

VILLAIN 321

Chapter 321: Cannon fodder

The role of the Wave Controllers was in no way lesser than that of the duelists.

Sansa and Seris had taken on that burden, and they had helped immensely.

But they suddenly halted when an unexpected variable appeared behind them.

From the west—another army emerged, nearly larger than the first that attacked from the east.

"When did they flank us like this...?"

The rear line only had Sansa, Seris, the mages, and Emelia Atarax—the healer.

So letting another army get close to them was a disaster waiting to happen .. and all of them realized it immediately.

"Let's hit them from range while the others pull back!"

Seris spoke as Sansa nodded hastily.

Both of them manifested spears of ice and shadow, ready to launch a counterattack—but they froze the moment they saw what was coming.

From afar...

Hundreds of fire projectiles flew through the air like catapult volleys, all aimed directly at the spot where Sansa and the others had gathered.

At the same time, the battle cries of the new army rang out clearly.

"Charge!!"

"Kill them all!!"

Those roars echoed in unison with the relentless firebombing raining down on their heads.

They had made a grave mistake—assuming the second army consisted of mindless Ganado.

But their new opponents... were the real deal.

The sudden bombardment launched by the Ultras' own Wave Controllers caught the princess and her group off guard, and in that instant, everyone at the front line finally understood what had prompted Frey's desperate warning moments earlier.

"Shit!!"

Several of them cursed simultaneously, trying to retreat—only to find the number of Ganado around them had surged dramatically out of nowhere, making it impossible to turn their backs.

The only one still able to move freely was Phoenix, who burst into a streak of flame and dashed back immediately—but by then, it was already too late.

From the front and from the rear... they were completely surrounded.

The pursuit had turned into a war of extermination.

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Far from the battlefield—and simultaneously, in another place...

A breathtaking garden bloomed with every kind of flower imaginable. Birds chirped, and the sound of fresh water trickled gently from a nearby stream, adding to the serenity.

At the heart of this peaceful scene stood a round white table, flanked by two elegant chairs.

On the table rested luxurious porcelain teacups, arranged neatly beside a massive chessboard that took up the entire surface.

As for the players, one was a beautiful blonde woman in a crimson dress. Her opponent—an older man in his fifties—wore a vintage suit, a tall hat, and round reading glasses, which he held delicately in one hand.

"This isn't very sportsmanlike of you, Beato... Playing your opponent like this," the man remarked.

Beatrice responded with a knowing smile.

"And why not? Don't tell me you're not impressed with my tactics? You used to praise them all the time."

She gestured toward the chessboard—one that lacked the usual setup. The white side had only a few pieces left, while black had completely overrun the board.

There, in that surreal space, the classic war tactic known as the "hammer and anvil" had been flawlessly executed—the white side was entirely surrounded.

"They took the bait. And now... they're trapped between my lovely little hammers," Beatrice said softly.

The man nodded slowly.

"But you know that such a beautiful tactic... means nothing in the end, don't you?"

"Oh? And why is that exactly?"

He pointed toward the few remaining white pieces.

"It's the difference in quality."

Beatrice nodded, her smile unfading—as if she had expected that answer all along.

"You're right."

As she spoke, the smoke from the previous bombardment cleared—revealing Seris and Sansa, who had raised a dome of ice and shadow that protected everyone from the rain of fire.

Meanwhile, Phoenix had returned just in time to join them against the second army that had seemingly appeared from nowhere.

This time, they were facing an intelligent enemy—not the mindless Ganado.

But despite its organization, the new army didn't contain any elite-level combatants.

"Well... you can't expect too much from cannon fodder, can you?"

Beatrice chuckled.

And in perfect sync with her words, Phoenix tore through their ranks in a terrifying display of overwhelming strength.

Seris and the others could only watch him from behind, barely able to comprehend how that man could slaughter such a massive number of enemies without even blinking.

The Ganado—even if technically human—resembled zombies. Killing them was easy... and required no hesitation.

But the second army was made of people—flesh and blood.

Still, this was war now. And in war, hesitation meant defeat.

Even so... it wasn't easy getting used to killing humans.

"They're just children. They don't know the terror of the battlefield yet," Beatrice whispered, placing more and more black pieces on the board.

"We can teach them a valuable lesson... thanks to the endless cannon fodder we have. Hehehe..."

And as if her words carried some kind of magical power—

More enemies appeared. From the north... and the south.

More Ganado.

It was no longer just a hammer and anvil.

Now, there were four hammers—threatening to crush Frey and the others from all sides.

All of this... and not a single member of the Ultras' elite had shown up yet.

Just as Beatrice had called them—

"Cannon fodder."

The middle-aged man let out a laugh as he observed her extreme chess strategy play out.

"I can't even call this chess anymore... You're absolutely heartless, Beato. Kihihihhi."

The man couldn't help but burst out laughing, taking his time before continuing.

"To do this to the very people you've lived alongside all these years..."

"Oh?"

In response, Beatrice gave him a sweet and seductive smile, her voice playful.

"Well, I'm a witch, aren't I? What did you expect from me?"

That sweet smile swiftly twisted into something demonic.

"It runs in my blood."

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Back on the battlefield...

Overwhelmed by the sheer number of enemies, Frey Starlight clenched his teeth as he summoned the Dark Sister.

Phoenix had said they shouldn't unleash too much power.

"To hell with that!"

At this rate—even if their enemies were weaker—they would be slowly worn down and exhausted.

With that thought in mind, Frey charged forward, swinging his blade and unleashing devastating waves of dark aura, slicing the surrounding Ganado into pieces.

There was no way he'd allow himself to die in a place like this—not like this.

And that same determination flooded the minds of every member of the elite class.

Each of them found themselves fighting with everything they had, clawing for survival in the heart of that death trap.

It was a desperate war—through and through.

Chapter 322: Beneath the Crows' Gaze (1)

The chaos of war—death, blood, and despair.

Experiences most people never face in their lifetime, yet the Elite Class lived through them that night.

Amid the desolate sands of the Ultras Desert, those students—barely of age—fought for their lives.

With the clash of blades, the tearing of flesh and bone, and the constant tension of battle, the pressure weighed heavily on them all.

Frey, who single-handedly took on dozens of enemies at once, found himself wondering—

"Can I save everyone?"

But he quickly answered himself ...

"Of course not."

The idea of a hero saving everyone was far from realistic—especially when the odds were stacked against them from the very beginning.

Besides, Frey never considered himself a hero.

All he wished for, amid the heart of this chaos, was for the few he truly acknowledged in his world to survive.

Surrounded completely by enemies, he lost sight of his companions. His full focus was on the monstrous beings relentlessly trying to end him.

For a fleeting moment, Frey imagined stumbling across the mutilated corpse of one of his friends. Rage boiled within him as the ceaseless wave of enemies obscured his vision and blocked his path.

The only thing that reminded him he wasn't alone was the surging auras erupting all around the battlefield.

Minutes passed in a blur. And for the first time, Frey's worst fears... did not come true.

Despite the encirclement, the Elite Class endured.

Frey and Snow tore through enemy lines from both flanks, while Daemon and Danzo, clad in reinforced armor, stood unscathed.

Together, the four of them completely secured the eastern front, allowing the rear line to finally breathe and focus on the enemies ahead.

Meanwhile, Ghost moved silently through the battlefield, his deadly strikes sending more Ultras into their graves.

"Are we... winning?"

Frey wondered as he finally caught his breath.

In the distance, he caught sight of a blazing spectacle—Phoenix Sunlight's fireworks on the far side of the battlefield.

Lord Sunlight did not hesitate to incinerate his foes alive, claiming the largest kill count that day. Behind him, everyone fulfilled their role flawlessly, despite the overwhelming pressure.

Sansa Valerion unleashed her shadows, covering a wide area with inky tendrils that shredded anyone who came close.

Near her, Seris Moonlight conjured dozens of ice spears and blades—deadly at long range. But that wasn't all.

The Moonlight heiress dazzled when a crystalline ice armor formed around her lithe frame—covering key points of her body, giving her the appearance of an icy ninja.

Wielding twin blades, Seris closed the distance and sliced through enemies with lethal precision, compensating for any weakness in her ranged attacks.

The ice aura not only fortified her defense but drastically enhanced her speed.

"Incredible..."

Sansa stared in awe, stunned by the elegance and brutality of Seris' technique.

"She matched the durability of Daemon and Danzo's armor... with just her own power."

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Seris Moonlight had pioneered a new combat style for Wave Controllers.

Sansa couldn't help but admire her. But without realizing it, she let her guard down.

And in battle, carelessness is deadly.

She didn't sense the mutated human lunging at her from behind.

Like a rabid zombie, he snarled and bared his filthy teeth, aiming for her neck.

Sansa stepped back in panic, far too late to retaliate. All she could do was raise her arm in defense.

