd be great if we all had another sleepover, right? But this time, I was thinking of inviting the girls too—hey, why are you laughing?!"

He stopped, bewildered at the rare sight of Frey actually laughing.

It was a stronger reaction than usual... maybe Danzo was the only one who could get this kind of response out of him lately.

"So you want girls now, huh? But how bold do you have to be to even think of inviting the princess to your house?"

Frey teased, and Danzo's shoulders slumped on instinct.

"You're right..."

"Don't take Daemon's words too seriously. He's built different from us."

After all, Daemon Valerion acted like he was already in his thirties.

"Yeah, yeah... shouldn't have thought of inviting Sansa..."

Danzo sighed in defeat.

"Invite me to what?"

Danzo froze as a soft feminine voice reached his ears from behind.

He didn't even want to turn around. Frey, however, had noticed her long before she spoke.

"Hey, Sansa,"

he greeted without missing a beat as the princess sat beside him.

"Hello... were you talking about me?"

"Absolutely not!"

Danzo shouted loud enough to make the whole restaurant glance their way.

"Suspicious..."

Sansa didn't buy it for a second—she could see the lie written all over his face.

"He wants to invite you to a group sleepover,"

Frey said plainly, without any attempt to sugarcoat it.

Danzo's face turned to stone as Frey threw him under the bus—again. Worse, Sansa didn't seem opposed to the idea.

"A sleepover? Like when a bunch of people stay over in one house and do all those activities?"

"Exactly. I take it you've never been to one before, princess?"

Danzo looked between Frey and Sansa, trying to process how quickly things were escalating.

"To be honest... I haven't."

"Would you like to try it?"

Frey asked, and Sansa shook her head gently.

"I can't leave the temple. Besides... I don't want to get involved with him."

"Too bad . You heard that, Danzo."

Danzo shrank in his seat, rejected outright. He said nothing.

"Whatever, man... I'm over it."

He pouted as Frey laughed at his misery.

They both ordered another plate—mostly so Sansa wouldn't eat alone.

Silence returned for a moment, except for Danzo, who kept muttering under his breath, cursing Frey for blurting everything out so casually.

Meanwhile, Frey turned his attention to Sansa.

"Is there something on my face?"

he asked, noticing her staring at him.

Sansa flinched, startled by his unnerving awareness.

"N-no... it's nothing."

She looked away quickly as Frey raised his eyes to meet hers.

Chapter 313: The Calm Before the Storm (2)

Sansa Valerion: B

Affection Points: 70

Current Thoughts: He's become way too perceptive... I can't read his face anymore.

Frey smiled as he read her thoughts.

His poker face had become so refined that even Sansa's unique ability to read expressions no longer worked on him.

"You're unusually quiet. Are you okay? Did something happen?"

Her pitch-black eyes met his as she asked.

"I'm perfectly fine."

And for once, he meant it.

He felt more at ease than ever, occasionally glancing at the thoughts of Sansa and Danzo.

Frey wasn't lying.

Having come to terms with himself, he'd reached a point where there was no longer any pressure ... no unnecessary thoughts weighing him down.

He had thrown everything over his shoulder... and now, he was focused only on what lay ahead.

Frey had begun living his life to the fullest... fully aware that it could end at any moment.

Later that same day, Frey wandered alone through the temple streets.

Lately, all eyes had been on him following his sudden spike in strength, so he made sure not to do anything suspicious. As a result, his days passed quietly.

The only ripple in that calm was the message that appeared on the system's interface.

A new mission had been added to the list:

Main Mission: Survive the Hunt

(Reward: 10,000 Achievement Points)

Frey didn't understand what "the hunt" referred to ... but the reward wasn't a joke. It matched the final mission's prize from before... which meant it wouldn't be easy.

A storm is coming...

Was it from the Ultras, with the impending war looming ever closer?

Or from the Church, which had begun isolating itself from the rest of the Empire?

Or perhaps... something else entirely—an unseen threat?

So many possibilities. But all led to danger.

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Far from the Empire ..

On the other side of the world, deep within one of the Ultras' top-tier Blood Cities...

A place unlike the barren plains beyond its walls.

A city so advanced, it could rival the imperial capital of Belgrad.

And just beyond its towering skyscrapers and endless steel structures, stood a secluded fortress—
isolated from the rest of the city.

The main stronghold of one of the Four Lords of the Ultras:

Gavid Lindman, the Aether Wielder.

Dressed in his usual sharp suit, with perfectly combed hair and a pair of reading glasses that made him appear like an intelligent aristocrat, Gavid silently observed the young man beyond the reinforced glass wall—untouched by the chaos within.

The castle was anything but quiet today.

The agonized screams of the young man inside echoed violently through every corner of the chamber.

The masked warrior, V—the Moonlight Blade bearer—thrashed wildly, trapped in a sea of black fire that devoured him from the inside out.

Faced with such torment, all V could do was scream... until even his voice faded into silence.

His battered condition was proof of how long he had been enduring the infernal trial.

Gavid Lindman continued to watch with zero emotion ... patiently waiting for the final result he sought.

"How cold of you, Lindman."

A third voice echoed from the shadows, pulling Gavid's gaze from the glass.

From the dark corner stepped in a massive intruder with a chilling smile across his face.

His body was wrapped in black bandages from head to toe, hiding whatever lay beneath... though they failed to conceal the ominous glow of his crimson eyes.

"Gvardiol..."

Gavid turned cautiously, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Are you really taking a stance against a mere Emyrean, oh mighty Lord?"

Gvardiol sneered, his laughter hissing like a serpent's breath.

Gavid didn't rise to the bait.

"What do you want?"

"I came as a messenger. To inform you that the operation will begin soon."

"You traveled all this way just to say that?"

Normally, Gavid Lindman would have kicked Gvardiol out without hesitation.

But this time, he held back—he could feel the pressure rolling off him.

A raging aura... one that matched his own, an SS class power.

"I hear the next Kazis Valerion has appeared inside the Empire,"

Gvardiol said, glancing at V, who writhed behind the barrier.

"I'm aware,"

Gavid answered bluntly. Gvardiol continued:

"And the new Abraham Starlight has made his appearance too."

"..."

Gavid said nothing.

Yet the news, which should have unsettled Gvardiol, did nothing of the sort. If anything, he seemed... thrilled.

Both men shared the same thought:

Snow Lionheart and Frey Starlight? Their potential means nothing... so long as they're killed early.

"But what a shame..." Gvardiol chuckled, licking his lips.

"Your little Emyrean can't enter Helmond, can he?"

Gvardiol laughed mockingly as he unleashed his aura ..

The unmistakable pressure of an SS rank warrior.

Gavid narrowed his eyes at the monster before him.

