

VILLAIN 331

Chapter 331: The Day Death Knocked (2)

"Sorry for eavesdropping..."

"I'm more sorry you had to witness such a pathetic sight."

With a single jump, Phoenix scaled the wall, and I followed him shortly after.

"I never thought I'd see the proud Sunlight family fighting among themselves."

"There's no such thing as perfection in this life, Frey Starlight... Our family is far from perfect. In fact, if you ask me, I'd say we're broken."

Currently, the Sunlight family was the strongest among all the noble houses, as they alone possessed three fighters ranked SS or higher.

So hearing Phoenix call them "broken" didn't seem realistic—but I knew better. I knew there was more going on behind the scenes.

"This is about the next family lord, isn't it?"

Phoenix nodded.

"That's right."

Standing side by side, we gazed down from above at the desolate land stretching far beyond us.

That's when Phoenix shared some truths about his family.

"The Sunlight family is a bit unique when it comes to inheriting the title of Lord..."

He raised his hand, summoning a crimson flame, then began manipulating it effortlessly.

"It started when I turned out to be the only one capable of enduring the family's current Lord combat Style—The Eternal Flame. In fact, I mastered it completely, something even Iris himself—the current Lord—was never able to do."

I nodded, understanding what he meant. That was a fact I already knew.

The Eternal Flame Style was dangerous, and only Iris Sunlight had ever used it before—but even he had never fully mastered it. It had left him with several lasting side effects, like a perpetually burning beard and the inability to feel heat or cold.

Phoenix, on the other hand, had perfected it ... achieved a 100% mastery. An unprecedented accomplishment.

"The title of Lord is given only to the strongest in our bloodline. That was my uncle, Iris Sunlight. But unlike him, who wielded great power, his children lacked both strength and talent."

Iris had only two children, twins: Ivan and Scarite.

Both were considered gifted by normal standards—but their competition wasn't ordinary.

"In the end, Iris chose me as his successor... completely overlooking his own children."

Compared to the blazing star that was Phoenix, the flames of Ivan and Scarite were faint ... barely there.

"I suppose that made them hate me, at least a little."

Phoenix smiled bitterly. That was when I realized—he never despised them. In fact, he had been trying to protect them with everything he had.

"If you ask me, you're far more fit to lead than either of them. You're not obligated to protect them, Phoenix. You don't owe anyone that."

Trying to save everyone had never been realistic. He could try, sure—but he'd ultimately fail, no matter how strong he was.

Xavier's death was the perfect example.

"I get what you're trying to say, Frey... but I can't help feeling responsible for them. If I can't even save this many people, how can I lead an entire family one day?"

So this is how Phoenix thinks...

It felt like I was beginning to understand him a little more.

Still—I didn't fully agree.

"No one in this world can do that, Phoenix."

"I know. But I'll try... in my own way. And one more thing—"

He turned to me with a faint smile.

"Your father could have done it. Easily."

For the first time during this conversation, my expression changed the moment he mentioned my father.

"Abraham Starlight once invaded the Ultras' territory all on his own, fought everyone there, and returned alive. I was just a kid back then—but I remember feeling this fire in my chest when I heard about it. Thinking, how did he do that?"

Phoenix spoke with excitement. He became a different person the moment my father entered the topic... but ...

"You shouldn't compare yourself to my father, Phoenix."

I replied bluntly.

My father had reached SSS rank, armed with knowledge and power from two lifetimes.

He was exceptional. That's what made his light shine so brightly.

"Hard to argue with that... especially coming from his son."

Phoenix's smile didn't falter—proof that he wasn't easily shaken.

We talked for a long while afterward. About my father, about the current situation. And once there was nothing left to say, we each went our separate ways.

I returned to the central building, where the rest of the elite class were staying.

That day... I felt like I finally understood Phoenix a little more.

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A day had passed since Xavier's death.

His demise threw everyone into a state of heightened caution .. each afraid they'd be the next in line.

Among them, Sansa spent most of her time alone.

The other girls came to see her occasionally, and she never refused them...

But she found herself preferring solitude, away from everyone else.

'When did I become like this?'

The princess wondered, confused by her own state of mind.

Solitude used to be a prison that reminded her of her title—an heir without real connections.

But somehow, being alone lately gave her a sense of peace...

As if it had never been the source of her sadness.

Sitting in the temporary room she'd claimed for herself inside the abandoned city's central building, Sansa spent most of her time reflecting.

Most of all, she dwelled on a painful truth:

She was no longer like other humans.

Her gaze drifted to her elbow—the spot where she'd been bitten by that mutated human.

Only a day had passed, and yet her arm was already spotless.

Not a single scar remained.

She hadn't felt anything.

But unlike her, Xavier—her classmate—had died the moment he was bitten.

He died a pitiful death... and she lived, as if nothing had happened.

That only reinforced a single truth—

She was different.

Not human... but something else entirely.

Those thoughts consumed her for a while.

At least until a sudden knock on the door interrupted them.

The knock was soft—gentle enough that she immediately assumed it was a girl.

"Yes?"

Sansa answered briefly, prompting the voice behind the door to speak.

"It's me... I mean, Adriana. I brought some food."

Adriana's clumsy voice came from behind the door, which Sansa then opened.

"You didn't have to trouble yourself. I told you I didn't need anything."

Sansa's tone was firm—at first. But it quickly softened the moment she saw Adriana shrink back timidly.

The shy girl's demeanor made Sansa sigh in surrender.

"Come in."

"Um... okay."

Adriana stepped into the small, barren room .. barely furnished with just a single bed and a chair.

Both girls sat on the bed, and silence followed for a while.

Sansa quietly ate the simple meal of bread and mashed potatoes placed before her.

Meanwhile, Adriana looked as though she was trying to muster the courage to speak.

"Is there something you want to tell me?"

Sansa decided to help her out.

Adriana blushed, then nodded. Without delay, she bowed her head deeply.

"I'm sorry!"

The sudden apology made Sansa frown slightly.

"For what?"

"Everything. You've always been kind to me... even though you're a princess and I'm just a commoner.

Despite how well you treated me, I still doubted you. I saw you as... something inhuman."

Adriana paused for a moment. Sansa continued staring at her in silence.

"As your friend, I shouldn't have acted like that. I know I can't force you to forgive me...

But at the very least, I wanted to apologize. I'm really, truly sorry—for all of it."

The way Adriana's body trembled made it clear she had summoned a lot of courage just to say that.

It was the most she'd spoken in one go since the beginning.

Sansa spent a few moments just gazing at her, making Adriana visibly flinch...

But then, the princess finally broke the awkward silence.

"You know, Adriana... you're special."

"What?"

"Your face."

Sansa gently cupped Adriana's cheeks, her large, black eyes locking onto her.

"You probably don't know this, but I can read faces. There are only a handful of people who can truly hide from my ability."

To resist Sansa's perception required exceptional calm, emotional control, and a perfectly unreadable poker face.

Very few possessed all of that.

Even Frey had only developed that resistance after countless brushes with death.

"But you're different, Adriana. Even though you're just a naive, shy girl... I can't read your face at all."

Sansa pulled her hands away, finishing her observation.

"Still, your actions always reveal everything. You're so simple—and I think that's what I liked about you from the beginning."

Adriana was like an open book. Easy to read, easy to understand.

Unlike the rest of the elite students with powerful families and long-standing names, Adriana came from nothing.

No status. No lineage.

Her talent was the only thing that had brought her this far.

She was naive—deeply so.

But maybe that's exactly what made Sansa prefer her over the others.

"There's no need to apologize, Adriana. You didn't do anything wrong. If anything... you saved my life. I should be the one thanking you."

The princess smiled, but Adriana waved her hands rapidly in denial.

"N-No! I didn't do anything worth mentioning!"

She flustered in a panic, accidentally knocking her glasses off.

Sansa caught them midair and gently placed them back on her face—and both girls laughed together.

Perhaps not everything could be fixed...

But for now, their relationship had.

The two spent the rest of the night talking to each other—

And just like that, the second night came to an end.

Chapter 332: The Witch's Gambit (1)

The days passed quickly.

The elite students would gather from time to time with Phoenix, who had taken it upon himself to explore outside the city.

They spent their time devising plans, trying to figure out a way to escape as soon as possible.

Among them, Selena found herself constantly glancing at Aegon, a single thought plaguing her mind:

'How did he do it?'

That question tormented her.

On the night of Xevier's death, she had clearly seen the curse cast on Aegon by the dying sorcerer.

It was a powerful curse—even she, a skilled witch, would have struggled to lift it.

And yet Aegon, who knew nothing of magic, shattered it effortlessly.

Selena found herself spiraling into thought over the rogue prince.

She couldn't figure out how to deal with someone like him—especially when her parents' lives were in his hands.

What an irony...

Aegon Valerion made her feel more helpless than the entire Ultras continent that had them cornered.

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The days continued to slip by:

The first... the second... the third.

The students, fearful of death, sank into a tense silence.

A silence that felt all too unnatural...

Phoenix had left the city several times searching for a route out, but couldn't venture far without endangering the others.

So he returned empty-handed every time.

At this rate, the elite class had no choice but to start moving soon.

And then came the fourth night.

As the dark sky stretched over them, the group gathered one last time to finalize their plan to leave the city.

Some were reluctant—they had finally found a place to rest in peace.

But they all knew they had to move if they wanted to survive.