Moments later, the creature's fangs sank deep into her skin—ripping flesh and spilling a flood of blood.

Pain surged through her as she stared at the vicious bite mark along her elbow. Her retreat only invited more enemies, surrounding her in a tightening ring.

Slash!

The whistling wind saved her—a single strike beheading the monsters in an instant.

"Are you alright?!"

Adriana appeared, clutching her wind-infused spear, worry etched on her face.

Sansa stood quickly, forcibly sealing her wound.

"No need to worry."

With a flick of her hand, the shadow tendrils surged again—stronger, deadlier.

"I'll slaughter every last one of them."

The black serpents slithered and lunged like massive vipers, reducing anything within their range to shredded limbs.

The assault shook the battlefield—but it wasn't enough.

Then she stepped in.

The Ultras never saw it coming. Arrows struck their skulls with pinpoint precision, ending them before they could even react.

"Don't forget about me, scum."

Perched on a high ridge with a full view of the battlefield, Lara Croft—granddaughter of the former headmaster—was in her element.

She loosed arrow after arrow with terrifying speed, mowing down hordes of mutants with ruthless efficiency.

Sansa was caught off guard when her wound began healing on its own—bathed in a gentle green light that had appeared from nowhere, wrapping around her body.

Tracing the source of this pure, radiant energy, she spotted Saint Candidate Emilia Atarax stationed in the rear, behind both Lara and the Sunlight twins.

Emilia's light didn't just reach Sansa. It swept over every member of the Elite Class in the vicinity, restoring vitality and clarity to their minds and bodies, allowing them to fight with renewed strength.

The nearby presence of Dawn and Ragna contributed as well.

The Elite Class had never trained to fight as a coordinated unit. Their formation was scattered, and Phoenix had failed to establish any real structure.

But their individual power was more than enough to reverse the tide. Even when facing a massive army numbering in the thousands, their quality far outmatched the enemy's quantity.

What began as a desperate struggle for survival turned into a complete annihilation of the Ultrares, who fell one by one.

And after exactly four hours—four excruciating hours that felt like an entire day—it was over.

The cawing of crows filled the air as they descended, feasting on the rotting corpses.

The battlefield was thick with the stench of blood, scorched flesh, sweat, and decay.

The scent filled their lungs.

They had won.

But none of their faces reflected joy, or even relief.

Only exhaustion. And a bitter, hollow emptiness.

"Is everyone okay?" Phoenix asked. He still looked as composed as he had at the start. Truthfully, it wouldn't be wrong to say he had handled half the battle by himself.

The Elite Class students gathered around him, some staggering, others more steady.

Snow was the one to speak.

"We're fine. We survived."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Phoenix let out a quiet breath. As the young lord of the Sunlight family, he had reached SS rank at an exceptionally young age. But he was used to fighting alone and had little experience in leading others.

In that regard, his failure to manage the flow of battle was glaring.

Fortunately, the raw strength of the strongest students had been enough to carry them through.

Chapter 323: Beneath the Crows' Gaze (2)

"What now?" Seris Moonlight asked.

Phoenix paused, analyzing the situation before responding.

"For now, we need to leave before reinforcements arrive. But..."

He cast a glance across the battlefield, now littered with corpses—and the crows that had found a lavish feast.

"You're thinking of looting the bodies, aren't you? Professor Phoenix, what happened to your manners? Hehe~"

Aegon chuckled from behind the group, calmly cleaning his sword. Like Phoenix, he looked untouched by the battle.

"Looting?" several students echoed, reacting in a mix of shock and discomfort.

Some looked disgusted, hesitant. Others remained impassive.

Overall, the idea of tampering with the dead was foreign to them—repulsive even. They had lived far from such grim realities.

"We're low on supplies. Right now, acquiring resources is a top priority."

Food. Clothing. Weapons. Anything that could improve their chances of survival, even slightly, was worth securing. That was Phoenix's reasoning.

But Aegon shook his head.

"It's pointless. Didn't you notice? We just fought the lowest scum of the Ultras. Barely above animals. What valuables do you expect to find on them?"

He spoke with quiet certainty, never glancing up—his attention entirely on his now-clean blade.

Phoenix couldn't deny his point. The Ultras soldiers had indeed looked more like empty husks than thinking beings.

Still—

"You may be right. But let me ask ..how many did we fight here?"

"No idea. You handled most of them yourself... maybe a few thousand?"

"Exactly. Thousands. I'm sure at least a handful had something useful."

No one knew how long they'd be stranded in this foreign land. They were running dangerously low on resources.

"Something useful? Even if they had anything, you probably incinerated it with their bodies, Professor Phoenix. You're wasting your time."

Aegon opposed Phoenix directly, as if this wasn't the first time they'd clashed on such a matter.

"Then one hour."

"What?"

"We search for just one hour. Then we move."

The battle had just ended, and lingering too long was unwise. Phoenix offered a compromise.

Aegon sighed, closing his eyes. He could see Phoenix wouldn't back down.

"Do whatever you want."

Everyone in the Elite Class had heard the exchange. To an outsider, it might've sounded like a conversation between equals.

And yet the truly astonishing thing was that a B rank like Aegon could speak to someone like Phoenix—an SS rank—without flinching.

Wherever he went, the prince commanded presence.

The presence of a true king.

"It's settled then," Phoenix declared. "Those of you still fit for battle will assist me in the search. I know this isn't something you're used to... but if we want to survive, we have to do what it takes."

Phoenix addressed everyone, but most of them couldn't even bring themselves to meet his eyes.

Despite their overwhelming victory, the truth was—it hadn't been easy.

The students were in varying states.

Snow and Frey still had enough strength to fight if needed, but what about the rest?

They were utterly exhausted.

Lara Croft could barely hold her bow anymore, her muscles worn and trembling from too many repeated shots. That alone said everything.

"I'll go," Frey said, unwilling to remain near the prince any longer. Looting corpses felt more bearable to him.

Snow followed suit. "We'll help too. Other than aura depletion, we're not really hurt."

Selina volunteered as well, joined by the mage Xevier.

"We need to recover the magic traps we scattered across the battlefield anyway, so we can do both," Xevier added.

Phoenix nodded and also called on Ghost, Danzo, and Daemon to join them. Daemon, however, refused.

In the end, seven of them stepped forward to retrieve what they could from the fallen, while the rest watched silently.

"How can they do something so vile?" Saint Candidate Emilia said, sadness painting her face as she watched Frey and the others search the corpses with emotionless expressions.

Seris, standing nearby, shook her head. "You're too innocent, Emilia."

"Am I the strange one here?!" Emilia asked, clinging to her beliefs.

She had opposed Phoenix's proposal from the beginning, but lacked the courage to object out loud.

"At times like these, we do whatever it takes to survive. Look at them. We already killed them. What difference does looting their corpses make? They're dead either way."

"But... what separates us from animals, then?"

Emilia's gaze shifted to the crows still pecking at the dead.

"There are boundaries given to us by the Lord of Light. Boundaries we must never cross."

Her voice trembled, but her conviction remained unshaken.

Seris didn't know how to respond. People like Emilia were the worst in these moments—convinced their beliefs were absolute, unwilling to bend no matter what.

But the reply came from someone else entirely.

"What kind of drugs do they feed you at the church?!"

It was Daemon, clearly fed up with her moral outcry.

"What?"

"Wake the hell up, you naive little girl, and try flipping the board for once. Put yourself in their shoes."

"Daemon..." Seris tried to stop him, but he pressed on.

"Let me spell it out for you. If the roles were reversed, they wouldn't just loot your corpse. They'd take turns raping you—again and again—until your fragile little body shattered to pieces !"

His brutal tone left Emilia in stunned silence, mouth open, words failing her.

"Take your dumb sense of morality and toss it in the nearest trash heap. The only thing that matters in this world is survival. You can only afford to spout this crap because you're on the winning side. You and your entire church are nothing but hypocrites!"

For some reason, Daemon looked even larger than usual as he shouted.

"Hy...pocrites?" Emilia murmured, right before Daemon roared:

"YES, HYPOCRITES!"

A heavy silence followed.

Then came the sound of soft sobbing.

Daemon's jaw dropped as Emilia suddenly burst into tears.

Without warning, he had made her cry like a child.

The girls nearby immediately gathered around to comfort her, glaring at Daemon with disgust and contempt in their eyes.

He scoffed, spat on the ground, and stormed off, flipping them off as he went.

"What kind of pathetic fools have I gotten stuck with?"

He muttered the words and disappeared, his muscular back fading into the distance.

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Far from the commotion between Daemon and Emilia, Princess Sansa sat alone, staring at the field of corpses—specifically, at Frey.

He was rummaging through the dead one by one, his face blank, showing no emotion at all.

"I can't read him..."

Sansa muttered. She couldn't figure out what was going through his mind.