With that level of strength, Gvardiol now stood among the Lords and the Hollows—officially making him the strongest Emyrean alive.

And it was all because of one thing:

That horn protruding from the back of his head.

As if reading Lindman's thoughts, Gvardiol left a note atop the nearby table before slowly sinking into his shadow.

"Don't be too bitter, old lord," he said with a sneer.

"We were forged from different materials... that's all."

And with those parting words, Gvardiol vanished completely.

"...Damn demon."

Gavid Lindman cursed, retrieving the note and tucking it into his coat before returning to V.

Gvardiol had always been an enigma—an anomaly that defied logic.

His meteoric rise in strength had raised more questions than answers.

Barely a year ago, he was just an S-rank...

How had he broken through so quickly?

The answer was simple:

He was a hybrid.

Half-human, half-demon.

Helmond—the demon realm and their homeworld—was a place no ordinary human below SSS-rank could survive, not even for a minute.

But those with demon blood... were different.

And that was the crucial point...

Just like Londor, time flows differently in Helmond.

"The Empire will lose this time..."

Gavid muttered, face blank.

Why?

"Because the seal they so proudly relied on... was broken long ago."

The barrier left behind by Kazis Valerion .. shattered into pieces.

In other words, there was no escape anymore.

The Earth now stood exposed... once again at the jaws of the beast.

And Gvardiol had taken full advantage of that.

He trained in Helmond for a long time... then returned.

Now an SS-rank monster ..

Announcing that the horrors of the war from over 300 years ago...

Were about to return.

Chapter 314: The Hunt Begins (1)

— Frey Starlight's POV —

A full month had passed since London.

I'd returned to my daily life inside the temple, which had completely closed itself off from the outside world ... transforming into a military war facility and treating us like soldiers.

And no group received stricter treatment than the second-year Elite Class, thanks to the remarkable quality of fighters our generation had produced—from swordsmen and tanks to wave controllers and mages.

It wouldn't be wrong to say that most of the Empire's future strength resided here within the walls of the Elite Class. Yet despite the current training intensity, it hadn't affected me in the slightest, thanks to the massive leap in my strength. That's what allowed me to win most of the time in sparring matches against the other elite students.

Today in particular... the students were once again paired up, as usual, to fight in duos.

"Your classmates will most likely become your future comrades in war," said Sophia, watching the duels from above as we clashed below.

"Knowing your ally's strengths and weaknesses is just as important—if not more—than knowing your enemy's."

And that's why they often had us fight each other.

I was typically paired against people like Snow, Daemon... or even Sansa and Ghost. These duels were always intense and exciting, as our powers were evenly matched—at least, without external boosts involved.

But today, unusually, I found myself paired with someone I hadn't interacted with much recently. Another member of the Starlight family... a distant relative by blood.

"We're both Starlights..."

She launched at me with her sword, coated in a blinding halo of light. Her strike came from the left, aiming for my side . which I'd seen coming from the start. I avoided it easily.

Clana had predicted I'd dodge, and so she immediately followed up with another strike from the opposite direction. The light around her blade made her movements swift, surrounding me from every angle.

With every slash, her sword left trails of shimmering light in the air, turning her assault into something flashy. Oddly enough, I didn't even need to activate Hawk Eyes to track her swift attacks.

Normally, I would've had to block them with my sword... but this time, her blade only struck afterimages—ghosts of my body as it effortlessly dodged her strikes on its own.

Clana used the Stardust Style, but she'd barely mastered half of it... and even that half wasn't anything Shadow Adaptation – Level 3 couldn't handle.

I saw her grit her teeth in frustration, trying to increase her speed after failing to land a single hit. But it was pointless. From the start, I'd been far faster than her—faster than anyone else in the Elite Class.

In a quick movement, I ducked low and swept her supporting leg, knocking her off balance. As she fell, I drove my sword into the ground next to her face—ending this meaningless bout entirely.

"Thanks for the match."

I said without showing even a hint of emotion—offering my hand to help her up as she lay at my feet.

"..."

Clana Starlight, unexpectedly, accepted the gesture without even looking me in the eye.

Usually, with her playful personality, she would try to mess with me or act out in frustration. But she didn't.

"Something wrong?"

I asked, unable to stay distant ... especially since Clana resembled my sister Ada. Like a younger version of her.

"It's nothing... I'm fine. Thanks for the match."

Her tone was softer than usual as she spoke, before running off, behaving more like a shy girl than the one I knew.

But honestly... I didn't have the mental space to think about her for long. I quickly pushed her out of mind as soon as she left.

I had a bigger dilemma to deal with—one that revolved around me.

Or more specifically... my strength.

"I've hit my limit."

To be clear, there's no more borrowed power that can push me any further than I already am. Balerion the Black Terror, the demon-slaying Dark Sister, Shadow Adaptation, and all my abilities...

They were all external factors that had boosted me—a mere B+—to a power level close to SS.

I was grateful for the added strength, but I'd burned through all of it.

No matter what I do, I won't be able to grow stronger with borrowed power anymore—and that truth became clear after a full month of training here in the temple. Which meant I had no choice but to return to the real path... one free of shortcuts ... my raw strength.

If I truly wanted to surpass where I am now, I'd need to elevate my B+ talent to at least S before I could see any further gain. And that's when I realized... Melina was right.

Legendary swords exist to help users unleash their potential more smoothly—not to increase that potential.

In the end, I am the source ... not the blade.

Having accepted that I'd reached my ceiling, I began planning how to raise my talent to SS and accelerate my training however I could.

But for now, my strength won't improve any further—for quite some time. And that's not good news at all... especially with the challenges that lie ahead.

"Are you done too?"

I was interrupted by Danzo, who appeared wearing a sleeveless shirt that showed off his muscles, his silver hair damp with sweat.

"Yeah. You?"

"Just finished. They picked that coward as my opponent."

Danzo jerked his thumb toward Adriana, who sat in the back with her head bowed, still reeling from her humiliating defeat at the hands of the human tank, Danzo.

As a Spear Bearer, she should've been able to put up a decent fight against someone like him—but the power gap was far too large. Add to that her cowardly nature, and it was clear why she hadn't progressed. No matter how I looked at her, only one thought came to mind—

"That girl won't survive."

Danzo said it before I could.

If war ever broke out again and she was thrown into the battlefield, I had no doubt she'd die quickly. Even Sansa, who had always been her friend and protector, wouldn't step in to save her.

And it would be entirely Adriana's fault—she treated her own friend like a monster, even though the princess only ever tried to help her.

Adriana was the kind of parasite who tried to survive without making any real effort to grow.

I couldn't feel any sympathy for someone like that.

With those thoughts, I looked away from the purple-haired girl sitting in the shadowy corner of the room.

After Danzo and I were the first to finish our matches, Snow and Ghost soon joined us. Everyone had completed their duels, showing what they were capable of.

