

VILLAIN 341

Chapter 341: Snow Lionheart (4)

Yosefka Orphanage should never have existed in the Empire's lands to begin with.

The fact it had lasted this long was a miracle in itself.

The strange truth at the time... was that Yosefka wasn't the only one. It had merely been a branch—one among many, part of a far greater organization.

The place Snow had lived in was just a single piece of it.

A few days before his escape...

"This facility's been discovered. The Empire will attack any moment now. Wrap things up and evacuate immediately."

That was what the Director had said before leaving—just like always.

He left behind only Annalise, along with the remaining staff who worked within those walls.

And now... here they were.

The flames devoured the orphanage without pause.

Snow ran straight into the fire, enduring the searing heat as he gasped for breath.

The deeper he went, the more charred corpses he found.

Children and adults alike.

Bodies burned beyond recognition, soaked in fire and blood.

That day, the orphanage was destined to be erased—as if it had never existed.

But Snow didn't care.

He only wanted to find her.

And after a desperate search through the inferno, he finally saw the back of that woman.

Standing amid the furious blaze ..

Snow reached out and shouted her name without even thinking.

"Mom!"

Annalise turned immediately, her mouth open in surprise.

It looked like she had been searching for him just as desperately.

Without hesitation, she ran toward him and pulled him into a tight embrace.

They held each other in the heart of the inferno.

Even now, Snow still remembered the warmth of her body, despite the hellish flames around them.

For a moment, he felt happy just to see her again.

"Ah, Snow... you're here. You have no idea how long I've been looking for you."

At that moment, Snow felt a wave of relief.

Tears streamed down his face before he even realized it, and he apologized through choked sobs.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry I left without you. I'm sorry for being a bad boy."

"It's okay."

Annalise gently stroked his hair as she rested her head on his narrow shoulder.

"It's okay. You're a good, obedient boy. Everything will be fine."

Those same words—again.

The same words where it had all begun.

While holding her, Snow suddenly felt something being torn away from him, followed by a burning pain.

Blood trickled from his shoulder.

He turned in shock to face the woman he once called mother ..

Only to find her savoring the taste of his flesh, having taken a massive bite out of his shoulder.

"M-Mom...?"

"Ahh..."

Annalise breathed heavily.

"You don't understand, Snow."

She slowly licked the blood from her lips and inhaled the scent of the boy in her arms.

"You don't know how long I've waited for this moment."

"What...?"

Snow tried to ask, still unable to grasp what was happening.

But Annalise buried her face into his neck again.

"For Lady Yosefka."

Snow froze in place, his mind blank, as Annalise continued gnawing on his tender flesh.

What kind of cannibals were they? And who was Yosefka?

Those questions ran through his dazed mind—but none of them mattered.

What mattered... was that he had been betrayed.

Betrayed by his only light.

Snow wept bitterly as he kept asking the same question ..

"Why?"

Why had all this happened? That woman had been everything to him.

And now, here she was, devouring him alive.

Perhaps the Director hadn't been the one to feast on the children.

Perhaps it had been her all along.

The one closest to them.

From the very beginning, he had been deceived.

His body... and his heart... both were played with.

"Unforgivable."

This was unforgivable.

In the end, everything he'd been through had been part of a twisted play. He was just a pawn.

Yes, the deaths of all those children hadn't been his fault.

But the burning pain in his chest... was deeper than any wound.

"Unforgivable."

It hadn't been him.

It had been them.

The Director. And her.

"Annalise..."

She had stopped biting ..no, she was forced to.

The boy's flesh had turned harder than steel.

She stumbled back, staring in shock at Snow's body now covered in radiant golden markings.

Symbols she couldn't understand.

Snow Lionheart stood up, his wound no longer bleeding. His golden eyes were hollow and dead.

With a grim expression, he slowly stepped toward Annalise.

"Snow... what are you doing?"

The woman, blood still on her face, screamed and lunged.

"I told you to be obedient!"