Ever since his hair had turned white out of nowhere, she hadn't been able to read him like she used to—except in rare moments.

Unless he lowered his defenses, it was impossible to see through him.

His presence had become completely enigmatic... but for some reason, she couldn't tear her eyes away.

"He's... good at handling corpses," she murmured under her breath, only for a sudden voice to interrupt.

"Yeah... like he's used to it."

Sansa turned to find a familiar girl standing beside her.

"Clana..."

Clana Starlight—Frey's relative. The girl greeted the princess with a gentle smile.

Chapter 324: Beneath the Crows' Gaze (3)

"Hello. Do you mind if I sit?"

"Not at all."

"Thank you."

Clana sat beside Sansa, both of them staring at the field of corpses swarmed by crows.

"We're far from home..."

"Yeah."

Clana chuckled softly, reclining against the solid rock she was using as a seat.

"If someone had told me yesterday that I'd end up here like this... I'd have called them insane."

"It's the worst fate imaginable."

There was a deeper meaning behind Sansa's words—one that Clana immediately picked up on.

"This is your second time here... are you alright?"

Clana asked gently, while Sansa kept her gaze distant and grim.

The princess had no fond memories of this place. She didn't even know what the rest of the Ultras continent looked like, having spent most of her time imprisoned in a cell. But that didn't change the fact that she was back on the land where she once suffered.

Of course it wasn't easy for her heart.

"I'm fine... really."

Clana nodded at her response.

"Do you think we'll survive this time?"

The princess had survived once. But what about now?

"I don't know... I hope we do."

Silence fell between them for a moment as their eyes returned to the bodies scattered before them—particularly one young man dragging a corpse, having found something useful in its pockets.

"I think some of us will survive... the strong ones at least. Like you, Sansa. And Frey—standing over there."

Sansa turned the moment Frey's name was mentioned.

"Tell me, Princess... what does he mean to you?"

"...What?" Sansa asked, a bit surprised by the sudden shift in the conversation.

"I'm talking about Frey. You were watching him the entire time."

"What kind of question is that, all of a sudden...?"

Sansa asked as Clana tilted her head, resting it on her knees.

"Call it curiosity. You're free to ignore it if you'd like."

Sansa frowned. This wasn't the time or place for a question like that.

"What does Frey mean to me..."

Friend. That was the first word that came to mind.

Having lived her entire life as a princess, always pursued by people looking to benefit from her status, Sansa had become used to reading hidden intentions. The manipulation and false smiles left deep scars during her childhood.

She'd developed a strange ability—to read faces.

But Frey... Frey was the only one who approached her without hiding anything.

He was rude. Annoying. But he didn't try to use her. That alone made her consider him her only real friend. Still, things had changed since they entered the Temple.

He saved her. Again and again.

When everything around her fell into darkness and all hope faded—he was there.

At some point, his presence had become as important to her as Oliver Khan, her only other true ally.

So... what exactly was Frey to her?

She wondered, recalling all their moments together. That brooding young man who always looked like he was carrying the weight of the world.

Sansa Valerion

Affection Points: 70... 71... 72... 73... 74...

...75

"Someone I can't afford to lose..."

That was the answer Sansa came up with. And from the surprised reaction beside her, it clearly wasn't the one Clana had expected.

"Seriously... why would you even ask something like that?"

Sansa spoke, finally turning to take a proper look at Clana's face—reading her emotions without even realizing it.

Her eyes slowly widened in surprise.

"Clana... you..."

She was about to say something, but a terrifying scream tore through the air, sending the crows flying in panic.

Everyone immediately turned toward the source, only to see the mage Xevier Adams writhing on the ground—something latched onto him.

"That's..."

"A mutated human?!"

Xevier, assuming all enemies were dead, had let his guard down—only to be ambushed by one of the mutants that had somehow survived.

The creature sank its fangs deep into the young mage's chest. Xevier thrashed in agony, unable to muster enough strength to resist.

Slash!

With a blur of motion, Frey—who had been nearby—sliced the mutant's head clean off in a single strike, ending its assault.

But the damage had already been done.

The creature had bitten deep, infecting Xevier's chest with a strange, spreading black rot.

He winced in agony as everyone rushed over, with Emilia at the front, healing him without hesitation.

"Idiot... did he really drop his guard just because he thought they were all dead?"

Daemon Valerion scoffed, watching as everyone gathered around Xevier while Emilia tended to his wounds.

"They're inexperienced..."

A sudden voice made him turn sharply—Ghost was standing behind him, still looting the corpses with cold efficiency, completely unfazed by the chaos behind him.

Daemon raised an eyebrow. He hadn't sensed anyone nearby—if Ghost hadn't spoken, he would've never realized the silent killer was there.

Apparently, Ghost had assumed Daemon's words were directed at him.

"Inexperienced?" Daemon sneered. "When it comes to experience, I doubt anyone here has more blood on their hands than a filthy assassin like you... Ghost Umbra."

Ghost remained silent.

Daemon chuckled.

"Tell me, Umbra. What do you think? Look at them... who do you think will survive? And who's going to die?"

Ghost didn't answer right away. Instead, he finished stripping the nearby bodies, carrying out his task with disturbing precision.

Then, he walked past Daemon, until they stood shoulder to shoulder. Only then did the assassin speak.

"Death spares no one, Daemon Valerion. Whether they have experience like us... or none at all like them... no one truly knows how this will end."

With a dark look, Ghost stepped past him, leaving behind a final remark:

"But if my instincts are right... the number of survivors here won't exceed the fingers on one hand."

Daemon couldn't help but laugh aloud, a chill running down his spine at Ghost's ominous words.

"What a cursed fate you're trying to place on us, Ghost Umbra..."

Between the crows' caws and Xavier's groans of pain...

The hour set by Phoenix had passed—signaling it was time to move again, venturing deeper into enemy territory... into a continent that had been lying in wait all along.

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— The Tea Party —

In the midst of a beautiful garden, Beatrice leaned on one hand, gazing at the chessboard before her with a smile.

"The first round is over."

The moment she finished her sentence, the man across from her—an older gentleman in his fifties wearing a tall hat—replied immediately.

"With your loss."

He sipped from his cup, savoring the variety of teas Beatrice had offered at her little tea party.

Beatrice smiled calmly.

"Was it really a loss? I achieved what I wanted, after all."

At that, the man's sharp eyes narrowed.

"So the second round has already begun?"

Beatrice nodded, her smile soft but knowing.

"That's right."

"Tch... just how long do you plan on dragging out this silly game?"

"As long as possible," she replied cheerfully. "You know how boring it gets around here."

She truly looked entertained—like a six-year-old who'd just discovered a new game to play for hours on end.

"Gavid Lindman won't be pleased when he hears about this..."

The moment his name was mentioned, Beatrice shrugged.

"Who cares what that pompous man wants? He won't be around anytime soon anyway."

After kidnapping the empire's most precious jewels, the Ultras were expecting a fierce response.

It was only natural for their forces to mobilize, bracing for the all-out war the empire would inevitably launch—a repetition of the war from seventeen years ago.

Only this time, the Ultras were the ones who lured the empire in.

Thanks to the looming conflict...

Beatrice was free to toy with Frey and his companions however she pleased.

The Eternal Witch observed the teenagers with deep interest and careful attention.

She watched as bonds formed between them—friendship, respect, love, hatred, rivalry...

The Elite Class had become fertile ground for every kind of drama, and the witch enjoyed watching every bit of it.

Her gaze reflected Frey and his comrades, from a place much closer than they ever imagined, and her grin widened.

"The second round begins now."

Chapter 325: Womb of Ashes

"Huff... Huff..."

Xevier Adams was panting heavily as Emilia worked to heal the festering wound in his chest.

Holy energy truly was a blessing in situations like this—its purifying touch cleansed the infection completely, allowing Xevier to breathe in relief.

"It's a good thing the wound didn't reach your heart... Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to save you."

Emilia exhaled and stepped back as the others made space for the mage to stand again.

"I'm sorry... I was careless,"

Xevier said, directing his apology to Phoenix. But he simply shook his head.

"It's fine. The responsibility is mine."

Even though the Elite Class was made up of the best, at the end of the day, they were still just children—barely past puberty. Incidents like this were well within the realm of possibility... but Phoenix had failed to anticipate it.

Standing a little behind them, Aegon Valerion gave a quiet, knowing chuckle. He'd predicted this outcome, perhaps even expected it—but chose to stay silent. After all, despite being in the same crisis, the Elite Class was far from functioning as a true team.

"We'll halt the looting here. There's no point in continuing."

Fearing another mishap, Phoenix decided to end the corpse-scavenging operation. Everyone laid out what they had collected.

The result was far from satisfying.

"What the hell is this filth?!"

Danzo stared in disgust at the pile of rotten meat, dried herbs, and moldy mushrooms dumped in front of him.

Ghost answered.