But tonight's standouts were clearly Daemon Valerion and Seris Moonlight—

Especially the latter.

First off, Daemon had fully switched to using black lightning from the start, completely abandoning the regular type. After observing him closely, I realized that the arrogant warrior had finally overcome his old weakness.

Black lightning devoured aura at an insane rate and placed immense strain on the body... yet somehow, Daemon had managed to extend its usage time. At this point, defeating him in a battle of attrition would be near impossible.

As for Seris Moonlight ..

The girl who had always fought from range as a Wave Controller had revealed a completely new combat style.

She was paired against Sansa, yet chose to give up her typical advantage entirely.

"Is that... a shield?"

Snow asked, wide-eyed as Seris fought like a tank, wrapped in a suit of ice armor.

A blue, icy shield encased her body, protecting her vital points and giving her the freedom to move quickly while wielding a pair of ice blades she used to slash at Sansa.

Even though the princess's shadows were no longer at their peak, they were still tremendously powerful and difficult to counter. Sansa controlled them effortlessly, launching waves of projectiles in an attempt to crush Seris.

But Seris countered with her ice, manipulating waves in return.

Locked in a clash of elemental forces, their battle hit a stalemate—until Seris shattered that balance by breaking through Sansa's defense with her own body.

"A Wave Controller fighting like a tank?"

Seris Moonlight could now engage from any front, eliminating her previous weakness just like Daemon had.

However, Sansa's shadows were far from weak, and breaking through them pushed Seris to her limits.

The battle between the Valerion princess and her Moonlight counterpart was by far the fiercest tonight, ending in a draw after they completely destroyed their combat arena.

"A draw..."

That term fit the outcome, but as someone who watched it unfold, I could say without a doubt that Seris had taken control of the fight more often than not.

Without me realizing it, the young lady of the Moonlight family had grown much stronger—proving that I wasn't the only one evolving.

Overall, the second-year elite class was rising to exceed every expectation. That was good news for the Empire, which was hurtling toward an inevitable war.

Each time the elite class stepped up, its members shone in their own ways, leaving their peers behind.

"Maybe this generation will be the strongest in the temple's history..."

That was what people were saying now. A group of youths, barely eighteen, had somehow become the Empire's seeds of hope.

Fully aware of the expectations and the heavy burden placed on our shoulders, the elite class trained harder than ever. As for me? I stuck to my usual routine—training in the morning, hanging out with my friends after.

Living a life where I could look forward to the future let me spread my wings of freedom, even if I knew I couldn't fly high just yet ... trapped as I still was inside a much larger cage.

But for now, at least, everything had gone smoothly and peacefully. So much so, I began to wonder if it was even real...

Chapter 315: The Hunt Begins (2)

In the blink of an eye, another month passed as the year drew to a close and the cold of winter set in.

And with it came the announcement.

An announcement that all the grueling training we'd been through... would finally be tested in the real world.

Gathered once again in the same hall where the island trial had been announced, we watched as Ivar Valerion, the temple director, stepped up to the podium and revealed a new test—one rumored to be even harder than the one held on the uninhabited island.

Ivar's ornate speech could be summed up in a few words...

All he really did was remind us of the Empire's current state, how war could erupt at any moment, and emphasize the need for proper training and preparedness.

Just a preamble before he revealed the details of the test.

A test I knew nothing about—since the plot of the story I once wrote had already deviated so far off course that predicting anything had become impossible.

Still, to be honest, I wasn't expecting much from this new trial. The temple hadn't been able to offer me a real challenge for a while now.

But I couldn't hide my disappointment when Ivar announced that the test would take place in the Eastern Nightmare Lands.

"That place again?" Snow grumbled beside me, and I understood why.

We had been there not long ago—and surviving in that place was far too easy.

I understood the headmaster's intent: to put students under pressure. But that kind of pressure only works on the weaker students—not the elite class.

Still, we had no choice but to comply...

...

Preparation for the test took only a few days. Like the island trial before it, we would travel to our destination via teleportation gate ..for the sake of convenience and efficiency.

Wearing the same armor from our previous test, I stood among my fellow elite students, ready for what was to come.

"I can't believe we're about to waste our time in the Eastern Nightmare Lands..." Danzo complained. He wanted a real challenge ... something beyond the endless competition among peers.

Fighting Nightmare creatures wasn't a bad idea... but we'd already done that during the island test, which now made this upcoming trial feel like a pointless repeat. The temple wouldn't pit us against any truly dangerous Nightmare beasts anyway...

"We have no choice but to trust the headmaster's intention," I said—though I wasn't convinced by my own words.

"I'll be looking for you the moment the test begins," said Dawn Polaris, equally displeased with the situation. "Better to fight you guys and get it over with than wander aimlessly in those lands for a month..."

With such thoughts clouding our minds, we stood before the teleportation gate—none of us even remotely excited for what lay ahead.

Just before our turn to step through, Phoenix appeared behind us, sensing the foul mood among the elite.

"No need to pout, boys. You know Old Ivar wouldn't send you anywhere without a purpose."

Phoenix's encouragement was met with silence—except from Snow, who was kind enough to respond.

"I hope you're right, Professor Phoenix."

Even the Empire's shining star, Snow Lionheart, felt no excitement for what awaited us.

Standing at the gate, I found myself next to someone I usually avoided.

"You're looking well, Frey."

"I'd say the same about you... but you haven't changed a bit, Aegon."

Side by side with Prince Aegon, I walked toward the gate.

That's when I noticed the slow, creeping smile spreading across his face.

"You seem unusually happy about this test," I noted.

Upon hearing that, Aegon quickly straightened his expression with his right hand. "Ah, excuse me. I guess I lost myself for a moment there."

"So I was right," I said.

Aegon nodded.

"This test, Frey... It'll be something we'll never forget."

For a moment, I stopped and stared at him as he kept walking with that same smile.

Had those words come from anyone else, I would've dismissed them entirely.

But from Aegon...

I found myself giving this trial—one I had completely underestimated—some actual thought. Yet no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't imagine what might happen in a test like this.

With that uncertainty in mind, I stepped into the teleportation gate along with the rest of the elite class.

The gate lit up with a blue glow, signaling the start of the teleportation. That soft blue light pulsed for a brief moment .. until it changed completely.

None of those outside realized what had happened... until the light of the gate turned red, releasing a violent wave of force.

That single shift was enough to declare that something had gone horribly wrong.

Among those outside, Phoenix—being the closest—was the quickest to act. He dashed forward without hesitation, diving through the gate right behind us... while the way sealed shut for the rest.

"What just happened?!" Phoenix muttered, unable to find an answer—but unwilling to wait around to discover it.

As for us...