Still... a single question lingered in their minds:

“What’s with this damn silence? Why haven’t we been attacked yet?!”

Danzo voiced the thoughts on everyone’s minds.

They had spent the past few days on edge, expecting death at any moment...

Yet none of those fears had come to pass.

“Maybe... we’re not a priority?”

Seris Moonlight offered the thought, and as soon as she did, the prince burst out laughing.

“Glad to see someone using their brain for once.”

Everyone turned to Aegon, who looked just as fed up with the situation as they were.

“As Seris said, we’re not a priority. We’re bait.”

“Bait?”

“Yeah. Just a side distraction. Something they can deal with whenever they feel like it.”

From the start, their survival had been pure luck—thanks only to Frey, who happened to be nearby.

Otherwise, they’d all be dead.

“The Ultras are using us to lure the Empire in.”

Some were stunned by Aegon’s words. Others remained calm—proof that they’d considered this possibility too, especially Phoenix.

“The last War of Light happened on imperial soil. Back then, it was the Ultras who struck first. This time, they want the opposite:

A war that drags the Empire into their lands.”

And what better way to make that happen?

“Don’t get me wrong. We are dangerous to them—because of our class’s potential. But right now? We’re just a secondary target.

The fact that they haven’t hit us with a real force yet proves it.”

So far, their only real encounter had been upon arrival—and even then, the enemy was weak.

They had won easily.

“Who knows,” Aegon added with a sly grin, “maybe the war has already begun while we’re sitting here wasting time.”

“Aegon might be right...”

Phoenix spoke, confirming the idea.

The elite class was made up of heirs to the great families, the crowned champion of the church, children of the top guilds...

To save them, it wouldn't be far-fetched for the Empire to launch an all-out assault on the Ultras.

"That might be why we haven't been attacked yet. This is our only chance."

Somewhere above the vast continent of the Ultras...

A war might already be raging to rescue them.

"We need to take advantage of their strongest forces being elsewhere—and escape while we can."

If they didn't, they might end up leading the Empire into a trap that could destroy them all.

"We move immediately and prepa—"

Phoenix was about to issue the command—

But his voice caught in his throat.

Everyone's expressions shifted in an instant.

The ground shook violently beneath them, as if a catastrophic earthquake had struck.

Phoenix felt every hair on his body stand on end.

He could barely stay on his feet under the crushing pressure that descended upon them.

The rest of the students weren't as fortunate ... most collapsed to the ground under the overwhelming aura.

"Enemy... one, two... no, too many!!"

Ghost screamed, trying to count or locate the threat.

But it was useless.

The suppressive aura came from multiple directions—and terrifyingly, it had encircled them completely.

At that moment, Phoenix exploded with power, his eyes burning red as he shot into the air like a flaming arrow—forcing the pressure off his body with sheer strength.

The Lord of the Sunlight had entered battle mode, ready to strike at any moment.

But even he froze midair...

As his eyes fell upon the scene below.

“What the hell is this?!”

Phoenix muttered in disbelief as he stared at the sheer size of the army surrounding the city.

It was a vast force ... unlike anything he had seen before.

They had encircled the entire city, trapping it from every direction.

But the problem wasn't just the numbers...

It was the names leading them.

The Four Lords of the Ultras stood at the front—with none other than Godfrey , Gavid Lindman at their head.

The infamous Hollows he had only heard of in stories were here too: Ludwig, Smough, the Blood Queen Evelyn...

All of them unleashed their devastating auras, crushing the earth and tearing the walls apart with their mere presence.

At the very front, an elegant woman in a wide dress floated in the air, smiling brightly.

Faced with such overwhelming force—and the witch Beatrice herself—Phoenix felt something he had never known before:

Despair.

He was staring at the full power of the Ultras...

and they had appeared from nowhere.

Had it been a single lord, he might've dealt with it. Even two ... he could've found a way.

But this many?

No human in the Empire could handle a force like this alone.

At that moment, his eyes met Beatrice's, as she hovered high above the city.

With grace, the witch raised a black wand and took a stance that resembled that of an orchestra conductor.

"Welcome... to the Witch's Game."

She waved her wand lightly, and the aura behind her took on a physical form.

"Forge me a weapon to slaughter my enemies."

As her voice rang out, an entire arsenal of cannons and machine guns materialized behind her out of thin air.

“In this game, everyone will finally get the chance to fulfill their ambitions!”

The barrage began without warning.

The weapons roared to life, bombarding the city in a relentless hailstorm of bullets and explosions.

Phoenix acted instantly. He manipulated his flames, forming a massive dome of fire that shielded himself and the elite students below from the assault.

But the city didn’t stand a chance.

Buildings crumbled, walls shattered—everything was reduced to rubble as bullets rained like a storm.

“Those fated to survive... will survive!”

“And those fated to die... shall perish!”

Beatrice spun her wand again.

“Crush my enemies—smash them to dust!”

With her chant, the sky split open.

A massive gate formed in the heavens, and from it descended hundreds of enormous legs and feet, slamming down vertically at terrifying speed.

They struck with such devastating force that the city was erased.

Nothing remained of its once-great walls and towers—nothing but Phoenix’s protective fire dome.

Beneath the dome, Frey and the others remained unharmed... but barely.

At the same time, the army began to march forward, and the pressure from their auras only grew heavier.

“Didn’t you say we were just bait?!!!”

Danzo screamed, furious enough to want to punch Aegon—but too paralyzed by the oppressive power crushing down on them to act.

Though he'd already armed himself with his shield, he couldn't move a muscle. The witch's assault had left them overwhelmed.

Still floating in the sky, Beatrice smirked as she twirled her wand once more.

"So you like using fire, do you?"

She grinned as she stared down at Phoenix, who had blocked her first attack.

"Then drown, all of you. Drown for me!"

Once again, a supernatural phenomenon unfolded—

The sky turned into an ocean.

A massive wave, wild and furious, surged from above Beatrice, crashing downward to consume everything.

Chapter 333: The Witch's Gambit (2)

Frey and the others watched in horror as the Ultras closed in and a deluge loomed above.

Phoenix clenched his teeth as the tidal wave threatened to swallow them whole.

With a devastating punch, he unleashed the full force of the Eternal Flame technique—

A blazing inferno shot upward, clashing head-on with the torrent.

Fire and water collided in a battle of titanic forces, each pushing to consume the other.

The tide kept coming, and Phoenix kept countering, locked in a grueling struggle.

Then—

“Let’s fight!!”

Snow roared, drawing Vermithor, ready to charge into battle.

But a thunderous shout from Phoenix stopped him cold.

“NO!!!”

Phoenix was barely holding back Beatrice’s assault.

But what truly terrified him were the Lords and Hollows who had yet to make their move.

“The backup plan! Do it now—Selena!!”

He knew it—fighting the Ultras head-on meant death for everyone.

That’s why they had prepared a contingency.

Selena immediately understood what Phoenix meant.

Without hesitation, she began casting.

In an instant, glowing marks ignited across everyone’s bodies ...

Teleportation seals that Selena had placed earlier.

“I’m initiating the mass teleportation—now!”

Everyone turned to her, expressions mixed with shock and resolve.

They all knew what was coming.

They had discussed this moment before... and now, the time had come.

“I can’t teleport everyone at once—so it’ll have to be random!”

Teleportation magic was among the most difficult to master, and Selena hadn’t perfected it yet.

The best she could manage was to scatter everyone randomly.

It would save them from immediate annihilation ... but at a cost.

“You’ll be on your own from now on! Stay strong—and stay alive!”

Phoenix shouted just before the radiant light of teleportation engulfed him.

Scattered across the vast lands of the Ultras, each student would be transported to a different location.

They'd be alone ... but that was still better than dying at the hands of an army like this.

They had made a mistake—thinking they were safe.

That the Ultras wouldn't truly come after them.

Now, they had to pay for that mistake.

In that moment of chaos, no one noticed the twisted smile curling on Beatrice's face.

And within seconds—everyone disappeared, vanishing one after another in random flashes of light.

But at the very last moment, something strange happened.

Selena, caught mid-cast, noticed one of the elite students resisting her spell—

Not just resisting—nullifying it completely.

There was only one person who could've done that.

“Frey?! What are you doing?!”

She screamed at him, shocked to see that he alone remained.

Frey gave her a calm smile.

“Sorry. I’m not leaving.”

“No—!”

Selena’s cry was the last thing he heard before she, too, vanished into light, teleported away like the rest.

And then, Frey was alone.

Standing in the middle of the destroyed city.

He let out a deep breath.

“Looks like the ability worked just fine...”

Opening his system interface, Frey deactivated his skill:

— Anti-magic : Level 2

— Allows the user to nullify spells cast within a 5-meter radius.

Since returning from Londor and wearing the Nameless Mask, Frey’s ability had evolved.

Now, he could cancel magic without needing to touch the caster.

He hadn’t needed to use it—until now. And it had proven invaluable.

“Well then...”

He exhaled and leapt onto a pile of rubble, moving toward the army that had surrounded him—each step driving him deeper into the crushing weight of their aura.

“Shall we begin?”

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Beatrice hovered in satisfaction as the Elite Class vanished—scattered across the continent.

“And with that, everyone is now... on their own.”

She smiled and slowly returned to the Ultras’ forces waiting nearby.

“This body did quite well,” she said, admiring her performance.

She seemed completely content ... until she felt something approaching from the ruins.