"This is what those people were eating. Rotten meat, aged fungi—some of it poisonous—wild herbs not fit for consumption... and most of the water they carried was contaminated and unfit to drink."

He paused for a moment, debating whether to share something else... but chose to keep it to himself.

"I don't know how they even had the strength to fight us. Like the prince said, we were up against walking corpses."

It was almost comical ... how the intruders on this land, like Frey and the others, were in far better condition than its native inhabitants.

"But on the other hand, we did manage to salvage a few things—armor, clothes, weapons. They're all in horrible condition, but they might work for camouflage."

Ghost gave his full report, as he had looted more corpses than anyone else—so much so that a few students had been repulsed by how he tore through some of the bodies looking for anything remotely useful.

As expected from an assassin like him, desecrating corpses wasn't something new.

"I see... well done, Ghost Umbra."

Phoenix sighed, trying to think of a way to make use of the limited gear they'd acquired. But overall, that hour spent scavenging had been almost entirely fruitless.

As Phoenix examined the poor-quality weapons and clothing, a few students walked over to the pile of rotten meat and bones, visibly disturbed.

"How could anyone eat this kind of garbage?!"

Jan Dover—one of the Elite Class members and formerly part of Feyreth's entourage—picked up a chunk of meat, grimacing.

Nearby, Frey raised an eyebrow as he glanced at Jan and his companion, Kyle.

"Amazing. You two are still alive?"

"You—!"

Jan was about to respond, but the words caught in his throat the moment his eyes met Frey's.

Frey wasn't someone they could afford to mess with anymore. Even though he hadn't meant any offense—he genuinely thought they'd died somewhere along the way—Jan backed off and refocused on the meat in his hands.

It looked like a shoulder cut, complete with bone. But its size didn't match any animal Jan could recognize, which led him to ask:

"What kind of meat is this...?"

The moment he asked, Aegon laughed loudly, drawing everyone's attention.

With a smile, Aegon pointed to the chunk.

"Are you sure you want to keep holding that shoulder? Its original owner must've been cursed to end up like this."

"What are you talking about?"

Jan asked, confused, and Aegon sighed.

"Seems like you forgot something in your report, Ghost Umbra... or maybe you left it out on purpose."

Ghost remained silent, confirming Aegon's suspicion.

"What you're holding... is human flesh."

The moment Aegon dropped that bombshell, everyone froze.

One second of eerie silence.

Then Jan screamed and hurled the meat away in horror.

"Human flesh?!"

Disgust spread like wildfire through the group as the realization set in. Some had already suspected it—among them, Snow Lionheart, who now looked thoroughly irritated.

"You shouldn't have said that... Aegon."

Snow muttered darkly, but Aegon simply shook his head.

"There's no point in hiding it. Let them understand what kind of enemies they're facing."

From the very start, they should've known—what they were up against wasn't just other humans. What lay on this side of the world was far more sinister.

And now, with the revelation of cannibalism, panic began to seep into the ranks of the Elite Class—exactly what Phoenix had wanted to avoid.

"That's enough... let's move."

Now that Xevier Adams could move again, there was no reason to remain on the battlefield.

In silence, everyone picked themselves up and departed, forming into separate groups— the largest of which followed Professor Phoenix.

Among them, Frey walked alongside Ghost and Danzo. Snow wanted to join them, but too many people clung to him, forcing him to look back awkwardly.

With each step, they passed the corpses of the transformed humans—zombie-like beings oozing black fluid from their wounds.

"I wonder... how did they end up like this?"

Danzo muttered absentmindedly, puzzled by the strange black liquid seeping out of their bodies.

"They're failed contractors," Ghost answered, and Frey nodded.

"I thought the same. That black substance is corrupted demonic blood."

There was no other explanation for what they were seeing.

Danzo seemed unfamiliar with the concept, prompting Ghost—uncharacteristically patient—to explain further. A clear sign that he had changed.

"There are two types of demonic contracts. First-generation contracts grant a human dark aura directly from a demon. But the increase in power is minimal."

Danzo nodded. That much he already knew.

"Then there are second-generation contracts... which involve injecting demonic blood directly into the human body."

Second-generation contracts produced far stronger results, as demonic blood held terrifying power capable of mutating the human body to wield more potent aura types.

However—

"Despite its power, demonic blood is essentially poison to us. Naturally, not many survive the process."

Those who did were elite—the backbone of the Ultras. But they were the minority.

As for the rest? Those whose bodies rejected the blood either died... or worse—turned into aimless, flesh-hungry creatures that roamed without purpose.

"The Ultras didn't hesitate to turn that many people into lab rats..."

"That's horrifying..."

This was why reconciliation had never been an option. Most people didn't realize how blessed they were to live behind the Empire's walls, protected from the horrors of the outer world.

Frey said nothing—he already knew all of this. These details were part of what he'd once written into the novel.

Even though the future had changed so drastically that the story was nearly irrelevant now, facts like these still aligned with the original "Land of survival" he'd created.

The group moved quietly, conserving their strength as much as possible.

As they crossed the barren lands, silence fell—each person lost in their thoughts.

The only sound was Xevier's occasional coughing, trying to catch his breath as Selina supported him.

Despite his poor condition, he was the object of envy—being taken care of by such a beautiful girl.

Frey, on the other hand, couldn't stop thinking about the previous ambush.

The way they had been cornered... how everything felt planned.

It all made him wonder ... was this just a game orchestrated by someone watching them?

If so, what did that person want? And why hadn't they killed them yet?

Even a fraction—no, just a sliver of the Ultras' true power would've been enough to wipe them out. So why hadn't that happened?

Just what kind of chase were they caught in?

The moment Frey asked himself that, he realized how little he knew—completely unaware that they were pawns in the Eternal Witch's game.

Chapter 326: Third-Generation Contracts

The march went on for hours. Hours spent on edge, bracing for an ambush that never came.

Still, the fatigue built up slowly on most of them. They looked like they'd fought for weeks... not a single day.

Eventually, when they were at their limit, they stopped—because, for the first time, they saw something that didn't belong to the endless wasteland.

“Am I hallucinating?”

Ragna Claude blinked, unsure if his eyes were deceiving him.

Before them stood a city—its tall buildings made from jet-black stone resembling obsidian.

It was still far away, but clearly visible.

“It's not an illusion.”

Phoenix placed a hand on Ragna's head, confirming what they saw.

“Everyone, get ready. We’re blending in.”

At his signal, everyone pulled out the tattered clothes and black cloaks they had looted earlier, dressing in them one by one.

“Ugh...”

Some of the girls grimaced at the filthy clothing they had to wear, but none dared complain.

“The plan is simple. We blend in. Try to gather as much information as possible—especially about the teleportation gates. If we can get supplies, great. But don’t engage with anyone. Keep your heads down at all times. Understood?”

“Yes!”

The students answered in unison, prompting a nod from Phoenix.

“Good. Ghost Umbra and Prince Aegon will come with me. The rest of you stay back until we know what we’re walking into.”

Phoenix had intentionally split the group, placing Snow and Frey among the rest of the students. Both of them were strong enough to fend off most of what the Ultras might throw at them.

Meanwhile, he chose Ghost—the best in stealth—and Prince Aegon—highly intelligent—to accompany him directly.

Phoenix's plan was sound, and no one objected, so the trio immediately set off ahead of the others.

Thanks to their exceptional speed, it only took them a few minutes to reach the city's crumbling outer walls.

"Try to stay out of sight as much as possible."

Both Ghost and Aegon nodded simultaneously. Ghost was about to suggest using his shadow manipulation ability to sneak in, but he stopped short as a strange realization struck him.

"Those walls... are empty?"

There were no guards on the ramparts—no signs of life where the city's first line of defense should've been. Ghost questioned his senses, but Phoenix's reaction mirrored his own.

"I don't sense anything..."

An SS ranked Awakened like him couldn't be fooled easily—ordinary people had no hope of escaping his perception. The fact that he sensed absolutely nothing confirmed it: something was definitely wrong.

“Stay sharp. We're going in.”

Following Phoenix's command, they cloaked themselves in aura and lightly tapped their feet against the ground, launching themselves toward the top of the wall that separated them from the city beyond.

Upon reaching the summit, the trio took a moment to process what they saw.

The sun's rays bounced off the old obsidian-like walls, revealing the entire city in haunting clarity. The sight was majestic, yet the deafening silence was unsettling.

“This isn't what I expected to find here...”

Aegon remarked with a soft smile as he stepped forward.

“This place is completely deserted...”

With every step they took deeper into the land of the Ultras, things only grew stranger.

“It’s too early to jump to conclusions.”

Phoenix moved forward with a stern expression, followed closely by Ghost and Aegon.

“Let’s scout the area.”

There was no logical reason for a city of this size to be abandoned. It simply didn’t add up. But no matter how hard they searched, the result was the same: it was a ghost town.