The moment I stepped into the gate, I was startled when the system issued a strange alert—something I hadn't seen since the day of Agaroth's arrival—declaring that something had gone terribly wrong.

I immediately opened the interface, trying to understand what was happening.

And to my utter shock... I discovered something I never could've imagined.

The teleportation gate hadn't been set to send us to the Eastern Nightmare Lands...

It was sending us somewhere entirely different.

Panicking as I realized the magnitude of the looming disaster, I tried to use the system's abilities to stop it—but it was no use. My remaining Achievement Points weren't nearly enough...

"It's too late..."

Teleportation would complete in mere seconds ... seconds before catastrophe struck. I had to act, no matter how little time I had. But my mind was blank...

"Elite monsters are nothing more than insects... so long as you kill them in the cradle."

Those were the words Gavied Lindman once said.

Inside the Ultras capital—caelid—a horrifying army had gathered around a crimson-lit teleportation gate.

Led by lords of terrifying caliber—Gavied Lindman and Godfrey among them—they had resolved to kill anyone who came out of that gate.

The Empire and the Temple had been far too negligent... blind to the fact that enemy hands had already infiltrated deep within their so-called impenetrable walls.

The gate meant to send us to a simple trial in the Nightmare Lands had been tampered with... rerouted to the enemy's stronghold itself!

The one place we should never have been sent ... the battlefield the Ultras intended to drown in blood.

Their only goal: to rob the Empire of its greatest prodigies, the ones who might one day tip the scales of war.

And knowing that, I burned every last Achievement Point I had—staking everything on the one idea my brain could muster under such suffocating pressure.

Using the system's writing ability, I desperately tried to save everyone at the final moment... just seconds before the gate would open and drop us all into unknown, enemy-infested territory.

The Ultras waited for the show to begin—for those unwitting teenagers to stumble through, unaware of the nightmare awaiting them. They were certain they had already won.

But the moment never came.

Instead, the gate simply shut down—without a single soul stepping through—after an unexpected shift in trajectory at the very last second.

...

...

...

In a barren land, like some ancient desert long forgotten by time...

I collapsed to the ground, drenched in sweat, gasping for air. There were no enemies in sight. No trap. Just... empty wasteland.

"Where are we?!"

"Is this the Nightmare Lands?"

I left my elite classmates behind, who were still unaware of the truth, and rushed to make sense of the disaster that had just narrowly missed us.

At the very last second, I had managed to alter the teleportation path—diverting us from the Ultras' trap. But I couldn't return us to the Empire... I simply didn't have the Achievement Points for it.

All I'd been able to do... was redirect us somewhere else on the Ultras' continent—far from the ambush, but still deep in hostile land.

But it changed nothing.

I raised my head, gazing up at the bleak sky above. The wind of this desert carried with it the bitter truth:

We were now in enemy territory. An entire continent where everyone wanted us dead.

"We're inside the Ultras Continent now."

I spoke with a darkened expression, accepting a heavy truth:

The hunt... had already begun.

Chapter 316: No Way Back (1)

Everything happened so fast, some of them barely had time to process it.

As their feet landed on a barren land, utterly devoid of life, the reactions varied among the elite class students who had just been mercilessly thrown into an unknown territory.

Among them was Frey, kneeling on one knee, running his bare hand through the rough sand with a deep frown on his face.

"What just happened?"

It was Seris Moonlight who voiced the question haunting them all.

They were supposed to arrive in the Nightmare Lands, as they'd been told.

But the strange deviation during teleportation suggested otherwise—something had gone wrong.

Of course, they had no way of knowing that this deviation had actually saved them, caused by Frey's intervention through the system.

Had he not acted, they would've ended up walking straight into the ambush the Ultras had prepared for them.

The elite students weren't fools—or at least, not all of them were.

After scanning their surrounding .. the barren plains stretching far into a distant mountain range, the desolate, grim aura hanging in the air—

"...Ultras Continent."

Ghost murmured those words. His voice, usually too quiet for anyone to notice, was for some reason heard clearly by everyone in that moment.

Truth be told, they had all been thinking the same thing, but none of them had the courage to say it out loud and face the reality.

"You're wrong!"

Unlike Ghost's calmness, a panicked cry rang out from the youngest daughter of Lord Sunlight—Scarite.

It seemed she hadn't intended to yell, judging by the way she flinched once all eyes landed on her. Her next words came much softer.

"You don't know that..."

In other words, he couldn't be sure this was the Ultras Continent.

"T-That's right... it's probably just part of the test."

"Yeah!"

Both Adriana Heijeforn and Emilia Atarax hurried to agree with Scar, trying their best to hold themselves together and stay positive.

Ghost showed no change in expression, even with the weight of their situation pressing down on them. He simply responded in the same calm tone.

"That's true. I don't actually know if we're on the Ultras Continent."

"Exactly, you can't—"

"But..."

Ghost continued, undeterred by their interruption.

"None of you can deny it either."

"Deny what...?"

He didn't bother explaining further—but Snow Lionheart was kind enough to step in.

"Just like we can't confirm this is the Ultras Continent, we also can't rule it out. And even if this were just a temple test, it's hard to believe."

The teleportation gate they'd used was the same one other second-year students went through. But for some reason, only they were here.

Snow had considered the possibility of everything around them being an illusion—but quickly dismissed the idea. Several of them, himself included, had abilities that could detect such deceptions.

No matter how much he thought about it, he kept arriving at the same conclusion.

"We're really in the Ultras Continent..."

He declared grimly in the middle of the barren desert.

"You're telling me we're trapped in enemy territory, where every single person wants us dead?"

Danzo scowled, fully grasping the gravity of the situation. Forget returning to the Empire—would they even survive in a land full of enemies on the brink of war?

And again ... they weren't seasoned warriors. Most of them were just teenagers, some not even eighteen.

The sight of Emilia and Adriana collapsing to their knees in shock served as a grim reminder of that truth.

"No..."

"What are we going to do now?!"

Tears welled up, and panic spread like wildfire. Their minds simply couldn't handle the reality they were now facing.

Unlike Frey and a few others who had been through life-and-death situations before and could stay composed, the rest weren't as fortunate.

Emilia Atarax's sobs, the despair and dread taking hold of them all—

It all came to a halt when the sharp clash of swords rang out.

Through a sudden swirl of dust caused by the impact, every eye turned to the two figures whose blades had met.

None of the elite students had noticed when—or how—Frey Starlight had drawn his sword. Nor how he had suddenly struck out at Prince Aegon Valerion, who blocked the attack using a wave of black lightning aura from his own blade.

Frey's cold eyes stabbed with a mixture of hatred and contempt toward that filthy prince.

"So you blocked it, huh?" Frey spoke with icy calm, while the prince responded with a trembling blade and a forced smile.