She struck him violently, screaming louder—

"I told you to be a good boy!"

She kept hitting him, until a sharp pain surged through her arms.

When she looked at her hands, she saw they were completely broken.

Annalise felt something was wrong.

She was in Class S .. how could a mere boy block her attacks with nothing but his skin?

But what stood before her wasn't a boy.

Snow Lionheart didn't even know what was happening anymore.

With a terrifying look, he lunged at Annalise, golden sigils glowing across his skin.

"You were going to kill me just moments ago."

With a brutal blow, he sent Annalise's body flying through the fire.

"So you won't mind if I do the same, will you?"

"You wretched brat!"

That day, the two of them clashed.

Snow felt his body sink into the unknown as a strange force took control of him, moving him however it pleased.

Everything had been destroyed...

He had lost her. Lost himself. Lost everything around him.

And so, he no longer cared about anything.

That day, a mere boy with no formal training overwhelmed someone from Class S.

As she lay before him, cursing him with all her might, Snow gave her a sorrowful smile.

"To be honest," he murmured, "I want to try it... that thing you all were so obsessed with. I want to know what it is that drove you to do all this."

Snow pinned Annalise's broken body to the ground as he leaned closer.

"But unlike you, I'm just an ordinary human... I can't eat human flesh."

Annalise couldn't move. After a long and brutal fight, her body was ravaged with injuries—bleeding from countless wounds.

And yet, she hadn't managed to hurt him even once.

Snow brought his face close to hers and whispered,

"At least... I'll take a small part."

"What...?"

"Just a small part."

He opened his mouth... and bit into her neck.

"A small part of you will live inside me forever."

The taste of her filthy blood and flesh filled his mouth, and he fought the urge to vomit.

Annalise watched in disbelief, her body broken and her death imminent.

No matter how much she begged her Lady Yosefka for strength, the latter gave her nothing. She was abandoned—left to die.

To think that she would meet her end being eaten by someone else. She, of all people?

Snow cried that day, his face drenched in blood.

"Goodbye... Mom."

It was over.

Later, when the Empire's forces arrived—led by the former temple director, Raphael Bloodmader ..

They found nothing but ashes.

Amidst those ashes sat a lone child, burned and bloodied, beside the corpse of a woman torn apart by countless wounds.

The child had survived.

The woman had not.

And yet, faintly... Bloodmader felt something strange emanating from the boy's body.

A power he couldn't quite comprehend.

"You," he called out.

But Snow Lionheart's golden eyes were distant—completely lost.

Bloodmader crouched to his level and slowly pulled a thin blade from his coat.

He ran the edge across the boy's cheek, drawing a shallow cut.

In that moment, Snow grabbed the blade tightly—blood trickling from his hand as he stared directly into Bloodmader's eyes.

The director smiled.

"Come with me... child born from the ashes."

That day, Raphael Bloodmader covered up the incident and took the boy with him... back home.

Later, Snow would learn that everything he'd experienced was part of something that came from another continent—

The continent of Ultras.

And that day, the boy set a new goal for himself ..

A target worthy of his blade.

The orphanage director, the one from whom it all began...

The Father.

Smough.

Thus began the story of Snow Lionheart.

Chapter 342: The Devil's Bargain (1)

Time usually passed quickly.

But not in the barren lands of the Ultras.

Especially for the Elite Class students, who had been scattered chaotically across the dark continent.

Each one of them was forced into their own journey, far from home... on the other side of the world.

"Ultras" — a term used to describe the fanatical, demon-worshipping traitors who had once turned their backs on humanity and sold their souls to the devils.

Here, most of the low-blood humans lived in misery, stripped of all dignity and civilization, left to roam like rabid dogs.

And now, the Elite students had finally come into contact with the eternal enemies who had long hunted them.

Those who survived this pit of death would undoubtedly emerge stronger — assuming they survived at all.

After all, who could predict what fate the Witch's Game — which had finally begun to unfold — would bring?

Among them... on a night when the moon finally pierced the clouds...