“This throws our entire plan out the window...”

It was like walking through an empty graveyard. There was nothing to give them even a sliver of hope. The land itself felt like a yawning abyss, ready to swallow them whole.

“We shouldn’t have expected anything from this barren wasteland to begin with.”

Aegon spoke while slicing through one of the city’s buildings, revealing its interior.

A bare room with a rotting wooden table and a few broken chairs.

“How charming...”

As they wandered through the vacant streets, they found empty shops, scattered belongings, abandoned homes...

“It’s as if everyone left at the exact same time,”

Aegon said aloud, earning a nod from Ghost, who was still investigating the scene.

“Not just that—it happened recently. Very recently.”

From freshly extinguished campfires and recent footprints, Ghost reached a firm conclusion.

“I’d wager this city was fully inhabited less than 24 hours ago.”

“You’re saying they left just a few hours before we arrived?”

Phoenix asked, frowning—then froze, as realization hit him.

“The army from before...”

Ghost nodded.

“We can’t be 100% certain, but it’s likely that army came from here.”

The wretched ones—those walking corpses who had eaten human flesh—had in fact emerged from this very place.

“But that makes no sense. Are we supposed to believe that those miserable fighters were the city’s entire population?”

To their knowledge, cities weren’t built like this.

Where were the women? The children?

No matter how they tried to reason it out, something crucial was missing from the picture.

But they couldn’t figure it out—no matter how hard they tried.

“For now, let’s continue exploring before we call the others.”

Even if it wasn't what they hoped for, the abandoned city was a decent enough place to set up a temporary base.

But first, they had to confirm that it was truly empty. So they swept through the area methodically.

Wherever they went, the result was the same—empty homes, desolate streets...

The only “food” left behind was rotten human flesh and a few scraps of grass—not even enough to feed a starving infant.

The same scene repeated itself throughout the city.

Except for one place.

Standing before a massive structure at the city's center, Aegon finally found what he was looking for.

“I knew it. Even filthy places like this have their command post.”

The building before him was noticeably more intact and refined than the others. Aegon naturally assumed this was the place everything had been coordinated from.

“If there’s anything worth looking at in this trash heap, it’s definitely in there.”

“I see you’ve found a lovely place, Aegon.”

The prince turned to find Phoenix and Ghost had caught up. Still smiling, he gestured grandly toward the building.

“Be my guests—after you.”

Phoenix ignored the flirtatious prince and made his way toward the building’s massive iron doors, which he shattered with a single punch.

The three entered simultaneously and began their search.

To their surprise, the interior was relatively organized. There was furniture that was at least usable, desks filled with old documents and files, and rooms that contained relatively clean beds.

But aside from that, no matter how many floors they searched, they found nothing of true importance.

As for the documents themselves—they were written in a strange language that none of them could read.

“What the hell is this language?!”

Phoenix muttered, glancing toward Aegon, who was staring blankly at one of the papers.

For a moment, it seemed like the prince had understood something. That’s what Phoenix hoped, judging by how focused he looked. But Aegon suddenly smiled and tossed the document aside.

“Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t understand a thing—just like you.”

“I see...”

Phoenix was about to give up, until Ghost called from below.

“You two, come downstairs. There’s something you’ll want to see.”

Responding to Ghost’s call, Phoenix descended at once, followed by Aegon—who gave one last glance at the paper he had discarded.

His eyes were fixed on the bold title that adorned it.

“Third-Generation Contracts.”

Then he turned his back and followed Phoenix down.

Chapter 327: Ashes of Innocence

Once they reached the ground floor, they found Ghost standing beside a massive hole he had punched into the floor.

And inside... was a wide staircase leading underground.

“I discovered it by chance while checking the building’s structure. This place might be much bigger than we thought.”

“Well done ! ”

For the first time since entering the land of the dead, they had found something that might actually help them.

“If they went through the trouble of hiding this, then whatever lies below is something they didn’t want others to see.”

Phoenix assumed that whatever was down there would be worth the effort.

“Let’s go.”

He conjured a bright flame in his hand, lighting up the dark stairway. The three of them descended in silence, tension building with each step.

With every move downward, their expressions began to change—something had started to fill the air. The scent of blood... accompanied by something else they couldn’t quite place. But it was strong. Overwhelming.

Eventually, they reached another iron door—bigger than the last.

The smell was seeping through its cracks.

“All this cursed aura... just from the gaps in the door?”

Even Ghost—used to death and blood—furrowed his brows. Only God knew how many corpses lay beyond that door.

It was almost comical... how the lands of the Ultras toyed with them like a twisted rollercoaster ride.

“Let’s see what they’re hiding in here...”

Phoenix muttered as his fist ignited even fiercer than before. He punched the door, blowing it apart and finally unveiling the horror that had been buried inside.

As the barrier fell, the wave of blood-soaked aura hit their faces like a tsunami of death.

Phoenix and Ghost both went pale the moment they saw what lay beyond.

“Well, would you look at that? The Ultras really are insane. Hahaha...”

Aegon was the only one who laughed, clutching his head with one hand.

His twisted reaction raised countless questions, but Phoenix and Ghost were too shocked to say a word. Their eyes were glued to the abomination before them.

Beyond the door was a massive corridor, one that stretched deep below the upper building.

Its walls, dimly lit by soft white lights embedded along the sides, revealed the nightmare.

On every wall... hung countless women. Their wrists were chained with rusted iron restraints.

The monsters had stripped them naked, robbing them of every ounce of dignity. Their bodies had been sliced open from abdomen to pelvis, entrails spilling out in a grotesque display.

Every single one of them had been gutted—completely emptied.

And on the cold floor, between the walls, was a pile—no, a mountain—of disfigured infant corpses. Stacked heads, one over another... a small hill of mutilated children.

Ghost stepped forward slowly and knelt beside one of the corpses.

Tough red skin... hollow, lifeless eyes... the child's body was warped beyond recognition.

He looked back and forth between the infants and the gutted women. It didn't take much to connect the dots.

"...My god. What the hell happened in this cursed place?"

Phoenix's voice trembled with fury. Meanwhile, Aegon continued down the corridor with his usual detached expression, unfazed by the corpses beneath his feet.

"We'll find the answer soon enough..."

Phoenix cursed everything—these corpses, the Ultras, Aegon's coldness... all of it.

With a single motion, he unleashed his flames. They consumed the bodies at a terrifying speed, reducing them to ash.

"At the very least... you won't rot in this cold, empty place anymore."

Phoenix's fire was something to behold. It burned only what he willed it to—and vanished the moment its task was complete.

"How noble of you~"

Aegon commented, his usual smile never wavering—as if he were strolling through a field of flowers, not the remains of mothers and their slaughtered children.

Slowly but steadily, the trio continued their descent as Phoenix burned every corpse along the way.

The place was massive. The sheer number of bodies was overwhelming—enough to make anyone wonder what kind of twisted mind could be behind something like this.

And finally, after a long march, Phoenix and his companions reached the answer.

And what an answer it was.

“Impossible...”

The young lord of House Sunlight muttered, staring at the corpse before him.

Ghost, visibly tense, whispered in disbelief.

“Is that...?!”

But Aegon simply nodded, a faint smile on his lips, as if everything finally made sense.

“A demon.”

Yes. The corpse lying on the steel table had a larger-than-human frame, rough gray skin, and prominent horns. Its grotesque appearance left no room for doubt—it was a demon.

“That can’t be. Weren’t all demons wiped out after the First Hero sealed the gates?!”

Ghost asked, and Phoenix nodded.

“That’s true. Supposedly, not a single demon remained after Kazes Valerion sacrificed himself.”

But what stood before them was undeniably a demon, and they all knew it.

Still, Phoenix didn’t panic.

“We can’t say for certain that every last demon was destroyed. Don’t forget Astaroth appeared out of nowhere too.”

This wasn’t the first time they’d encountered a demon, so it was too early to jump to conclusions.

But Aegon interjected immediately.

“You’re being far too optimistic, Professor Phoenix.”

With a flick of his sword, Aegon released a surge of lightning that lit up the entire chamber—revealing what lay behind the first corpse.

In that instant, the truth struck them all.

A second body. A third. A fourth... and dozens more. Demon corpses tossed aside like the women and children before them. And from what they saw, these demons had died only recently.

“What now, Professor? Do you think these are all just stray survivors?”

With every word Aegon spoke, the weight of the moment sank deeper into their bones.

“These aren’t survivors. This is an entirely new batch that arrived here recently. Do you know what that means?”

“No...”

Phoenix tried to deny it, but Aegon shook his head.

“Face it. What you’re looking at is undeniable proof.”

It was time to abandon their illusions.

“The seal is broken... the gates have reopened. The demons can cross into our world again.”

That single statement shattered whatever composure Ghost and Phoenix had left.