"Barely..."

With a swift slash of his sword, Frey knocked Aegon back. The prince braced his feet to stay grounded, barely holding on.

Despite using Black Lightning, he could only just parry Frey's blow—and still got pushed back several meters.

"That smile of yours... You're actually enjoying this, you damn rat."

Unlike Aegon, who struggled to stay steady, Frey walked toward him with a composed, unhurried pace, holding Balerion like a reaper's scythe.

"Frey, what are you doing?!"

After everything they'd just been through, no one expected Frey Starlight to launch a sudden attack on Aegon Valerion. The sheer shock of it sent panic rippling through the group.

A few students moved to intervene, but Frey let his aura loose deliberately—unleashing crushing pressure. For most of them, this was their first glimpse of what a Victoriad Champion was truly capable of.

"This isn't very polite... Frey Starlight, attacking me like this,"

Aegon swung his sword, his hand still trembling from the last clash, yet the smile never left his face.

Frey simply raised his blade again, pointing it at the prince.

"You knew it. From the start."

"That's a God-damn lie."

Aegon denied it instantly, but Frey didn't let up.

He showed no mercy to the foul prince, surging forward with Balerion charged by a wave of dark aura.

This time too, his strike was blocked—but not by Aegon.

Vermithor gleamed brightly as Snow intercepted Frey, steel clashing against steel.

"That's enough... Frey."

"Snow..." Frey muttered his counterpart's name, still pressing forward. "Step aside."

"Look around you!"

Snow's voice boomed as his light-based aura clashed violently with Frey's darkness.

His words snapped Frey back to his senses, making him finally aware of the situation around him.

Without realizing it, most of the elite class had already started to shift toward Aegon's side.

Only a handful remained near Frey—and even among them, most stood in hesitant silence.

"Stop it, Frey. This isn't the time or place for this," said Sansa, stepping beside him, trying to pull him back from the brink.

"Yes! Listen to them, Frey."

From the other side, Aegon chuckled.

"You're accusing me of causing this catastrophe? I mean, what would I gain by throwing myself into enemy territory alongside the Empire's top talents? Does that even make sense?"

Aegon Valerion answered with what he did best—words.

And gods, was he good at them.

"From where I'm standing, Lord Starlight... you're the one acting like a traitor."

As Aegon spoke, gazes full of suspicion and judgment turned toward Frey.

In that moment, Frey finally realized the mistake he had made.

The prince had spent years building his reputation and status within the Empire, turning most people into mere pawns who trusted him implicitly.

Even those who hated him—like the witch Selena—had to obey, because he held their parents hostage.

As for Frey, there weren't many willing to stand with him against Aegon.

Yet even with the odds stacked against him, Frey didn't lose his composure—not for a second.

Chapter 317: No Way Back (2)

"So I'm the traitor now, huh?" Frey let out a soft chuckle, but his killing intent surged, blanketing Aegon and everyone who had gathered around him.

“There’s a fundamental difference between us, Aegon. If I wanted you all dead... you would be.”

If he truly were the traitor, half the elite class would’ve fallen before they even realized what was happening.

“Then do it.”

Even under Frey’s pressure, Aegon didn’t flinch.

In that moment, Frey was ready to cut him down—ready to clash with the entire elite class if that’s what it took to silence the serpent that had hissed in his ear for far too long.

Snow Lionheart saw it clearly. His counterpart was about to make a move he couldn’t take back.

And so, Snow resolved to stop him.

Ghost, Danzo, and Sansa all followed, bracing themselves for what could be the beginning of a disaster.

But—just before it could all spiral into chaos...

Everyone froze the moment something crashed down from the sky, shaking the ground and triggering an ear-splitting explosion.

From within the swirling sandstorm, a man emerged—his aura explosive, his fiery brown hair wild, and his eyes glowing fiercely as if searching for something.

And he quickly found it.

The Elite Class recognized him at once. That man was the sole glimmer of hope in the sea of despair they were trapped in.

“Professor Phoenix!!”

One of the girls—most likely Emilia—screamed and ran straight toward him.

Phoenix Sunlight exhaled deeply in relief. He had finally found them.

Judging by the intense aura surrounding him and the sweat soaking his body, it was clear he’d been searching for them for quite some time.

Most of the students were overjoyed to see him. Others, however, sought answers.

“Professor Phoenix...”

Snow Lionheart was the first to step forward.

“What exactly happened? And... are we truly inside Ultras territory?”

Somewhere deep inside, he still hoped this was all part of the test. But Phoenix’s answer wasn’t what he wanted to hear.

“I’m not sure what happened exactly. All I know is that something went wrong the moment you entered the gate. So I rushed in after you.”

Upon entering the gate, he was pulled along with them—only to be spat out moments later when Frey tampered with the system. Because he hadn’t gone in at the same time, he ended up several kilometers away.

Phoenix went silent for a long moment, then finally spoke with firm resolve, realizing that hiding the truth would only make things worse.

“You need to understand, kids... this isn’t a test. We’re truly somewhere inside the continent of Ultras.”

That confirmation crushed the last shred of hope the elite class had been holding onto—that all of this might've been part of some extreme trial.

Elsewhere, Frey and Aegon were still locked in a tense stare, even after Phoenix's sudden arrival.

"Kikikiki... would you look at that?"

Both turned their heads at once toward the third person beside them, who burst out laughing.

With his towering build and blond hair—the mark of House Valerion—Daemon chimed in from the side.

He had remained neutral despite being Aegon's cousin.

"Why not just fight it out already? Simple and honest."

Daemon's words were laced with meaning, aimed directly at Aegon. The prince preferred scheming in the shadows, while Daemon believed in straightforward action.

That might be the biggest reason Daemon despised him.

Aegon simply shrugged with the same ever-present smile and made his way toward Phoenix, who had already taken note of the tension between him and Frey.

“Those methods suit you better, Daemon. But how about this instead?”

With just a few well-placed hand gestures, Aegon managed to draw the attention of everyone around him.

“Since we’ve fallen into this deadly trap, we need to find a way to survive. In other words—we need to find a way home.”

“And how exactly do you propose we do that?” Sansa snapped on purpose, clearly unimpressed.

The continent of Ultras was leagues away from the Empire, separated by the Demon Sea, which swarmed with the most deadly Nightmare Beasts.

Crossing that entire distance and making it out alive was beyond impossible.

But Aegon had already considered that.

“Teleportation gates,” he said.

Phoenix narrowed his eyes.

“There are no direct teleportation gates between the Empire and Ultras,” Selena interjected—but Aegon chuckled.

“You actually believe that?”

“Compared to your claim, that’s the more logical assumption. Are you seriously saying there are gates connecting us to our worst enemies?!”

The Empire and Ultras were on the brink of war. The idea of direct gates linking them was absurd.