The witch turned.

And so did the entire army.

“Oh? What do we have here?”

Beatrice grinned as she saw a lone figure climb atop the wreckage, standing tall above the shattered cityscape.

It was Frey Starlight.

He looked down at the massive army gathered before him, his violet eyes glowing darkly.

The crushing pressure almost forced him to his knees.

Every cell in his body screamed for him to flee.

But he didn't move.

Instead, he cleared his throat and drew on his aura, amplifying his voice.

Taking a deep breath—he roared:

“My name is Frey Starlight!”

His voice thundered across the battlefield, rising even above the deafening sound of the army below.

“Lord of House Starlight. Son of Abraham Starlight!”

Of all the things he could’ve said... he chose to introduce himself.

Beatrice responded with a playful smile.

“My name is Beatrice—the Eternal Witch. Pleased to meet you, son of Abraham.”

She floated forward, her smile widening.

“You’re quite bold, Frey Starlight...”

“Or maybe just stupid. Who knows?”

She laughed, while Frey remained silent.

“Why didn’t you run, Frey Starlight?”

With each word, her aura intensified, the pressure threatening to crush him completely.

“Perhaps... you have a death wish?”

She wasn’t entirely wrong—what Frey had done was close to suicide.

Yet, the young lord of House Starlight said nothing.

Instead, he drew his swords—Balerion and the Dark Sister—and unleashed his full power.

He devoured the aura from his inner sea, pushing his body to the brink of explosion.

Only then could he finally breathe ... relieving some of the pressure weighing him down.

“You asked if I wanted to die.”

Frey spoke in his usual calm tone as he stepped off the pile of rubble, walking straight toward the massive army ahead. A crooked smile stretched across his face.

“Death... Yes, I’ve wished for it. More than once.”

“But those above didn’t want me dead. They wanted me alive... to entertain them until the very end.”

“What are you talking about?”

Beatrice narrowed her eyes, clearly confused.

But Frey wasn’t speaking to her. He seemed to be speaking to himself—or perhaps to something else entirely.

“You down here, on the other hand... You want me dead. As soon as possible. That’s the contradiction, isn’t it?”

Between the ones above who demanded his survival, and those below who craved his death, Frey had made a decision.

He, too, would play the game.

A game where the price was his life.

“I’m tired of dancing to the same rhythm.”

His aura erupted violently, and a monstrous grin tore across his face—ear to ear.

Who would interfere this time?

Who would dare claim it was all part of their plan?

“The ones above... The ones below... And you, the so-called Eternal witch...”

“Come at me—all of you!!”

The ground exploded beneath Frey’s feet as he launched himself forward.

Frey Starlight charged headfirst into Beatrice and the entire Ultras army ...

declaring the start of a suicidal battle.

Chapter 334: Frey starlight vs Beatrice (1)

— Frey Starlight's POV —

When I stood before the Ultras army, I thought I'd feel a storm of emotions.

Fear—from an army that embodied the full might of the Ultras.

Regret—over the suicidal decision I had just made.

Terror—at the unknown fate I was about to march into.

But to my surprise... I didn't feel any of that.

Despite the overwhelming number of enemies—foes unlike any I had ever faced—my mind was calm, my senses sharper than ever.

A blazing fire surged in my chest.

Anticipation.

A thrill that set my blood alight as I took that first step into the unknown.

The step that might finally sever the threads of fate wound around this body... a body that was never truly mine to begin with.

I knew the odds of dying were high—but I didn't care.

I wanted this.

To die, maybe.

But only after taking as many of those bastards with me as I could.

With every ounce of strength my body could muster, I lunged toward the witch who had ambushed us before.

Beatrice.

That was her name.

I'd never heard it before, but that didn't matter.

I intended to kill her in a single blow.

With Dark Sister in hand, I surged forward at full speed, aiming straight for her neck.

Beatrice didn't flinch. That calm smile never left her face. She didn't move an inch.

Then, just before my blade could connect, space itself shattered between us .. as if the air had turned to glass and cracked apart.

"So much bloodlust... You really intend to face us all alone?"

She laughed, unfazed.

I didn't waste time responding. I slashed at her immediately with Balerion.

My blade passed cleanly through her body, slicing her in half.

But it was only smoke.

Her slender form dispersed into a cloud of white mist, vanishing before my eyes.

The real Beatrice reappeared below, clapping her hands in amusement.

"So strong... and so young. How delightful."

Whoosh!

Like a black arrow, I lunged again, closing the distance with terrifying speed.

Beatrice, now holding her black wand once more, simply whispered:

"Bind him for me."

In an instant, dozens of golden chains wrapped around me, locking me in place.

“Where the hell did these chains come from?!”

I was stunned ... I hadn’t even sensed them until it was too late.

“You’re quite rude, Frey Starlight. Trying to carve up a beautiful lady like me.”

She raised her wand again and spoke sweetly:

“Rip him apart for me.”

Without warning, countless blades and spears appeared midair, surrounding me on all sides.

They shot forward, aiming to pierce and shred me to pieces.

In response, I unleashed my aura at full force—obliterating the golden chains—and deflected every single weapon with a barrage of sword strikes so fast they were invisible to the naked eye.

I had barely repelled her attack when she summoned something else—a massive mirror appeared right in front of me.

“Look closely... Frey Starlight.”

Beatrice spoke while holding the mirror from behind.

Inside the tall, rectangular frame... my reflection began to take shape.

“Your face, your body... your soul.”

Her smile widened.

And then my eyes opened wide in shock.

The mirror cracked.

A hand emerged from it—one holding a black sword.

“Kill him for me.”

The mirror shattered completely, and from its shards stepped out my reflection—a perfect copy, except for the lifeless look in its eyes.

It vanished for a moment... then reappeared right in front of me, swinging its swords.

Boom!!

Our blades clashed.

Once.

Twice.

Then dozens of black slashes followed as we exchanged attacks in a whirlwind of violence.

What shocked me most was how flawlessly the clone mimicked my abilities.

“What’s wrong? Struggling against your own self?”

Beatrice called out, watching from a distance with a smirk, fueling my frustration.

Worse still... the clone was matching me blow for blow.

Enraged, I abruptly increased my speed, slipping past the clone in a flash and setting my sights on Beatrice.

“Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Black Star!”

I summoned a massive amount of dark aura and released a beam of pure shadow—one powerful enough to consume her entirely.

But she didn’t even move.

Instead, she calmly raised her wand.

“Stop this attack for me.”

BOOM!!

The darkness exploded, engulfing her completely ... shattering everything in the surrounding area.

But she emerged from the darkness unscathed, a strange sphere-shaped barrier surrounding her completely.

A shield strong enough to neutralize my full-powered strike.

There was no time to be impressed—my damn clone lunged at me again, relentless in its pursuit.

Engaged in this vicious duel, a question echoed in my mind:

“How is she doing this?”

Beatrice’s abilities were overwhelming—manifesting out of nowhere, one after the other.

To achieve something of this magnitude required an absurd amount of aura.

It made me wonder...

Just how powerful was this witch named Beatrice?

Where was all this power coming from?

As if reading my thoughts, Beatrice answered herself.

“Confused, aren’t you?”

With another flick of her wand... she distorted reality once more.

“Kill him for me.”

With that command, dozens of pale white ghosts took form .. each one a twisted version of Beatrice herself.

They shrieked with lunatic laughter as they dove toward me all at once.

BOOM!!

At the same time, my clone kept pressuring me with relentless strikes, pushing me into a corner.

“This is real magic, Frey Starlight.”

Explosions erupted everywhere as both the ghosts and the clone tried to tear me apart.

“Phenomena that human minds were never meant to comprehend.”

BOOM!

One of the ghosts exploded in my face the moment I slashed it, sending me flying across the ground.

But the attacks didn't stop.

“If you can understand my magic... then is it even magic anymore?”

On one side, the clone wielded my skills with perfect form.

On the other, the ghosts acted like walking time bombs.

And amidst that chaos, amidst the ever-shifting battlefield beneath my feet... a realization struck me:

“Why aren’t they attacking?”

I glanced toward the Ultras army that continued to pressure me with their overwhelming aura.

All those Lords... all those monstrous Hollows...

Not a single one of them had moved.

I had been holding back—saving my strength—thinking the real fight hadn’t started yet.

But now?

It had been far too long since the battle began.

And they were still just watching.

Were they toying with me?

Giving me time before they tore me apart?

Or... were they standing aside out of respect for the witch who engaged me?

BOOM!!!

Beatrice's onslaught continued without pause. I had only been defending—unable to go on the offensive.

Caught in a storm of dust and exploding aura, I narrowed my eyes at the Ultras army.

"I came here for a battle of life and death..."

The ground trembled beneath me, reacting to the surge of aura that flooded out of my body.

And for the first time in this battle, Beatrice's expression changed.

"To shatter the threads of fate that bind me... Do you dare retreat from me now?"

There was no point in delaying this any longer.

“Blood Form.”

Without warning, I unleashed the strongest state of Balerion, amplifying it even further using Dark Sister.

The force that erupted from this combination sent a massive wave of aura in all directions, blasting back both the clone and the surrounding ghosts.

“Out of my way!”

My swords moved at inhuman speed, creating afterimages as I unleashed dozens of black slashes—cutting the clone to pieces and triggering the detonation of every remaining ghost.

All of it unfolded under the eyes of the astonished witch.