Because if there was no seal keeping the gates closed, then it meant that demons far stronger than Astaroth—those beyond the 19th rank—could come through.

Monsters capable of leveling mountains with a flick of their fingers.

But Aegon didn’t stop there. He kept twisting the dagger.

“And you’ve noticed it, haven’t you? The pattern. A demon. A woman. A disfigured child. I assume you’ve figured it out by now?”

“ ... ”

Silence.

Aegon laughed.

“They’re experimenting. Hybridization. Have a look—demon and human... What should I call them? Half-demons? Heh, delightful.”

His laughter was manic. But Phoenix and Ghost could only stare, unable to understand—

Why was he laughing?

Why laugh when what he just said could mark the beginning of humanity’s extinction?

But there was no way of knowing what truly went through the prince’s mind.

“Hybridization...”

Phoenix repeated the word silently.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

The sudden rise of powerful lords... the strange blood samples the researchers couldn't explain...

Demons and humans...

Children born from both...

Phoenix staggered back, clutching his head, trying to comprehend the scale of what was happening.

"May the gods help us..."

The situation was far worse than they imagined.

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—The Tea Party—

Sitting gracefully in her chair, having finished the last drop of her tea, Beatrice smiled as she stared down at the board before her.

“Looks like they’ve finally uncovered the truth.”

The middle-aged man beside her nodded.

“I don’t know why you chose to reveal it now... Well, it won’t change anything—aside from crushing their morale before the war.”

“It’s a game, Mister Simon. The Witch’s game.”

“Oh? Then I wonder what you’re planning next.”

In response, Beatrice laughed softly and rose to her feet.

“It’s time I made a move.”

“You’re sending in your favorite puppet, then? I look forward to this performance. Kihihhi...”

With elegance in every step, Beatrice walked away, casting a sidelong glance at Simon.

“Enjoy the next act... Mister Simon.”

Chapter 328: Dancing to the Devil’s Tune (1)

– Frey Starlight’s Pov –

I wonder... when did it all begin?

The turning point that changed everything—and toyed with the fate of mankind itself.

I suppose it started when Phoenix returned with the prince and Ghost, after spending a full seven hours exploring the isolated city we’d found earlier.

Upon their return, Phoenix reported that the place was a ghost town .. completely devoid of human life. The entire city had been abandoned just before we arrived.

The bad news was that despite its size, the city held nothing of real value that could help our group survive in the hellish lands of the Ultras.

Still, it wasn't all meaningless. We decided to stay in the city for the time being. One of the buildings contained a few beds and some clean clothes, at least.

Setting up camp there wasn't the worst idea, given that it was a fully enclosed area. If something happened, we could respond properly.

That was Phoenix's current decision—and that was where his report ended.

Yet for some reason... the somber look on his face raised many questions. As if he had seen something no one should ever witness—something tragic enough to etch that expression into his features.

Phoenix had clearly chosen to hide the truth, along with Ghost and the prince, hoping to avoid further crushing the group's already fragile morale.

Unfortunately for them, I had already seen everything.

Using my Third-Person Pov skill—and leveraging the 50 Affection Points I had with Ghost—I'd been following them from the very start, completely undetected.

And that's how I saw what they saw.

Third-generation contracts. Demons. And the truth that the seal had already been broken.

Fully aware of those horrifying facts, I concealed everything behind my usual cold expression. But deep down, I was shaken too.

The real problem wasn't the demonic breeding or the reopening of the gates. I'd known about those things for a long time—they were, after all, part of the story I once wrote.

The problem... was the timing.

They came early. Far, far too early. Frighteningly early.

These events weren't supposed to unfold until long after the coming war with the Ultras—years from now, at least.

Yet somehow, we'd jumped ahead in the timeline so drastically that the gates had already opened.

At this rate, this wasn't a war anymore. It was a gamble.

A gamble where all we could do was raise our hands in prayer... and hope nothing truly monstrous walked through those gates now opened anew.

Because any demon from the upper 15 seats alone would be enough to wipe out the entire Imperial Army.

We could only pray... that Earth—the little planet at the end of the world—wasn't appealing to them.

Anyway, I got so lost in thought that I didn't snap out of it until we reached the empty city wall.

Phoenix came to a deliberate stop at the top.

"Everyone, head to the city center and get some rest."

"What about you?"

The Sunlight twins, who had been sticking to Phoenix like shadows, spoke up, clearly wanting to stay close to him.

"I'll remain on the wall, in case something happens."

"Then we'll stay with you!"

Phoenix raised an eyebrow as he looked at Ivan and Scarite, who insisted on staying.

They would only slow him down if something happened, but for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to refuse his cousins.

"I wouldn't recommend it... but I won't stop you either."

Judging by how he treated them, it was easy to tell something deeper existed between the members of the Sunlight family.

But that wasn't the concern at the moment.

"Are you sure about this, Professor Phoenix? You're clearly the strongest among us. If something happens and you're not in top shape, it could be disastrous."

Taking the watch alone without even a moment of sleep might've been a terrible decision.

But Phoenix shook his head with resolve.

"I'll be fine. Don't underestimate the stamina of an SS ranked Awakened. I could go a week like this before my energy starts to run dry."

His response left me with nothing else to say.

Phoenix really did intend to carry the entire burden on his own.

Some of the students visibly relaxed just from hearing that. They were completely relying on him.

But that wasn't good. This land was vast, and the enemy surrounded us from every side. What if Phoenix were somehow separated from us?

That would be the end for many of them...

I wanted to say something—but chose to hold my tongue. My position within the group was still uncertain.

So, for now, I decided to keep moving forward.

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After leaving Phoenix and his cousins behind, the rest of us made our way to the city center ... the same administrative building where they'd found the corpses.

The irony was absurd. We were about to sleep in the very place where all those bodies had once been.

But Phoenix had incinerated everything down there, so there wasn't a single trace of what had been done.

"There's clean water, blankets, and beds here. Pick what suits you and take care of yourselves," Ghost said plainly as he guided us to the right place.

Once everyone confirmed his words, they immediately erupted with excitement and noise, their faces bright with relief.

Water for bathing, clean places to sleep... just the fact that we wouldn't have to camp out in the open brought immense joy to everyone—especially the girls.

"What are they making all that fuss about? We've barely made it through our first day here."

I nodded in agreement with Danzo. It didn't seem reasonable to be celebrating this much after just a single day.

"Are these kids really the elite humanity's counting on?"

Danzo kept grumbling, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"You do realize you and I are the same age, right?"

"Take a look at this."

He pointed to his bulging biceps—two slabs of muscle stacked onto his arms—along with his broad chest, solid abs, and towering frame.

"Does this wrecking machine look anything like those clowns?"

I didn't know how to respond. Danzo did have a point. His gray hair, pale skin, and the countless scars on his body made him look far older than he actually was.

"You're right... you even look older than Phoenix himself, my dear friend."

Not that he was the only one. Daemon, who had stripped down in front of everyone for a shower, wasn't exactly lacking either—and neither was the solitary Ragna.

"I've still got more to give."

Danzo clenched his fist, his face hardening.

"Something on your mind?"

He looked a little surprised by my question before exhaling deeply.

"Am I really that easy to read?"

"Not at all. I've just spent enough time with you to know when something's off."

After two whole years, it wasn't hard to understand Danzo—no Affection System needed.

Danzo sat against the wall beside me, eyes locked on the ceiling.

“It’s not even worth talking about, really. I just...”

He opened his palm, allowing his aura to take shape—forming the image of a circular silver dragon.

“I barely made it through the last battle. Even though our enemies were weak, the shield drained me completely... Meanwhile, Daemon Valerion didn’t even break a sweat.”

Danzo grit his teeth, his frustration spilling out.

“I want to get stronger.”

“You already are.”

“Heh... I don’t need to hear that from you, genius.”

Genius.

I echoed the word to myself quietly, realizing just how much others’ perceptions of me had changed.

“Do I really look like one?”

I asked without thinking. Danzo replied without hesitation.

“Yeah. You’re a genius. All someone like me can do is try to keep up.”

There was depth to his words—this wasn’t just talk.

Danzo was the hardest-working person I knew. He trained day and night, constantly striving to refine himself.

And yet, no matter how hard he worked, he was often overtaken by others—those born under the label of “genius.”

Geniuses blessed with overwhelming power that allowed them to surpass someone like Danzo with far less effort.

Somehow, I had become one of them.

But I hated being called that. After all, the power that dazzled everyone wasn’t even mine to begin with—it was borrowed.

Unconsciously, I reached into my clothes and touched the dark Nameless Mask I always kept hidden.

I was the one relying on a strength that didn't even belong to me, while Danzo had built his power from the ground up.

I didn't have the right to call myself a genius in front of someone like him.

"But I won't give up!"

Ignoring me as I sank into my thoughts again, Danzo suddenly stood, eyes burning with renewed determination.