“Then you’re even more naïve than I thought,” Aegon replied, making Selena scowl.

“What?”

“How do you think the Ultras have been launching their attacks until now? By crossing the entire Demon Sea each time?”

“That’s...”

Come to think of it, their appearances had often been abrupt—without warning.

“There must be gates somewhere... isn’t that right, Professor Phoenix?”

Aegon turned his words deliberately to the strongest man among them.

The Lord of Sunlight remained silent.

In truth, he couldn’t deny what Aegon had said. The Empire had long suspected the existence of such teleportation gates—and had even discovered a few.

Gates left over from the First War, more than three hundred years ago. The likelihood of there being an extra one or two they still hadn’t uncovered was very real.

“The prince is right.”

The moment Phoenix said those words, Aegon’s smile widened.

In truth, he was certain of the gates' existence. He had used one himself once, during secret negotiations with the Ultras.

Of course, he didn't mention that to anyone.

"What now, Frey? Still think I'm the traitor? I just gave you half the solution."

Aegon never missed a chance to provoke Frey.

The latter said nothing. Meanwhile, the prince wrapped up his argument by giving the group a direction.

"We have to find one of those gates."

That was their only hope.

"But... how? Are you suggesting we scour an entire continent where everyone wants us dead?"

Danzo frowned as he spoke, while Aegon simply shrugged, making it clear that he'd done his part. Whether they succeeded in finding the gates or not was entirely up to them.

“Professor Phoenix, I trust this responsibility falls to you.”

Aegon spoke with a smile, while Phoenix let out a sigh.

“I promise you—I won’t let anything happen to you. Not while I still draw breath.”

Aegon nodded cheerfully. “Yes, I’m sure you will.”

Some of the students felt slightly reassured. After all, Phoenix was powerful.

It all sounded like a normal conversation.

But it was anything but normal. Aegon had just subtly pushed all the responsibility onto Phoenix—and all the blame, should anything go wrong.

After all, their presence here was the result of the temple’s negligence. They had allowed such a catastrophe to unfold.

Phoenix couldn’t help but wonder: how had the Ultras pulled it off?

How did they bypass the temple's defenses and sabotage the gate so thoroughly, right under their noses?

Cold sweat crept down his back every time he thought about it.

"With all due respect... Professor Phoenix, I don't need your protection."

Frey Starlight's voice snapped Phoenix out of his thoughts.

The young man before him, radiating a terrifying aura and power, declared that he would not hide behind anyone.

"We'll fight for ourselves. Isn't that the whole point of all that training?"

Taking the same stance, Snow followed his friend's lead.

And they weren't the only ones. A surprising number of students expressed their willingness to fight.

Despite knowing how dangerous their situation was, they stayed composed. Phoenix couldn't help but smile at the sight.

“Then let’s do it. We’ll make it out of here—together.”

Phoenix declared.

With mixed feelings, twenty-two individuals began a journey into the unknown across a deadly continent.

A group bound by friendships, rivalries, and a multitude of emotions.

How would it all end?

Back then, Frey had no idea just how dark the future that awaited him on that continent truly was.

Chapter 318: A Continent Against Twenty-Two

Far from the continent of the Ultras—

—The Temple—

Only a few minutes had passed.

Mere minutes since the disaster had occurred.

The crimson gate that had appeared out of nowhere. Phoenix, who had rushed through it to follow them.

And the mages, who continued to report back...

Grim reports stating that the Empire's greatest generation—those who bore the titles of Church Champions, Victoriads, the children of current lords, and the heirs of the great guildmasters ..

Alongside the greatest talent of their time .. Phoenix Sunlight .

All of them had now vanished somewhere inside the continent of the Ultras.

Ivar Valerion, the current head of the Temple, stood before the growing pile of reports, his hand pressed against the wall as a throbbing headache nearly brought him to his knees.

The more he thought about the gravity of the situation, the harder it became to find any answer.

“What do we do now?”

What could he say? What would he announce?

“So... what now? Do I simply go to the giants of the Empire and tell them—’Hello, all your children have been kidnapped and are now stranded in enemy territory?’”

A colossal disaster had just dropped onto Ivar’s head. His fist clenched unconsciously and smashed into the wall beside him.

“How did this happen?”

How had they done it?

It was impossible for the Ultras to pull off something like this. There existed no spell, no ability capable of remotely tampering with a teleportation gate.

There was only one possible explanation for something this impossible—

“From the inside...”

Ivar muttered as sudden realization struck him like lightning.

To alter a teleportation gate’s destination path, the interference had to come from their end. In other words, it had to be inside the temple.

And that meant only one thing.

Without hesitation, Ivar issued immediate orders.

In under a minute, the temple was sealed shut. No one was allowed to leave. Everyone was now locked inside... with Ivar.

He had already decided—if it came to it, he would shoulder all the blame. But right now, something else took priority.

“There’s a traitor.”

Someone among them...

A filthy spy who had orchestrated this catastrophe.

And Ivar would find them.

Standing before the very gate that had just devoured the Elite Class, the current head of the Temple understood a grim truth—

They had passed the point of no return.

The enemy had been waiting for a reason.

A reason to start a war.

And now... they had one. The cruelest one imaginable.

“Oh God... have mercy on us.”

Ivar whispered with all sincerity—praying for himself, and for the teenagers now stranded deep inside enemy lands.

—

—Ultras Continent—

The other side of the gate.

The place meant to be the grave for Frey and his companions.

A full army awaited them.

Men clad in terrifying black armor, surrounded by towering buildings made of stone and black iron.

They had been waiting a long time at that gate—waiting for the sheep to come to slaughter.

But their prey never arrived.

Annoyed by the delay, a man finally reached the edge of his patience.

Dressed in a fine suit and long coat, his hand gripping the hilt of his sheathed blade, Gavid Lindman stepped forward.

“What is the meaning of this?”

His voice was deep, edged with irritation and impatience.

“I’m asking you... Beatrice.”

He called out to a certain name while casting a sideways glance at a figure sitting behind him.

She was a strange woman, looking to be in her thirties, dressed in a red medieval gown adorned with black roses. Her blonde hair was hidden beneath a stylish hat. Sitting there calmly, she smiled while clasping both hands together.

“How may I serve you, Lord Lindman?”

Her voice was sweet and silky as she responded with a question of her own.

As usual, Gavid didn’t bother hiding his growing impatience.

“Where are they?! Shouldn’t they be here by now?”

The woman called Beatrice answered with a curious look.

“I truly wonder how they pulled it off... I’m certain I disrupted the gate’s path and linked it to this location. And yet, just as they were about to arrive, they somehow diverted off course! It’s a miracle!”

She seemed genuinely delighted to share the revelation.