“This aura... He’s at the level of an SS ranked Awakened!”

Ignoring her words—and riding the momentum—

I leapt forward in a single motion, instantly closing the distance to the Ultras army...

"If you won't come to me... then I'll come to you!"

My blades ignited with a surge of dark aura that billowed upward, shrouding a huge part of the sky.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Infinite Darkness!"

With a dual slash, the wave of dark aura tore through the entire Ultras army ... shredding everything beneath it.

I had poured my full strength into that attack... aura strong enough to threaten even an SS rank warrior and force them to take me seriously.

I waited for their response.

But the reaction I expected... never came.

Instead, what happened was something I couldn't have imagined.

The Lords of the Ultras.

The monstrous Hollows that had been exerting crushing pressure since the beginning of the battle...

They all shattered into pieces the moment the attack touched them.

Eyes wide open, I stared at the army reduced to dust .. nothing left but ash and a crater of destruction left by my assault.

The very army that once made me tremble.

The same force that drove us to scatter across the continent in desperation...

Had been completely obliterated.

And then came the sound...

The hysterical laughter of a mad witch who had completely lost her mind.

“hehe .. hehehehehehehehe...”

I slowly turned toward Beatrice, who was laughing uncontrollably ... arms wrapped around her body, her face flushed red.

“What the hell is that twisted laugh for?”

“Ah, forgive me, forgive me... I just couldn’t resist the look on your face. Shocking, isn’t it?”

“What is the meaning of this?”

I asked, my voice seething with anger.

Was it all fake? The Ultras army? The Lords? The Hollows?!

“I know what you’re thinking, Frey Starlight—and yes, you’re right. It was all an illusion.”

“Impossible!”

I shouted without thinking.

Not for a second had I suspected that everything I saw was fake. It didn't make sense.

That crushing pressure we all felt earlier... it wasn't imaginary. It was real.

Even Phoenix, with his heightened senses, felt it. That's why he decided to retreat.

"It's called magic, dear Frey. Just magic."

"What are you talking about?"

Still smiling, Beatrice raised her delicate hand, pulling back the sleeve of her elegant dress to reveal her pale skin.

With a touch of her aura, that flawless skin vanished—replaced by a hideous, scarred hand etched with dozens of strange runes and overlapping magic circles layered on top of one another.

"Magic is nothing but tricks we sorcerers cast to distort reality. You don't know how easy it is to manipulate human senses, Frey Starlight."

She blew out a puff of cold air. The moment it touched my face, I felt a chill brush my skin.

Then, she blew again—but this time, it was warm. I could feel the heat from her breath.

“See? Just like that.”

With a flick of her wand, a shimmering sphere of pure aura formed around her.

“Illusion isn’t limited to what you see. It goes much deeper than that. All I had to do was tamper with your senses—make you believe you were being attacked by an army of Ultras.”

“That alone was enough to trigger your contingency plan and force your little team to scatter on their own. Hehehehe... You’re more naïve than I thought, dear elites.”

Beatrice’s words left me speechless.

She had manipulated us with surgical precision.

She knew every step of our plan—down to the emergency teleportation strategy.

“That’s impossible.”

For her to know that... there could only be one explanation.

Beatrice, this mysterious witch I knew nothing about...

Had been watching us from the beginning.

She pulled our strings, made us dance to her rhythm, and drove us to separate across the continent of the Ultras...

All of that with nothing but illusions and a few spells.

It was at that moment I realized—

This witch was dangerous.

“You...”

With a terrifying thirst for blood, I unleashed my full killing intent.

“You’re going to die here!”

I couldn’t let a monster like her continue to exist ..

Not after witnessing what she was capable of.

Beatrice, still smiling darkly, twirled her wand in the air.

“The only one dying today... is you, Lord Starlight.”

Chapter 335: Frey starlight vs Beatrice (2)

She cast a new spell that twisted the ground beneath me into something unnatural.

“Swallow him for me!”

As her words echoed, the earth turned into the gaping maw of a monstrous beast trying to consume me whole.

But I didn’t even blink.

My eyes were locked solely on her.

SWOOSH!!!

A gust of wind erupted.

In less than a second, I slashed through the summoned beast—turning it into chunks with one clean motion.

My attacks left behind nothing but streaks of dark aura, so fast they blurred into shadows.

The very next moment, Beatrice's head flew into the air, a thin black aura line marking where my blade had cleaved through.

But the body dissolved—again—into a puff of smoke.

She reappeared in the distance.

“Not bad at all, Frey Starlight.”

BOOM!

I didn't waste time with words. I dashed at her again, blades ready.

"Tear him apart for me!"

she cried once more, warping reality again.

This time, she summoned dozens of giant snakes from the void—massive serpents capable of devouring me in a single bite.

So many that they completely obscured my view of Beatrice.

But it didn't matter...

SLASH!!!

In under a second...

The snakes were diced into tiny pieces by a flurry of slashes too fast for the eye to follow.

Without pause, I continued the attack, appearing behind Beatrice and cleaving her in two.

She couldn't even follow my movement.

And again... her body turned to smoke.

"Again?"

"There's no point in what you're doing... Frey Starlight."

Beatrice twirled her wand once more.

"You can't defeat magic unless you uncover the trick behind it."

This time, she cast a much stronger spell.

"Like the illusion spell earlier... You managed to dispel it because you broke the core. Hehe... But you won't do it again."

“Kill him for me!”

With a single command ..

Dozens of mirrors materialized around me in a perfect circle.

And from within each one, stepped out a replica of myself.

Every single one of them drew their swords and charged toward me, surrounding me on all sides.

Chaos erupted as I sprinted at incredible speed, with dozens of doppelgängers chasing me down, blades aimed to kill.

They were strong—so strong I felt as if I were fighting my true self.

And yet... for some reason, not one of them could touch me.

SWOOSH!

I dodged their strikes with precision, parrying the few I couldn't evade.

At the same time, I retaliated with a flurry of attacks, destroying replica after replica.

All of this played out in front of Beatrice, who watched my every move.

"What's with this bizarre fighting style?!"

After trading blows for a while, I finally understood why I was able to handle them so easily.

"In the end, you're just poor imitations of me."

Copies that mimicked my mastered movements perfectly ..

And that triggered my strongest passive ability:

Shadow Adaptation: 3/7

A mirage-like aura of darkness shimmered around my body as I dismantled the clones with terrifying precision and speed.

Thanks to Shadow Adaptation, I'd become fully resistant to their attacks, allowing me to dominate the fight so thoroughly that I even managed to launch a shadow arc at Beatrice mid-battle.

She dissolved into smoke the moment it struck her.

'I can't get close to her...'

Every time I tried, she vanished like magic.

I thought my speed would be enough—but it wasn't.

I had to try something else.

But the damned clones kept coming. Beatrice kept summoning mirror after mirror until the battle turned into a brutal war of attrition.

It was clear she wanted to wear me down.

And not knowing how much aura she had left... playing her game was a terrible idea.

So, I decided to end it with my next strike.

“Playtime’s over.”

I raised both the Dark Sister and Balerion at once.

My skin cracked, revealing glowing purple lines beneath—raging with volatile energy.

Surrounded by dozens of my own copies, with Beatrice weaving through them behind the lines, I chose to obliterate everything with a single, all-out attack.

Drawing in a monstrous surge of aura, I roared:

“Ignition!!!”

A blinding light burst from my blades, illuminating the dark night sky and swallowing everything around me.

Beatrice stood frozen, stunned by the sheer magnitude of the blast.

BOOOOM!!!

A deafening explosion shattered the earth, and a towering pillar of aura pierced the heavens, annihilating every mirror and clone Beatrice had created.

Within moments, the light faded.

What remained was a massive crater—an ocean of ruin scorched into the wastelands of the Ultras continent.

At the center of it all...

I stood alone.

Surrounded by nothing but silence, smoke, and destruction.

Huff...

I let out a breath, steadying myself as I rose to my feet.

I checked my body—tired, but intact.

“My aura pathways... they can finally withstand Ignition.”

I was no longer at risk of collapsing after using it once.

Relieved, I scanned the area .. there was no one left in sight.

I thought it was over.

But in that very moment ..

Everything changed.

I felt the sharp sting of a blade piercing my back.

Warm blood spilled onto the ground as a thin sword slid out through my chest, stabbing me directly through the heart.

The world flipped on its head, and I could barely hear the voice behind me.

“Kikikikiki... Still so naïve, Frey Starlight.”

Slowly...

I dropped to one knee, pain surging through my body.

“That was a spectacular attack, truly. But you’re too naïve... Did you forget? Techniques like that don’t affect my body.”

Beatrice spoke with a confident smile as she left the blade lodged in my chest.

As expected .. she possessed some kind of magic that constantly protected her physical body, making it nearly impossible to harm her.

Ignition hadn’t hit her at all.

She simply waited until my guard was down—then struck with surgical precision.

“How tragic, Frey Starlight... for such talent to go to waste. It seems your fate was to die like this, after all.”

She spoke with certainty.

And I...

Could only smile through the pain, one hand touching the sword buried in my chest.

“Yeah... it would’ve been a shame to die here.”

SLAAAASH!!!

“Huh?!”

It was almost laughable ..

How quickly the tide of battle could change.

Beatrice could only let out a sharp gasp, her eyes wide with disbelief, as her body was cleaved clean in half at the torso. Blood sprayed across the battlefield, painting the ground.