"If what I'm doing isn't enough... then I'll just double the effort!"

For a moment, I stood stunned by him ... and by how he always managed to keep moving forward.

With a talent that might never take him to SS-rank... he still wanted to fight. Still wanted to challenge geniuses like Daemon Valerion, who was born with everything.

In that moment... I found myself truly admiring him.

“You really are something else ...”

“No need to tell me. I already know.”

With a smile, I followed him toward the showers. I was genuinely glad to have someone like him by my side. His presence had saved me in more ways than one.

Chapter 329: Dancing to the Devil’s Tune (2)

Night fell.

Phoenix remained on the wall, keeping watch. The rest of the students had spread out across the strange administrative building, claiming rooms for themselves.

The place was quiet—eerily so. And completely dark.

While everyone else slept, the silence was broken by the sound of slow footsteps echoing through the dim corridor.

Step by step, a young man walked forward, dressed in a black robe, one hand on the wall, coughing now and then.

With his disheveled blond hair and pale face, the figure was unmistakable—Xavier Adams, the young mage, walked on with a single goal in mind.

“Damn you...”

Clutching the wall with one hand and his constricted chest with the other, the young mage looked like he was in genuine agony.

“I curse you...”

He continued muttering between gasps, until a sudden coughing fit overtook him—so violent it forced everything in his stomach out onto the floor, along with blood so pale it had lost all color.

“Damn you...”

With a pale face, Xavier struggled to keep walking.

“What’s wrong... Xavier?”

The young mage immediately froze when he heard that familiar voice—the very one that made his blood boil.

The voice came from a figure standing at the end of the dark corridor, golden eyes glowing fiercely.

“Were you looking for me?”

“Aegon... ugh—!”

Xevier cried out the name before collapsing again, vomiting blood, unable to even form proper words.

“What’s this, Xevier? I always thought you were filthy, but throwing up your guts in front of me like this? That’s just revolting—heh.”

The prince laughed, almost as if he had expected Xevier to show up.

The mage continued vomiting profusely, his blurry eyes barely able to focus on Aegon anymore.

The sound of his violent coughing echoed through the halls, drawing the elite students out of their rooms in a rush.

Lights turned on, revealing the sorry state of the young mage—his eyes still locked onto Aegon, struggling to speak.

“Xevier!!”

Selina was the first to reach him, followed by Emilia and the rest of the group.

“What’s happening to him?! Why is he like this?!”

Selina screamed, horrified by the black veins writhing beneath Xevier’s skin and the blood pouring from his mouth.

Emilia sprang into action, tearing open his clothes to reveal his chest—and what she found shocked everyone.

The skin across his chest had turned completely black, and the festering wound reeked of rotting pus.

“What is this?! I know I healed him!”

It was the bite wound he had received earlier from a mutated human.

The holy energy should’ve purified it completely, yet in less than a day, it had worsened to this degree.

Emilia immediately channeled her sacred power to try healing him again—but her expression darkened as she realized nothing was working.

“What’s going on...?”

No matter how much sacred power she poured into him, it had no effect.

That’s when Aegon spoke.

“It’s useless. The demon blood from that bite already reached his heart. It’s only a matter of time before he becomes like the other mutants.”

“Demon blood?”

“No! There has to be a way to save him!”

Selina shouted at Aegon, her voice breaking. He just shrugged casually.

“Then I’d love to hear it from you.”

She had no answer ... but Emilia, resolute, continued pouring her power into Xevier, refusing to give up.

Snow joined her, summoning Vermithor.

“My sword carries immense sacred power—it might help.”

Emilia nodded, continuing her efforts as their combined light bathed the room in radiant energy.

Their strength was so overwhelming that everyone present felt a wave of relief wash over them, their minor wounds healing instantly.

Everyone... except Xevier.

Sacred power could suppress demonic energy—but not the blood itself.

The mage’s eyes never left Aegon.

Bathed in Emilia’s light, Xevier’s thoughts drifted through his tragic past.

He had once lived a happy childhood, loved by his parents. Then he discovered his incredible magical talent, which earned him a place in the Temple.

There, he met friends who became like family. Life had been good—until Kai Luc's betrayal, and their capture by the demon prince: Aegon Valerion.

Threatening their parents, Aegon had given them all a task: to find the one who had disrupted his plans.

Selina succeeded and saved her parents.

But what about Xevier?

Aegon wasn't merciful. He didn't kill both of Xevier's parents—he was far too calculating for that.

Instead, the prince played one of his twisted games.

He decided to kill just one of them.

Xevier still remembered that day...

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Bound and gagged in a wooden chair, he watched in terror as Aegon approached with his signature smile. Behind him, guards dragged in Xevier's beloved parents.

"Xevier, oh Xevier... you really let me down this time."

He had failed. And failure came with a price.

The young mage trembled in fear, dreading what Aegon might do to his parents.

But the prince had no intention of making it simple.

"Let's play a game, Xevier!"

That's what he called it—a game.

“I’ll kill one of your parents... and let the other live.”

He spoke with a cheerful tone, completely ignoring Xevier’s muffled screams as he tried to leap at him—only to fall off the chair.

“How rude, Xevier... Let me finish.”

With a swift kick, Aegon shoved him back into place.

“As I was saying... I’ll kill one of your parents. But I can’t decide which one.”

Aegon gripped Xevier’s mother and father by their collars, both trembling in his hands.

“So I thought... why not let you choose, Xevier?”

With a swift flick of his wrist, he removed the gag from the terrified mage’s mouth.

“W-What...?”

That was the only word Xevier could utter in his stunned state, but Aegon burst into laughter before shouting:

“Choose, Xevier! Who lives? Who dies?!”

He spun a thin dagger in his fingers, pressing it alternately against the throat of Xevier’s mother, then his father.

“CHOOSE!”

Aegon screamed maniacally as Xevier broke down in tears.

“Don’t kill them! Please! Take me instead!”

The young mage begged, but the prince only shook his head in disappointment.

“That’s not how games are played, Xevier. You have to choose.”

Aegon grabbed Xevier by the neck, his eyes wide with lunacy.

“Choose! Choose! Choose! Choose! Choose! Choose! Choose! Choose! Choose! Choose! Choose!”

“Please... stop... why are you doing this to me? Kill me instead, please!”

“CHOOSE! CHOOSE! CHOOSE! CHOOSE! CHOOSE! CHOOSE! CHOOSE!”

Amid Aegon’s screams and laughter, and Xevier’s sobs and desperation...

A horrific scene was painted—one soaked in despair and innocent blood.

After several minutes of unhinged cruelty, Aegon finally grew bored.

“So you won’t choose, huh?”

“Kill me...” Xevier whispered, the last word he could manage.

“Understood.”

Aegon stepped back swiftly, moving behind Xevier's father. Grabbing him by the head, he yanked it back.

With a sickening smile, the prince slid his blade across the man's throat—unleashing a crimson fountain that drenched Xevier's face in blood.

His mother screamed in horror, and Xevier froze, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

At Aegon's gesture, guards entered, dragging the father's corpse away and escorting the mother out, leaving only Xevier and the prince alone.

"Remember this well, Xevier. I have no patience for failure..."

He patted the stunned mage's head, whispering coldly:

"Fail me again... and who knows what might happen to your dear mother. Understand?"

His father was dead. His mother remained in Aegon's grip.

Before the prince, Xevier felt what true despair meant.

And now, in the final moments of his life, lying powerless on the floor while the prince laughed ...having taken one parent and kept the other as a hostage ... Xevier's only emotion was regret.

'I didn't live a life worth remembering... I achieved nothing to be proud of.'

He could no longer speak. Blood and bile filled his throat.

'Through my own weakness, my father died... and my mother was left in the jaws of a monster worse than any demon.'

He had failed—utterly and completely.

'You killed my father... so I curse you.'

'You made my mother cry, left her a widow... so I curse you.'

'You ruined my life... tortured me... killed me... so I curse you!'

Ignoring everyone around him...

Xevier raised a trembling hand toward Aegon, eyes lifeless, and channeled all his remaining magic.

His pain, his hatred, his sorrow—all of it—was poured into a single spell. A curse he had forged silently all this time, just for this moment.

‘I curse you!’

The final power left in his soul burst forth—a deadly curse aimed straight at the heart of the demon prince.

The magic had no color. No one noticed it.

But Aegon felt it pierce his heart. For a moment, his expression froze in shock.

This was a death curse.

A curse that could only be broken by another mage. And here, isolated from the outside world, there was no one who could help Aegon.

‘At the very least... I’ll take you with me...’

That was Xevier's final thought. If the prince died, then his mother and Selina would finally be free.

As he exhaled his last breath, Xevier looked at the prince one final time...

He wanted to see fear. Panic. He wanted Aegon to suffer—just for a moment.

To watch that arrogant prince, who thought the world bowed to him, finally break.