“One of them managed to interfere with the teleportation path—something even I, the Eternal Witch, cannot do. Fascinating... how did they pull it off? Was it a tool? A spell? Just who was it? Which one of them?”

She spoke rapidly, her excitement building, until—

“Beato. You’re rambling again.”

A voice cut through the air as Madam A appeared beside her out of thin air.

“Ah! My apologies.”

Beatrice offered a quick apology.

Gavid, in contrast, spat to the side with disgust.

“Filthy witch.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Beatrice replied as if it were praise, which only deepened Gavid’s scorn.

“We gave you one task... and you failed it entirely.”

“Don’t be like that, Lord Lindman. I told you I’d bring them—and I did. They’re somewhere in the western part of the continent.”

“The western side of the continent? Am I supposed to be happy about that?”

The Ultras Continent was anything but small.

“And what now? Do you want to punish me? Oh, why don’t you plunge that beloved sword of yours deep into my chest? Right here.”

Beatrice tapped a spot just above her heart, a playful smile tugging at her lips. Gavid’s face twisted in disgust.

“I have no intention of staining my blade with the blood of one of your puppets.”

“So cold-hearted... as always, Lord Lindman.”

She let out a melodic laugh.

“You have no idea how much effort went into crafting that homunculus you call a puppet. You should be grateful—without her, none of this would’ve been possible.”

Who would have thought...

That elegant woman, seemingly perfect in every way, was nothing but a puppet.

And just like that—

“No need to worry. The Empire will never uncover my other doll, hehehehe~”

Beatrice twisted her eye between her fingers, revealing far more than she should’ve.

Gavid, unfazed and unimpressed, turned away from her, barking orders to his troops.

“To all forces... the High Blood... spread across the continent and awaken every servant of the Lesser Blood!”

“The targets are the Empire’s prodigies. Whoever brings them back—dead or alive—shall be honored with blood and glory! Leave no corner of the continent unsearched!”

“Yes, sir!!”

The army roared in unison.

And just like that... the hunt began.

A continent rose—against twenty-two souls.

Chapter 319: The hammer and the anvil (1)

– Frey Starlight's POV –

"Frey! Want some?"

Danzo called out to me, inviting me to join everyone for food.

"No thanks... I'm fine."

I declined, stepping away from the group and ignoring Danzo's persistent gaze.

"You're not going to last like this, man..."

"..."

I understood where Danzo was coming from.

It had been several hours since we arrived in this barren, lifeless land—a place that reminded me all too much of London.

If anything, it confirmed one thing: this planet was already starting to bleed.

Night had fallen, and darkness loomed above our heads.

Despite hours of travel through the wastelands, we had found nothing ...no shelter, no signs of life.

It wasn't in our best interest to remain like this for long. After all, we had stepped through those gates intending to take a test. That meant none of us had brought any real provisions or supply rings.

The only food we had was what happened to be inside Professor Phoenix's ring when he followed us through.

But from what I saw... the amount he had would barely last a few days, especially considering how many of us there were.

And once that food ran out... most people here wouldn't survive. Especially not in this land, devoid of any life.

My body was different—able to go on without eating. That's why I chose to refrain from joining the others. It might help, even a little. And it seemed I wasn't the only one who thought that way.

"You two shouldn't cling to me like that."

I addressed both Snow and Sansa, who had also chosen not to eat.

"You think you're the only special one here, Frey? I can go weeks with just water," Snow said with a smile, while Sansa didn't comment at all.

I figured she didn't want to talk about her demonic body—that body that could survive on aura alone.

"At least we've got Seris with us..."

Sansa muttered, glancing over at Seris Moonlight, who was effortlessly conjuring water from thin air, manipulating the element without limits.

Snow nodded.

"I can use water too, but Seris is on a whole other level. She can produce large quantities with minimal aura... Her control is insane."

Most of the elite class gathered around Seris every time they needed water, doing what they could to avoid dehydration.

That put Seris at the top of the priority list. If she lost her ability to continue, dehydration would hit everyone hard. Fortunately, only a few hours had passed since our arrival, so that threat still felt distant—for now.

But I couldn't help but wonder... is this really enough?

Even if no one died from hunger or thirst, would we really be in a condition to fight if the time came?

Every minute we spent on this land drained us bit by bit .. not to mention that most of those here had no experience surviving in the wild.

No matter how I tried to think about it... my mind kept drifting toward the worst-case scenarios.

But I quickly abandoned those thoughts when Sansa tapped me lightly on the forehead.

"Could you stop? Every time I look at your face, I feel like your cursed thoughts are seeping into me."

Hearing her comment, I unconsciously touched my face and gave a half-smile.

"Sorry... Was it that obvious?"

"Yeah. So obvious I don't want to look at you anymore."

"Hehe... My bad."

It was a game we had been playing lately—Sansa trying to read my thoughts through my expressions, and me trying to hide them behind a blank face.

"I guess there's no point in overthinking it."

Better to worry about things when they actually happen rather than drive myself into a corner trying to anticipate every disaster.

If you asked me whether I could survive... I'd say yes. I'll make it somehow, even if the odds are against me.

But...

I lifted my head and glanced at the others.

I scanned their faces one by one—twenty elite students, and Professor Phoenix.

By the end of this ordeal... how many of them will still be standing?

That was the thought that haunted me most.

"Just to be sure... Let me ask you this, Frey."

Snow suddenly said beside me.

"What?"

"You don't have anything? A plan? A lead of some sort? Y'know... like last time?"

"Oh..."

I understood what he meant.

He was probably talking about our time in London—how I always seemed to know the way forward.

Which, in this case, meant... system advice.

I gave him a strained smile and answered with the bitter truth from the very start.

"Sorry. I'm completely in the dark this time. I have no idea where we could find any teleportation gates..."

I saw a flicker of surprise cross Snow's face.

But he quickly accepted it with a serious nod.

Unfortunately, system advice required Achievement Points.

Not many... but a significant amount nonetheless.

But my current number of Achievement Points... was quite simply:

— Current Achievement Points: 0 —

This was the first time ever that I had reached zero.

Diverting the teleportation process earlier and saving everyone had burned through all of my points— leaving me without my greatest weapon this time... the System.

In other words... I had no cheat left. If I wanted to survive, I'd have to rely solely on my own abilities.

And it all starts... with finding those teleportation gates.

"In the first place, how would we even activate one of them? Aren't they insanely complex?"

As if reading my thoughts, Sansa posed the obvious question.

"She's got a point," Snow said as a new variable entered the equation.

"We'll have to figure that out once we actually find one."

If the system were available, I could've activated them easily...

"Excuse me."

Our quiet conversation was interrupted by a fourth voice approaching from the distance.

The two approaching figures were the mages—Selena and her quiet companion, Xevier Adams.