On the other side, I rose to my feet, gripping the thin sword that had pierced through my chest and yanking it out with a strained breath.

Beatrice, now lying on the ground, stared at me in utter shock—unable to comprehend what had just happened.

“How... my magic?!”

Standing over her, I stared down coldly, my chest still bleeding, a gaping wound in the center of it.

“Just who exactly do you think I am?”

There was no way I would ever let myself die here.

“I’m Frey Starlight... son of Abraham Starlight, damn it!”

I coughed up blood as I focused all my strength on healing.

“There’s no way I’m dying like this.”

With a bitter smirk, I glanced at the system window in front of me:

Anti-Magic – Level 2 (Activated)

From the beginning of this fight, I’d been unable to get close to Beatrice no matter how fast or hard I tried. She kept spreading illusions, constantly veiling her true body and forcing me to chase phantoms.

So instead, I dropped my guard on purpose—right after using Ignition.

She must have thought I was exhausted, vulnerable after such a powerful attack. And so, she walked right into the trap.

The moment she stepped within five meters of me...

I activated Anti-Magic .. instantly stripping her of all magical protections.

“You should never have judged me by the standards of ordinary humans... Eternal Witch Beatrice.”

I pointed at the hole in my chest, which was already starting to close.

“As you can see... I don’t go down that easily.”

Not when I had a body that could regenerate like some sort of mythical beast.

Beatrice, now severed in half and stripped of all her magic, could do nothing but stare up at me from the dirt as I raised my sword over her face.

With one last smile, she whispered her final words—just before I drove Balerion down into her skull, shattering it completely.

“...Magnificent.”

And with that, the witch who had manipulated us from the shadows finally perished.

But the worst was far from over.

All the elite students had now been scattered—each stranded somewhere across this cursed land.

“I need to move.”

With a long breath, I dragged my battered body away from the ruins of the battlefield, leaving Beatrice’s corpse behind.

“This... is only the beginning of the war.”

A war no one could predict.

With turbulent thoughts and heavy steps, I pushed forward into the desolate plain—

In search of the others... each of whom was now fighting a war of their own.

Chapter 336: The Witch’s Game (1)

– The Tea Party –

It was ironic—

A breathtaking garden, adorned with flowers of every shape and color, blooming in the heart of a continent reduced to lifeless desert.

The Witch's Garden had always been an enigma.

A dreamlike place whispered about across the Ultrass Continent.

But only a select few were ever granted the honor of stepping inside.

Among them, Simon Manus had been the most frequent guest ... thanks to their shared eccentricities, which allowed the two to sit for hours, talking without a hint of boredom.

Now, Simon sat quietly at Beatrice's game table, unmoving, eyes closed, as if awaiting something inevitable.

Fortunately, he didn't have to wait long.

A faint smile curved his lips as he opened his eyes, meeting the gaze of the pale-skinned woman with long black hair now seated across from him.

She wore an elegant dress of black and violet, her expression darkened by annoyance as she glared at him with violet eyes.

"Well, well... what do we have here? Kihihhi... looks like someone suffered a spectacular failure."

Simon's voice was thick with mockery as he leaned forward, elbows on the table.

Beatrice rested her chin on one hand, turning away with a pout.

"No. The plan worked perfectly."

"Oh? Then why didn't you bring back your other body? Isn't it your favorite?"

She remained silent, her face reddening slightly as she turned further away.

"I..."

She mumbled something under her breath, barely audible.

"Speak up, woman. You know I'm hard of hearing."

"I died."

"Louder."

He pressed further, until she finally snapped.

"I DIED! That damned puppet got destroyed, alright!? Happy now?!"

"Kihihih... Now that is unexpected. Our dear Beatrice—defeated after all that boasting and meticulous planning."

"I wasn't defeated... The game's still ongoing."

Simon couldn't help but laugh.

Opportunities to tease the Eternal Witch were rare—and too precious to waste.

"I wonder... who did it? Was it Phoenix? I wouldn't be surprised. He's strong enough to beat most Lords and Hollows."

"It wasn't Phoenix."

Beatrice's answer cut through the air, making Simon pause in surprise.

"You're telling me... you lost to one of the Empire's children?"

She gave a slow nod.

"That's right."

Her confirmation only deepened Simon's confusion.

"I know your homunculus copies aren't as powerful as your real body, but to lose to a mere child..."

"He's not just any child."

Beatrice's lips curled into a faint smile as she recalled the battle.

"His name is Frey Starlight. When he fights seriously, he can rival SS rank Awakened. And that's not all .. he possesses bizarre abilities I've never seen before."

She leaned back in her chair, her expression pensive.

"He can nullify magic somehow... My magic—something no one in this world has ever been able to suppress—vanished completely the moment I got close to him. Not to mention those two burning swords of his... His strikes could obliterate entire battlefields."

She paused, eyes distant.

"It's likely... he was the one who interrupted the teleportation trap."

"To my knowledge, there's no method to alter a teleportation gate's destination from inside the gate itself." Simon said, while stroking his beard.

"That's what I thought too. But clearly, we were wrong."

Had he used some kind of tool?

Even if so—no such tool was known to exist.

"This is troublesome. Another monster talent has emerged within the Empire."

If Frey could unleash such power at this age, how far could he rise?

Perhaps... a calamity on the scale of Abraham Starlight himself.

As Simon sank deeper into those grim thoughts, he noticed Beatrice smiling unconsciously.

"Hey... what's with that cursed grin?"

"Ah—pardon me."

Beatrice quickly composed herself.

"I just got a little too excited. With someone like him in the mix, the game will only become more... fun."

Simon burst out laughing.

"You're truly insane... kihihhi."

"And you're insufferable."

She pouted again, fiddling with the small toys laid out on the table.

"But I did lose a lot today... I really liked that puppet. She was my finest one."

"That's entirely your fault. You should've just gone with your real body. No matter how advanced your homunculus are, they'll never channel your highest-tier spells."

With a long sigh, Beatrice reset her odd chessboard.

"I know I would've won if I used my real body. But I won't."

The mad witch lifted a chess piece shaped like a queen and waved it mockingly in Simon's face, her expression one of theatrical sarcasm.

"No matter how hard you try, you filthy old pervert, I'll never let you see my real body."

"Bah! Who'd want to see that rotten thing? My interest lies solely in your dolls..."

"Which is exactly why you're a pervert."

The two bickered for hours, their strange relationship blurring the lines between friendship and something entirely... other.

Simon never once dared cross the line. Beatrice had never shown him her true form—not even once.

After all, how many Awakened could hope to survive against an SS+ rank witch?

Those were the thoughts running through the mind of the Hollow, the Puppet Master—Simon Manus—as he gazed at the whimsical woman who only moved when her twisted whims demanded it.

And unfortunately for everyone else...

The children of the Empire had become her latest obsession.

...

...

...

The Desolate Plains of the Ultrass Continent.

A land that had devoured life, leaving behind only hunger and death.

Under the shadow of night, a flickering glow dashed across the cursed earth—vanishing and reappearing in flashes of movement.

"Void Step."

Snow muttered the name of his skill as he traversed vast distances, his face tight with determination.

Everything had happened so fast ..

The ambush, the chaos, the forced separation scattered them across the deadly continent.

Snow quickly realized how dire the situation truly was, especially with several weak links among the Elite Class.

Some of them wouldn't survive out here alone.

"They must be close by..."

Using Void Step again and again, Snow scoured the wastelands without direction, wondering if the decision they made back then had been a mistake.

But it was too late now.

Facing the entire Ultras army head-on would've been suicide—an express ticket to annihilation.

Despite everything, the Church's golden prodigy tried to remain optimistic, even as he sprinted for hours, finding no sign of life—only endless silence.

It made him wonder...

Was this land even more lifeless than the Nightmare Land's?

Eventually, his solitude came to an end.

After dozens of teleportations ..

Snow stopped abruptly, eyes narrowing.

"A tent?"

In the distance, a massive tent stood tall, surrounded by several others and flanked by black flags flapping violently in the wind.

As he approached, he realized it wasn't just one tent ..

It was an entire city of them, arranged like a traveling circus.

At the camp's entrance, a weathered sign read:

"Black Flag."

The name felt oddly fitting.

But what truly stunned him was what lay inside.

For the first time since entering the Ultrass Continent, Snow laid eyes on something he never expected ..

People.

Real, living humans.

Not twisted mutations. Not deformed beasts.

Actual men and women, walking and talking, moving from shop to stall amidst crumbling walls and canvas shelters.

Snow quickly cloaked himself in a black hooded robe—one he'd taken from a fallen Ultras corpse—and slipped among the crowd.

His top priority was to find his companions.

If they weren't here, then perhaps he could at least uncover clues about long-range teleportation gates—their only way home.

Blending into the crowd was surprisingly easy. The inhabitants came and went in cycles, indifferent to a lone newcomer.

At first glance, everything seemed normal.

Ordinary humans trying to live in the heart of death itself.

Snow dared to hope.

Perhaps he'd finally found a haven in this forsaken wasteland.

Chapter 337: The Witch's Game (2)

Snow made his way toward the largest tent—

If there were answers, they'd be in there.

He slipped in silently.

What greeted him was not a clue ..

But a deafening roar.

Cheers erupted around him as blinding lights struck from above, illuminating the inside of the tent in a dazzling spectacle.