But fate was never kind to Xevier... not even in death.

Because what he saw wasn't fear.

It was the same wicked smile—the very one Aegon had worn when he killed his father.

In that moment, Xevier watched his powerful curse shatter ... fragmenting uselessly before it could reach Aegon's heart.

Stunned, the mage stared as Aegon moved his lips without making a sound.

But Xevier understood the words, because he was watching closely.

“I’ll take good care of her... your mother.”

Xevier’s eyes flew open wide... before slowly returning to emptiness.

The light of sacred energy faded—there was no need for it anymore.

Everyone stepped back, silent, as Xevier’s cold corpse remained still on the floor.

Eyes blank, still locked on the void... his face frozen in pain, as if even death brought him no peace.

And so, surrounded by the elite students...

Xevier Adams died from his wound .. marking the fall of the first soul.

Remaining students: 20.

Chapter 330: The Day Death Knocked (1)

— Frey Starlight's Pov —

"..."

Silence lingered for a while.

The loud noise was what had drawn us together earlier—the sound of Xevier breathing his last.

And now, here we were, standing around his corpse, unable to say a word.

As I looked at the rotting body, corrupted by demonic blood, I could vaguely imagine the torment Xevier must've endured.

He must've known he was going to die. Helpless to stop it. Maybe, in those final moments, he tried to do something—anything—that could give his life some meaning.

But the look on his face... that expression of sorrow, fear, and bitter regret... said otherwise.

Despite knowing all that, I didn't feel anything.

I wasn't sad. I wasn't angry. I simply thought his death was pitiful.

And I'm sure many of the others shared that same thought.

Everyone, except Selina, who mourned him. The rest just stood in silence.

"We should inform Professor Phoenix..."

Seris was the first to break the silence, pointing out the obvious.

After that, things happened quickly.

Seris crafted a coffin of ice to preserve Xevier's body from further decay. Then we all split up.

The only emotion we seemed to share on our faces was fear...

Fear of death, which had finally come knocking.

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"I see."

That was all Phoenix said after learning one of his students had died.

From a single look, I could tell how angry he was. Perhaps he blamed himself, since he was the one who told us to loot the corpses. Had he not done that, maybe Xevier wouldn't have been bitten in the first place.

But while Phoenix seemed to carry the blame on his shoulders, none of the students did.

After a brief discussion that lasted only a few minutes, we buried Xevier's body here—within this foreign Ultrian city. There was no way to take him home, and no one volunteered to carry his body.

We got rid of him quickly. So quickly, in fact, that some didn't even show up for the burial.

Still, despite how pathetic his death seemed, it wasn't meaningless.

With the first casualty, we were all forced to face the truth—forced to return to reality, realizing just how close death truly was.

A single bite. A small wound that might've seemed trivial to most... was enough to kill.

So what about the rest of this dark continent?

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That night, I found myself wandering alone, lost in thought, avoiding everyone else.

As I passed by the dilapidated buildings that once housed the Ultras, I wondered how they managed to live like this—feeding on their own kind, leaving corpses strewn about like worthless trash... like dogs.

Then I asked myself another question...

How did they lure us here?

Teleportation isn't something that can be tampered with—unless the gate itself is compromised. And that points to the existence of a traitor within the temple. A mage, to be precise, since only mages can operate those gates.

A skilled mage... one very good at hiding.

And yet, I couldn't think of a single name.

Even though I'm the one who created this world, I couldn't figure it out.

What if the traitor was still nearby?

"I'm completely in the dark..."

And it didn't seem like that would change anytime soon.

After wandering aimlessly for hours, I finally stopped. I leapt up and climbed onto a building taller than the rest—one that overlooked most of the city and its high walls.

Ultras City looked like an ancient desert town from a forgotten age. But the difference was ... this place was utterly dead.

Demons devour life force—the aura that sustains the earth itself...

This city, and everything around it, had long been drained. The land died because of the demons Phoenix and the others discovered underground.

At this rate, if the demons keep coming, it's only a matter of time before Earth suffers the same fate as Londor—a lifeless world devoid of even a trace of vitality.

In that moment, I raised my head toward the sky... still asking questions that had no answers.

"The gate Kazes Valerion sealed..."

Who broke it?

Who opened the door that let all those demons flood in from beneath the city?

To shatter a seal of that magnitude... it would take at least One of the Ten High-Ranking Demons

And only one name came to mind.

"Wesker..."

The Rank Four demon who fought my father seventeen years ago.

Wesker is terrifyingly powerful. He managed to pass through the seal by force, though he severely damaged him. Still, he didn't break it—he merely forced his way through.

Later, he lost that fight to my father and the Engineer who stood by his side.

But... did Wesker ever really leave Earth?

If he didn't, then he's likely the one who destroyed the seal. A monster of his level could definitely do it.

But if it was him... then where did he go?

Where is he hiding?

The demon who bears the Eye of the King—the eye that can see the fate of all living beings.

The same being who once laid his hand on me.

If a monster like that were to return and attack the Empire...

There would be nothing I could do to stop it.

"Frey Starlight wouldn't be able to defeat him."

I muttered quietly, then pulled something from inside my clothes.

A black, metallic object in the shape of a mask.

"Frey can't do it... but you can."

Staring into the hollow eyes of the Nameless mask, I recalled what happened in Londo.

To be honest, I'd been thinking about those events every day since then—but I'd buried the thoughts after we fell into the Ultras' trap.

Still, Xevier's death today brought those memories flooding back...

I knew I was going to die one day. Everyone does.

But the difference between me and the others... is that my death would open the door for something greater to live.

Because I'm just a temporary host. A vessel crafted for a certain king.

A king powerful enough to achieve everything I ever wanted.

I wasn't sad about that—on the contrary, I'd fully accepted it.

Accepted the fact that one day, I'd be replaced... that my will would be cast aside.

But Xavier's death made me realize something important ...

"I don't want to die like that..."

A pathetic death. One without meaning. A death so insignificant that people throw your body away on the same day... and forget you the next.

If death and disappearance are truly my fate...

Then at the very least, I want to die on my own terms.

Whether here, against the Ultras... or elsewhere ..

"I am the master of my own fate."

It may not be my place to say that, considering I'm just a puppet being pulled by the strings of the blue-eyed Engineer...

But this time, I really wanted to defy his expectations.

To break the future they'd prepared for me up there... the fate I was never allowed to escape.

I wanted to shatter it.

To succeed... and then die the right way.

There's no such thing as an omnipotent being in this world—not even Agaroth, the great Demon King himself.

So maybe... what seems impossible at first glance... isn't entirely impossible after all.

"I guess that's enough for now."

Without realizing it, I'd spent hours like that—gazing at the sky, thinking through every little detail.

Drowning in isolation...

A lone star drifting through the void.

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By the time I moved again, dawn had already arrived.

The cold air that stung my chest and the faint sunlight breaking through the ruins marked the end of our first day in the abandoned Ultras city—

And our first night without our fallen comrade... Xevier Adams.

I intended to return to where the rest of the elite class had set up camp—the administrative building with the corpses buried beneath it.

But I stopped when I heard someone yelling near the wall beside me.

Maybe it was curiosity that made me approach the source of the voice.

And thanks to my enhanced senses, it wasn't hard to pinpoint.

As expected, the shouting came from none other than Scarite Sunlight, who was lashing out at a grim-faced Phoenix standing in front of her.

"Why are you trying to push us away like this?! Is that what you want? For us to die out there like Xevier?!"

She screamed at him while her brother Ivan tried to hold her back.

Phoenix didn't react. He just stared at her in silence, his fiery eyes glowing faintly.

"That was never my intention," he finally said. "But starting tomorrow, I'll be moving on my own to search for the escape gate. I can't take you with me on a mission that dangerous."

It was the first time I'd heard of Phoenix's plan.

Apparently, he intended to explore alone—leaving us behind in this relatively safer location.

It meant he wanted to shoulder the greater danger himself.

But Scarite didn't see it that way—and her response made that clear.

"So you want to abandon us and run away alone? How fitting of you... 'Miracle Lord.'"

"Scar... I'm not abandoning anyone."

Phoenix reached out to her, trying to calm her down.

But she slapped his hand away instantly.

"Don't touch me!!"

Her explosive reaction made me wonder how Phoenix, who could erase her with a single blow, was keeping so calm.

"Get out of my sight! You're the one who took everything from us... our future, our family... our father. I hope you die on this cursed land with the rest of us!"

She turned and stormed off, leaving behind a stunned silence. Ivan bowed awkwardly to Phoenix, then chased after his sister.

Phoenix let out a long sigh as he watched his family disappear. Once they were gone, he turned toward a dark corner with a forced smile.

"How long do you plan on hiding there?"

"Just as I expected of you."

I stepped out of my hiding spot once I realized he'd noticed me.

There's no fooling an SS-ranked Awakened's senses.