They exchanged a glance, and then Selena stepped forward to speak.

"We overheard your conversation, and we think we might have a solution to the current issue."

"What do you mean?" Snow asked, and Selena replied without hesitation.

"We already discussed it with Professor Phoenix. All you have to do is find the gate—we'll handle the rest. I'm confident we can activate any teleportation gate on this planet."

Selena spoke with conviction ... and her words didn't sound like empty boasts.

"I see... That's reassuring to hear."

Snow nodded with a smile. At the very least, we no longer had to worry about how to activate the gate.

The conversation continued for a while longer as we naturally split into small groups that stayed close to one another.

Danzo, Dawn, Ghost, and Ragna joined us shortly after.

Most of the remaining students clung to Phoenix, following him wherever he went.

And then there was that damned prince—the one I couldn't let my guard down around for a second.

Overall, the atmosphere was incredibly somber.

And it stayed that way for a few more minutes.

Alone in the wasteland, surrounded by nothing but lifeless sand and freezing winds that threatened to freeze our blood solid...

All of that, accompanied by silence.

A silence that had lasted far too long.

But nothing lasts forever.

Chapter 320: The hammer and the anvil (2)

This world was far too vast for us to have it all to ourselves.

The first to notice something wrong... was Phoenix Sunlight. He rose to his feet with a scowl, his eyes fixed on the eastern horizon.

Phoenix's sudden movement instinctively drew everyone's attention in the same direction.

At first, there was nothing.

But over time, my senses picked up what had made Phoenix move earlier.

"This is bad," I muttered without thinking, and Snow nodded—he had felt it too.

"What? What's going on? Why are you all making those faces?"

Danzo asked quickly, his voice rising in tension.

Phoenix answered in a deep, commanding tone:

"Everyone, prepare to move."

And just as he spoke those words... the first wave of danger we had sensed moments ago revealed itself.

The land was cloaked in darkness, so we couldn't make them out clearly at first—but they were far closer than we'd expected.

"What the hell are those things?!"

Ragna and Danzo both cursed at the same time as a wave of pitch-black bodies surged out of nowhere.

"Nightmare creatures?!"

"No!"

I immediately denied it, pushing my Hawk Eyes to their limit.

"They're human."

Mangled, broken, and disfigured... they staggered toward us barefoot, draped in tattered rags—or, in many cases, wearing nothing at all.

Upon closer inspection, you could see it .. that black substance oozing from their pores and wounds...

Everyone stared in horror at the horde approaching from the distance.

"These are humans? They look more like..."

Emelia Atarax murmured, but Dawn Polaris finished the sentence for her.

"The Ganado..."

They looked terrifyingly similar to that nightmare creature we fought during the island trial.

"Should we avoid them?" Seris asked, directing her question at Phoenix, who stood at the head of our formation.

"No... That won't help."

After focusing for a moment, I understood what Phoenix meant.

"They're coming specifically for us."

Their presence here wasn't random. They were headed straight for us—mouths open wide, drooling black sludge as they came.

"Prepare for battle!"

Phoenix shouted, and we immediately shifted into the battle formation we had agreed on beforehand.

With Phoenix at the front, flanked by Danzo and Daemon, the two of them burst forth—releasing explosions of silver and golden aura respectively as they donned their armor.

Right behind them were Snow Lionheart and I— the main duelists in our formation. The rest had taken their positions toward the rear according to their roles.

We had already decided to go all out—no restraints—which explained why both Daemon and Danzo had pulled out their trump cards from the very beginning.

"I don't get it... Professor Phoenix, wouldn't it be better to wipe them all out with a single large-scale attack?"

Snow asked, beginning to feel the tremors beneath his feet caused by the approaching army.

Phoenix simply shook his head in response.

"We can't do that."

Phoenix was more than capable of incinerating the entire army with his flames... but that wasn't an option.

"If I unleash one of my stronger attacks, I'll have to burn through a tremendous amount of aura—and that would immediately alert the Ultras to our position."

It was safe to assume this army only found us because they happened to be nearby. In other words, our location likely hadn't been exposed—yet.

But the other side undoubtedly had its fair share of mages and Wave Controllers. If Phoenix went all out, they would sense his presence in an instant.

"Remember... the enemy isn't just what you see in front of you. It's far more than that."

"Understood!"

Snow responded without hesitation, and Phoenix nodded firmly.

"We'll have to do this the hard way!"

As he spoke, Phoenix's fists ignited with blazing fire—flames that the young Sunlight Lord unleashed in a searing beam, vaporizing the vanguard of the oncoming army.

In a single strike, he wiped out dozens of them.

Phoenix's fire was so intense, his victims didn't even leave behind corpses.

"Let's go!"

Daemon Valerion shouted as well, charging headfirst into the crowd in a flash of lightning, slicing through their ranks. Danzo followed right behind, unleashing his own destructive power.

Meanwhile, the Wave Controllers—led by Sansa and Seris—targeted the deeper lines of the enemy formation.

And after the initial clash...

I realized something.

"This is easy."

Cutting off one of their heads with Balerion, I understood they really were like the Ganado.

"Way too weak."

They were so primitive they tried to attack with their mouths, attempting to bite... but even that was painfully slow.

"Let's finish this quickly."

Snow and I plunged through their ranks with blistering speed, tearing them apart with swift, coordinated strikes. Still, most of the kills were claimed by Phoenix, who shredded dozens in mere seconds.

"What the hell is up with these things?!"

BOOM!

With a single punch, Danzo sent an entire swarm of them flying. Some exploded into pieces, their bodies ripped in half.

Yet even in that state... they still attacked.

"What kind of curse is this?! Zombies?!"

"Quit talking and kill them properly!"

Slash!!

With a giant arc of violet aura, I cut down more and more of them.

We eliminated hundreds in record time, but despite the ease... something didn't sit right with me.

"Something's off..."

How did they find us in the first place?

Was our position exposed?

And if it was... why send weaklings like these?

"Something's wrong..."

As I started using my brain again, I finally realized just how deep I had pushed into the swarm of twisted humans.

The adrenaline and high of combat had blinded me to the state of the battlefield—I hadn't even noticed how far I'd gotten from the others.

But I wasn't alone. Phoenix, Snow, Danzo, and Daemon were still further ahead.

Dawn and Ragna—along with the other duelists and spearmen—weren't far either.

But I didn't see Sansa or the others anywhere nearby.

Activating Hawk Eyes, I scanned the battlefield, and after a moment, I found them.

They had been supporting us from afar in their own way .. and that help had made a big difference.

But then... I froze.

Because the moment I extended my gaze just behind them—

"Everyone! Fall back! NOW!!"

I shouted with all the strength I could muster, drawing everyone's attention to what was happening behind the line.

But I was too late.