The space had been magically soundproofed .

No noise reached the outside.

Inside, the air was dense with sweat and blood.

Unlike the shrouded figures outside, the people here bared their faces ..

Their skin dry and cracked, their features sharp and worn like they were all suffering from a chronic illness.

Every eye in the crowd was locked on the center ring.

A massive arena.

Lit by piercing lights, the ring served as a battlefield.

Inside, two towering, nearly naked men clashed with oversized spears, fighting like rabid animals.

Their movements were brutal and unrefined—

All offense, no defense.

They struck each other without hesitation, slamming weapons into flesh again and again, until blood soaked the arena and their bodies became unrecognizable pulps of mangled meat.

With every clash between the two giants, the crowd erupted in louder cheers—urging them to fight with even greater brutality.

And in just a few short minutes, one of the behemoths collapsed, slain after a savage and gruesome duel.

The victor roared at the top of his lungs, declaring his triumph.

As soon as the match ended, an even brighter spotlight focused on the center of the arena, revealing a strange man stepping forward.

He wore a black mask and circus-like garments, spreading his arms dramatically toward the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen! The battle is over! Do you know what that means?"

His voice, amplified with aura, boomed through the tent.

And the crowd answered in thunderous unison:

"Feeding time!!"

At their shout, the masked man effortlessly hurled the fallen giant's corpse high into the air.

With a gleaming blade, he performed a dizzying flourish .. slicing the massive body into chunks of raw flesh that rained down upon the arena like crimson hail.

Limbs. Guts. Chest. Even the face.

The moment those human remains hit the ground, the crowd descended into madness.

Men and women alike threw themselves into a frenzied brawl—biting, clawing, stabbing each other for scraps of meat.

They tore one another apart for a taste of what they considered a delicacy.

And all of it happened right before Snow's eyes.

He watched, his expression grim.

"This wasn't a battle..."

His golden gaze scanned the arena, piecing everything together at last.

"These people... came here to eat."

It was then that Snow realized just how naive he had been.

The crowd devoured the human meat like starving beasts.

And once the supply was gone, they turned on each other—consumed by their hunger.

Man or woman—it didn't matter.

They fought. They killed. They fed on each other like monsters.

Then, when it was finally over and their bloodied faces had feasted, they cheered and danced and sang as if nothing had happened.

They ate, they drank, they celebrated—

Even engaged in public acts of depravity without shame.

Bare. Wild.

Like...

"Animals."

For the first time in his life, Snow felt true despair for humanity.

There was nothing for him here—nothing but rot.

Turning away, he prepared to leave that wretched place behind.

But he stopped.

Something caught his eye.

Something he couldn't ignore.

He was fine enduring the horror. Fine with the adults.

But what he saw next crossed a line he could not forgive.

As he turned to leave, Snow spotted a hulking man—more beast than human—towering over a small child who looked no older than six.

The man threw the boy to the ground and began beating him savagely.

The boy was tiny, curled up on himself, impossible to notice amidst the chaos.

His screams were drowned by the noise of the crowd, leaving him utterly defenseless.

"Hey."

The brute froze.

Snow had appeared at his side.

"Huh? What the hell do you wan—ughkkk!"

With a single backhanded blow, Snow sent the man flying—his neck twisting a full 360 degrees before he crashed to the ground...

"I messed it up..."

Snow knelt down, reaching out to help the child.

The hero of the Church had managed to ignore everything until now ..

But he couldn't turn his back on a single child.

"Are you alright?"

He extended a hand.

The boy shakily rose, sobbing.

His frail, naked form was covered only by a filthy white robe.

"T-Thank you, sir..."

Snow gave a faint nod, brushing the dirt and blood from the child's face.

"Where is your family?"

The boy lowered his head.

"I... I don't have one."

"Orphaned, then..."

Snow sighed, dusting off the grime from the boy's robe.

But as he did, his eyes froze on a faint emblem stitched into the cloth.

An emblem that made the air itself grow heavy—

And darkened his face in an instant.

"S-Sir?"

The boy flinched as Snow suddenly grabbed the robe, eyes locked on the symbol.

A dove—wings spread wide in freedom.

It was the exact same dove engraved on the pendant that Snow had worn around his neck his entire life.

"Yosefka..."

He whispered the name, stunned.

"Sir... you know our orphanage?"

The boy's words confirmed it.

"Impossible..."

Golden eyes blazing with fury, Snow stumbled to his feet—staggered by what he'd just uncovered.

"He shouldn't be here..."

The orphanage.

Yosefka Orphanage—the one Snow had searched for across the Empire for years.

"Why is he here... among the Ultras?!"

Rage surged through Snow's veins as he clenched his teeth.

That could only mean one thing—

That bastard is here.

"Hey there, pretty boy. What are you doing all alone?"

Blinded by anger, Snow didn't notice the group of men who had surrounded him.

"You're not from around here. Where'd you come from?"

One muscular man wrapped his arm around Snow's neck and laughed mockingly.

"Not that it matters. Why don't you come play with us for a bit?"

"Your hand."

Snow's voice was cold and flat.

"What?"

"Take your filthy hand off me."

Despite Snow's slim build and composed tone, the killing intent he radiated was suffocating.

The man's grin faded. He tightened his grip.

"You've got a sharp tongue for someone so pretty... I'll make sure you—"

BOOM!

Before anyone could react—before even the boy could blink—

The man exploded into a crimson mist, blown apart by the radiant sword that had appeared in Snow's hand out of thin air.

"I was trying to keep a low profile. Make things easier for me and my friends."

BOOM!

"But I've changed my mind."

With another swing, the rest of the group were shredded—erased in a flash of light and blood.

"All of you will die here."

Consumed by pure wrath, Snow launched himself into the crowd.

The orgy of madness turned to a slaughter.

Every light that had once brightened the arena shattered, plunging the tent into pitch-black chaos. Screams of confusion erupted from the Ultras ..

And in the heart of it all, one light remained:

A glowing white sword, and two golden eyes burning with fury.

Snow carved through them like a reaper.

No mercy. No hesitation. Only death.

The Ultras scrambled to escape, trampling over one another in blind panic. But they couldn't outrun the Vermithor Blade—

Not when it cleaved through them faster than they could breathe.

The blood flowed like rivers.

Most died by Snow's hand.

The rest were crushed under the feet of their own.

He didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

That man—

The one he had searched for all those years—

Was closer now than ever before.

Snow had become a storm of death.

When the lights flickered back to life, he stood alone in the ring..

Soaked in blood, surrounded by heaps of torn, mangled corpses.

Expression grim, he turned away.

He could no longer bear the stench of that cursed place.

But just as he walked past the bodies, something caught his eye.

A small figure, crushed under the weight of the stampede.

The boy.

The same boy he had saved—trampled to death in the chaos Snow himself had unleashed.

Most likely, the boy had screamed.

But no one heard him.

"What makes me any different from him?"

The pig who beat him?

Or Snow, who got him killed?

Which was worse?

"Damn it..."

Snow cursed under his breath and scanned the area.

"Where's their leader?"

The masked man.

Snow just wanted to fight .. to forget.

To drown in blood and let go of everything he'd buried deep inside.

But when he found the body of the masked man tossed in a corner—already dead—

Even that hope was gone.

"Burn in hell..."

With a single command, Snow ignited the entire tent.

Flames erupted from the ground, setting the main structure ablaze.

The Ultras outside panicked, surrounding the burning tent in confusion and terror.

Snow walked out through them ..

His body drenched in blood, his presence suffocating.

No one dared move.

No one dared breathe.

Because the killing intent he radiated was unbearable.

He had come here searching for information.

But what he found...

Was something far worse.

The shadows of his past.

Memories buried deep within ..

The kind that clawed their way back from the abyss no matter how hard he tried to forget.

The shadows of Yosefka.

And within Snow's golden eyes, those memories flickered ..

Unwelcome. Unrelenting.

Chapter 338: Snow Lionheart (1)

Years passed, one after another, each carrying its own story.

Some of those stories would remain forever in the dark ... perhaps never to be told.

For what belongs in the dark is sometimes better left there.

But occasionally, those tales surface,

shedding light on yet another struggle.

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The Empire—an expansive realm that sheltered what remained of humanity when catastrophe clawed at its gates.

While legends like Abraham Starlight and Maekar Valerion carved their names into history, others lived in peace, far from the chaos.

On a stormy night, with winds howling across the land,

a man walked alone beneath a pitch-black sky lit only by intermittent flashes of lightning.

Far from cities and villages, he carried a child in his arms—his face somber, his steps heavy.

The infant's wailing never ceased, a desperate cry harmonizing with the thunder above.

The weary man glanced down at the child with snow-white hair.

"No sleep, no rest... doesn't eat, doesn't drink. A cursed child, through and through."

He walked with slow, burdened steps. There was something hopeless in his demeanor.

"Perhaps this will count as penance... for their wretched souls."

Soon, the silhouette of a massive building came into view, rising through the mist and rain.

"Mourning the dead is pointless... but the living can still be judged."

As he neared the towering structure—its grim façade unshaken by storm or wind—

a rusted sign above its iron gates came into view.

"Yosefka Orphanage."

He knelt and gently placed the child before the gate, casting a final glance at him.

Then he turned away and walked back into the woods from where he had come.

With bleak eyes, he drew out a rusted dagger and gripped it with both hands.

And with a sorrowful smile, he plunged it into his throat, blood washing into the rain.

"Let this be atonement... for all my sins."

The man died.

And the child lived ... his cries the only sound left behind.

But everything that had occurred... was seen by someone.

A tall, broad-shouldered figure emerged from the shadows, cloaked in black. A round monocle framed his right eye.

Wordlessly, he picked up the child in his arms. The dead man behind him was of no concern.

Written on the baby's blanket was only a name:

"Snow Lionheart."

The child... an offering to the soul of Yosefka.

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Time passed. The years rolled on. And the boy grew.

Yosefka Orphanage had become home to many—a refuge for children who had lost their parents far too young.

Among them, one stood out.

A boy with white hair and golden eyes, gentle features, and a rare kind of beauty that drew the gaze of all who saw him.

Snow Lionheart.

He sat at his desk, hands folded, gazing forward alongside the other children at the woman teaching them in their modest classroom.

She taught them how to read and write.

For many of the orphans, the orphanage was their entire world—a world whose boundaries ended at the wrought-iron fence.

But they didn't mind. They were content with what they had.

All of them adored the woman who nurtured, educated, and gave them everything they lacked in life.

The vice-director, known to all simply as... Sister Annalise.

Though she had asked them to call her "sister," to most of the children, she was truly a mother.

Especially to the white-haired boy with golden eyes, whose gaze never strayed from her—not even when so many other eyes were on him.

After the lessons ended each day, the children would gather in a vast courtyard to play, rest, and enjoy their time.

Many would naturally drift toward Snow Lionheart.

At an age no older than ten, they still lived in their dreams—immersed in a rose-tinted childhood.

Dreams of one day having a real family... a family from outside.

Or something even simpler... like falling in love.

The children were naïve when it came to such things, and it was clear that most of the girls in the orphanage were enamored with Snow, who looked more like an angel walking among mortals.

That, of course, stirred jealousy and resentment among the boys—so much so that they often sought to pick fights with him.

It was their childish way of standing out: "If we beat up the pretty boy, we'll prove we're better."

But reality shattered those fantasies. Snow Lionheart, the slender boy who looked prettier than most girls, crushed every single one of them.

His movements were something far beyond their age, as if he had been born a master of martial arts.

Anyone who challenged that boy ended up kissing the dirt in defeat.

Their plans backfired horribly, only making Snow Lionheart more popular than ever.

After each bitter fight, Snow would simply remain where he stood, as if waiting for something.

And sure enough, within seconds, the orphanage guards would arrive, scolding the children and escorting them straight to the deputy director's office.

That was exactly what Snow had been waiting for.

They were always met with the same stern lecture from that lady.

Sister Annalise—mature, with fiery red hair and violet eyes like gemstones behind the spectacles she always wore due to her poor eyesight.

Her features were so gentle that even when she scolded them, it never really felt like punishment.

Once the lectures were over, the others would leave. All except him.

"What is it? You can go now."

Snow would shake his head and stay behind.

"I want to stay and help."

He said that often. Annalise sometimes tried to make him leave, but she always ended up giving in.

While the other children played outside, Snow spent hours hovering around the deputy director.

He did everything he could to help—bringing her the correct documents, assisting with small tasks.

Things that would bore any child were welcomed by Snow, as long as they let him be close to her.

When she finished her work, Annalise would often stroke his hair and pull him close.

"You really are such a sweet child... Snow."

"..."

"Remember this—always be a good, obedient boy, and you'll always get what you want."

Snow nodded at every word, replying in a quiet voice.

"Yes, Mother."

For a moment, Annalise froze at that last word.

"No, Snow. You mustn't call me that... Just call me Sister like the others, or Deputy Director."

She sounded like she was reprimanding him, but her tender gaze and faint smile betrayed her words, rendering them meaningless.

To Snow Lionheart, Annalise was a mother.

She was his whole world, the only person who had ever been there for him since the earliest days he could remember.

He had no real friends. For some reason, he kept his distance from everyone else.

And so, he cherished every moment he spent with her. She filled the void left by the family he never had.

Eventually, he left Annalise's office, only to bump into a man standing just outside the door.

The young Snow stumbled back, hitting something that felt like iron rather than flesh.

A tall man in priestly robes, with long messy black hair and the same type of reading glasses, perched on a face marked by two distinct scars.

"The Director."

This was the head of the Yosefka Orphanage.

With his large hand, the man gently patted Snow's head.

That hand looked strong enough to crush him with ease—but he didn't.

"Be obedient, and go play with the others."

The deep voice spoke, eyes focused on Snow.

Snow nodded quickly and darted away.

"Yes, sir."

The director watched him for a moment before stepping into Annalise's office.

He was rarely seen around the orphanage. His presence was intimidating, yet he treated everyone with kindness.

But Snow Lionheart could never truly accept him. Every time they met, every hair on his body stood on end, warning him.

He was terrified of the man. Though it didn't affect his life much... yet.

Their daily routine was simple: wake up early, study, play, then go to sleep.

The only oddity was that one day of the week when all the children were gathered for what they called a "medical session."

They were told they were sick. So routinely, they sat in that vast room while a red substance was injected into their veins.

Every time Snow saw it, he felt it wasn't medicine at all... it was blood.

Blood from an unknown source.

But it was Sister Annalise who administered the injections. And Snow trusted her blindly...

He believed she would never give him anything that could harm him.

So he accepted the injections willingly, letting the strange liquid blend with his blood.

Some of the children ended up spending nights in the orphanage's infirmary due to side effects.

But Snow never suffered from any... though he could feel the changes in his body.

He often wondered what that substance truly was—what it had turned him into.

Chapter 339: Snow Lionheart (2)

Days passed.

Snow followed the same daily routine for a long time. He didn't have many bonds, but he was observant.

He noticed...

How the children began to vanish, one by one...

How they were essentially prisoners in the orphanage, never allowed beyond those iron fences.

There was even an entire section of the orphanage they were forbidden to enter—

The Restricted Grounds.

All of it revealed cracks in what once seemed like their perfect world.

What was really happening behind their backs?

Did the world outside even know they existed?

Snow often found himself wondering.

He had awakened the ability to manipulate aura at a very young age—and was undeniably gifted.

But the educational system within the orphanage had restricted him heavily, almost as if it didn't want him to grow stronger.

His only solace was the time he spent with Vice Director Annalise.

Curiosity grew within the young boy's heart each day.

Especially with the increasingly frequent disappearances of the orphanage children.

At some point, it became a common occurrence, always followed by the arrival of new children to replace them.

The teachers claimed they had been adopted, or transferred to "better" places.

Many considered them the lucky ones.

But were they really?

Especially when their disappearances always seemed to coincide with the director's return.

Later, upon reaching the age of ten, Snow began to be treated as someone "special" alongside a small group of children his age.

That was when his doubts about the orphanage—and the strange substances being injected into his body—grew far stronger.

Yet he had little to hold onto.

The only constant he had... was Miss Annalise. With her around, he felt he needed nothing else.

And every time she embraced him, she would whisper the same words in his ear:

"Be a good boy, Snow. Be obedient, and everything will be alright."

One day, she even gave him a necklace.

A silver pendant shaped like a dove—a symbol of freedom.

It was the same emblem used by the orphanage itself.

But... was he really free?

Snow had always known the answer was no.

His curiosity deepened each day, driven by a need to uncover the truth.

He had grown weary of all the quiet sobbing that followed whenever a child vanished without saying a word.

But Annalise's words had always been enough to hold him back.

"Be a good boy, Snow. Be obedient, and everything will be alright."

Yet how long could those words continue to restrain him?

Not much longer...

On a moonlit night, Snow snuck out of the bedroom, leaving the other children fast asleep.

Despite their limited training, he could manipulate aura freely—allowing him to move swiftly and silently through the orphanage.

The forbidden zone lay on the western side of the grounds. To reach it, he had to pass through quite a lot.

The orphanage was practically a small city on its own.

But Snow was gifted by nature, and within minutes, he reached that forbidden, shadowed section of the compound.

He walked forward, step by cautious step.

The area was dark. Ominous.

Gradually, he reached a wide hall at the end of the corridor, illuminated by faint green lights emanating from enormous glass containers.

Driven by the urge to know—by the burning curiosity inside—Snow entered the room and was struck by a scene he never could've imagined.

It was an old laboratory, filled with blood-stained instruments, beds covered in crimson, and the reek of death.

That alone would've been enough to terrify any child... but something else seized his attention entirely.

The massive containers.

He approached them slowly.

And then he froze.

Because he recognized what was inside.

The boy trembled violently, struggling to comprehend what he was seeing.

Inside those cylindrical tubes... were bloodied human body parts.

Arms. Legs. Severed limbs.

But those weren't what frightened him most.

It was the heads.

Severed, preserved heads—neatly arranged within the glass.

They weren't just anyone. They weren't strangers.

They were the children he had lived with for years under the same roof.

They weren't exactly friends. But they had shared the same space. Laughed, cried, played, and grown together.

And now...

Their lifeless faces stared back at him from inside those tubes.

The grotesque sight of those decapitated heads, paired with the stench of blood, was far too much for someone like Snow Lionheart, who had lived a peaceful life until now.

He couldn't even scream.

All he could do was tremble as his heart pounded violently in his chest.

His instincts screamed at him to run—to leave now.

But his thoughts were clouded. Fear ruled over logic.

So instead of turning back, he ran deeper into the forbidden wing.

Eventually, he arrived at a room.

A room thick with the scent of blood and death.

What exactly was happening in this orphanage? Human experimentation? What kind of deranged mind had created this place?

The answer awaited behind the door.

It was slightly ajar.

Snow pushed it open just enough to peek inside.

The room was pitch black, lit only by a single lamp dangling from the ceiling—casting light on the center.

There, lying on a small bed, was a girl who couldn't have been older than eight.

Standing before her...

Was the man who had terrified him for as long as he could remember.

The Director.

The girl was still alive.

But the light had long since vanished from her eyes.

At that moment, the sound of Snow's chattering teeth could be heard. He was trembling more violently than ever before.

The Director slowly turned toward him.

The girl lying on the bed before him had been half-eaten—her right chest and stomach were completely gone, her blood pooling endlessly.

Her blood covered the Director's face and robes.

And from between the scars above his right eye, additional glowing red eyes emerged, staring directly at Snow.

The boy collapsed, his legs refusing to move.

Then, in a deep voice, the Director spoke:

"Snow... ah, damn it. What are you doing here?"

Snow was special—so the Director recognized him immediately.

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, the man began walking toward the boy.

With each step, Snow's heart sank deeper.

"N-No!"

The Director picked up speed.

"Don't come any closer!"

But he didn't stop.

He knelt down and seized Snow's face with both bloodied hands, smearing the girl's blood across his cheeks.

His terrifying, inhuman eyes locked onto Snow's.

Snow could feel the Director's bloody breath brush against his skin.

Then, in that same guttural voice, the Director spoke again:

"You didn't see anything... did you, Snow Lionheart?"

"W-What...?"

Snow hesitated. His mind was still struggling to process what he had just witnessed.

"You didn't see anything. You didn't hear anything."

The Director pulled Snow into a tight embrace, soaking him in blood as well.

"You're an obedient child... aren't you?"

"..."

Snow remained silent.

He couldn't speak a single word. It felt as though the Devil himself was holding him.

"Answer me."

The Devil demanded a response.

But the boy couldn't form the words.

"Answer me!!"

The monstrous roar shattered what little resolve Snow had left. Shaking all over, he finally replied:

"Y-Yes!"

"Good."

The Director pulled away slightly.

"Very good. Everything you saw tonight... was nothing more than a nightmare."

A sharp blow suddenly struck Snow's stomach.

The boy's world flipped upside down.

"Just a bad dream."

Snow fell unconscious on the floor as the Director gazed down at him.

That boy was too important to lose. They couldn't afford to let him die.

Otherwise, it would've been him lying on that table instead of the girl.

When the time came, he did plan to let the boy go.

But that time hadn't come yet.

Moments later, a familiar woman entered the room.

The Director had already finished devouring the unfortunate child and was now cleaning himself.

When Annalise arrived, he gestured toward Snow.

"Return him to his bed. And make sure you control him properly."

"My apologies, sir. I didn't expect this child to break the rules. He's usually very obedient."

Annalise bowed deeply. The Director stepped closer, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"It's fine. Just make sure it never happens again."

"Yes, sir."

They looked into each other's eyes for a long moment—before falling into each other's arms, consumed by their carnal desires.

And beside them... Snow Lionheart lay motionless on the floor.

That child had been swallowed by the darkness.

Chapter 340: Snow Lionheart (3)

When Snow Leonhart woke up, he found himself lying in bed.

He slowly touched his face, then glanced down at his clothes.

They were perfectly clean.

Everything seemed normal.

As if what he had witnessed had been nothing more than a dream—a terrible dream.

But that trembling, that pain in his chest...

That fear... it had been far too real.

"I saw my world collapse before my eyes."

Snow muttered as he hugged himself tightly.

The image of the blood-soaked Director still haunted his mind.

The man whom everyone called Father... had been a monster who devoured the flesh of the very children who called him that.

That truth alone made Snow consider running—escaping as far away as possible.

But... to where?

They were prisoners in the place they called home.

The dove on his pendant looked just like him.

He was like that dove .. a dove trapped inside an iron cage, with nothing to do but wait... wait for death.

With thoughts like those, the days went by.

Snow Lionheart lived each one in terror, haunted by what he had seen.

Children continued to disappear from time to time, as usual, replaced by newcomers.

But this time... he knew their fate.

Those children were either cut into pieces or eaten alive.

Each ending more horrific than the last.

Knowing that—without being able to do anything—was a crushing weight for a ten-year-old boy.

Someone could sleep in the bed beside him one day, only to vanish the next and end up on the Director's death table.

Speaking of the Director... Snow's face would go pale every time he saw the man.

And yet the Director never acknowledged him again.

Which made him wonder...

Had his time... simply not come yet?

The time of his death?

A never-ending war of thoughts raged inside the boy's mind.

Perhaps his only solace was the time he spent with Deputy Director Annalise.

She was the only light in that dark place.

She always hugged him and told him everything would be alright.

But it was her next words that carved themselves deep into his soul:

"Be a good, obedient boy, and everything will be fine."

Those words always brought him back to that day... the day that felt more like a dream than reality.

As time passed, Snow managed to keep himself sane by forming new thoughts.

"I'm going to escape."

He would run away from the orphanage. From that hell.

"And I'll take her with me."

The person he called Mother.

Deputy Director Annalise.

Snow wanted to save her.

He wanted to take her away from that cursed place.

And then, the two of them could live in peace, far away from all of this... as mother and son.

The boy blinded himself with those dreams—those sweet, impossible dreams—as he began to seriously plan his escape and what he would do afterward.

It was a selfish decision. He would leave all the other children behind. But he wasn't a hero .. just a child.

A child crushed by guilt as he watched more and more of them disappear, completely unaware of the fate that awaited them.

He knew what was coming, and yet said nothing.

It was almost as if he were complicit in their deaths. That was why he wanted to run. To leave everything behind.

He knew that what was happening would leave a scar on him for life.

But he didn't know what he was supposed to do.

Especially when some of the children tried to befriend him...

He didn't know what to say to them anymore.

So instead, he focused. He trained in secret, honing his control over aura, and little by little, searched for a way out.

He planned to take Annalise with him once he found an escape route, so he never told her about his plan—not until the very end.

The days passed quickly. Then months.

Eventually, Snow Lionheart turned twelve.

For two years, he built his escape.

And for two years, an uncountable number of children died... children whose deaths Snow felt he had caused with his own hands.

They were all gone. And he had known. Yet he did nothing.

Snow wondered often... why hadn't they taken him?

Why didn't the Director just devour him and be done with it?

Why did he have to suffer in silence, carrying the burden of all those lives?

True, he hadn't killed them. But he was a part of everything that had happened.

Silence in the face of a crime made him no different from the criminal.

Every time Snow looked at his hands... all he saw was blood.

The blood of all those children.

All the injections he had received throughout the years, changing the very makeup of his body...

The strange environment he had grown up in...

Snow could feel himself becoming something entirely different.

Something... not human.

And finally... the day he had long awaited arrived.

After two years of searching, planning, and training in secret—

Snow had finally found a way to escape.

He decided to go alone first .. to see if the path was truly safe. If it was, he would return immediately to take the Deputy Director with him.

So, late at night, Snow slipped out of bed and set off once more... hoping to find his salvation.

After two full years of preparation, he had memorized every detail by heart. And with almost flawless execution, he managed to escape the orphanage.

It was easy—far too easy.

As if they were letting him go.

What he didn't realize at the time... was that those red eyes had been watching him all along.

Once he found himself beyond the walls of Yosefka Orphanage, deep in the forest that surrounded it—

He felt a rush of freedom.

Harnessing the aura he had trained so long to master, he bolstered his body and darted through the trees with speed.

He wanted to run far—far away from that place.

For a moment, he even forgot about the Deputy Director entirely...

Freedom was something his poor soul had longed for, for far too long.

So he ran. And ran.

Until his legs couldn't carry him anymore.

He wanted to get as far away as he could.

But thin threads still tied him to the orphanage.

He felt like he had left so much of his shattered self behind.

So even after he had crossed a great distance... he stopped.

"Be a good, obedient boy, and everything will be fine."

Annalise...

The mother he never truly had... was still back there.

He was scared—terrified of what he had left behind.

His body and his soul, both had been stained by the filth of that place.

Did that boy really have the right to survive... alone?

No. He couldn't.

At the very least...

"At the very least, I'll take her with me."

And so, the boy turned back.

He returned to hell.

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By the time Snow Lionheart made the decision to return, he realized just how far he'd gone—blinded by that intoxicating taste of freedom.

His aura had responded to his emotions, propelling him forward with incredible speed.

So much so that the return trip took him several days...

Only then did he realize how isolated the orphanage truly was from the world.

And for the second time, he came to understand just how little he knew about what lay beyond it.

About how vast the world really was.

Everything he had ever known ended at those orphanage walls.

He wanted to hurry back and rescue Deputy Director Annalise.

Saving even one soul would be enough to ease the weight crushing his young heart.

So after a long journey, he finally reached that place on a moonlit night... a night just like the one when he first discovered the truth.

It was almost ironic...

Snow Lionheart froze in place as his world was shattered all over again.

Before him, beneath the wing of night, the orphanage burned—consumed by raging flames.

A fire so fierce it lit up the darkness of the night.

Snow found himself running—toward the fire.

Searching for her... his only light.