In an isolated patch of this death-ridden land, sitting atop a heap of mutilated, bloody corpses ..

The rogue prince calmly wiped his blade clean of both black and red blood, wearing his usual faint smile.

Aegon, who had been randomly teleported during the initial transfer, had found himself surrounded by a squad of mutated humans trying to rip him apart.

He killed them all with ease.

He hadn't left the area since. Instead, he remained seated for hours, as if he were waiting for something.

And after yet another hour, something changed.

Aegon raised his head and smiled, his eyes fixed on a shadowed corner of the ruins.

"I have to admit... no one's ever made me wait this long before."

His words were directed at the old man who stepped out of the darkness.

Dressed in tattered black rags .. a weathered kimono and faded pants tied around the waist with a sheathed katana .. barefoot, with messy long black hair, the man emerged into the moonlight and faced the prince.

"Sorry. I don't really care for important folks' special appointments."

The old man chuckled, pulling out a familiar flask from his waistband.

"I eat when I'm hungry. I drink when I'm thirsty. I sleep when I'm tired... and I fight when I have to. But I'll admit—I might've shown up earlier if you were a pretty princess instead of a rogue prince."

The drunken old man let out a hearty laugh.

Aegon, still crouched atop the mountain of corpses, smiled as he looked down at him.

"That's certainly a unique way to live—doing whatever you want, whenever you want... especially when you've got the power to back it up. Lord Mergo."

"I'm just a speck in this vast universe. My strength is insignificant. Hardly worth talking about."

Mergo, the Lord of the Dark Hive, seemed as carefree as ever.

But Aegon's eyes stayed locked on him .. curious, as if he were seeing something different... something that didn't match the image of a drunken old fool.

"I must say, I admire your outlook, Lord Mergo. But I wonder... is that really all there is to you?"

"What are you getting at?"

"You can't fool my eyes so easily. I know you're more than what you pretend to be... You're special."

"You're giving me too much credit."

Mergo shook his head with the same clumsy attitude, but his sharp eyes observed Aegon with equal interest.

The description Aegon used for Mergo could just as easily apply to himself. Behind that royal face, the prince hid more than most could imagine.

"Let's get to the point," Mergo said. "I trust you brought something worth our time."

Aegon nodded.

"Of course. It would've gone faster if Beatrice hadn't taken her sweet time."

"That crazy woman?" Mergo sighed. "Unfortunately, she's the one handling your little group now. You're already pieces in her game."

Beatrice—neither a Lord nor a Hollow—seemed to have amassed considerable influence among the Ultras.

"I suppose the Empire and my idiot father have finally made their move? Otherwise, why take this long just to deal with a bunch of kids from the Elite Class?"

Mergo chuckled at how Aegon referred to his classmates—despite being one of them himself—but he confirmed the prince's guess.

"You're exactly right."

With a heavier tone, Mergo declared:

"The war has already begun on the eastern front. The Empire launched a full-scale assault to retrieve their young talents."

For the first time in ages, the Empire had become the aggressor—baited into enemy territory by the Ultras.

"Then should you really be wasting time here with me, if what you say is true?"

"No need to worry. We unleashed a starving beast that won't rest until it's devoured every last one of them... A beast named Pontiff Sulyvahn. Alongside two other Hollows and Madam A, who has joined them."

"The war is already burning that hot?"

Aegon scratched his head, feigning nonchalance, though clearly intrigued by what was unfolding across the continent.

"I wouldn't call it a war. It's more of a game."

After all, everything that had happened so far...

Had been planned and staged in advance.

"I agree with you on that."

Aegon's gaze drifted past Mergo, landing on something—or someone—lurking behind him.

"Now that everyone's here, we can finally begin."

Right as he said that, a tall man emerged from the darkness, dressed in a fine suit and long coat, followed by a group of men who remained behind him. Mergo was the first to greet his fellow lord.

"Lord Lindman. Welcome to this filthy swamp."

"Mergo..."

With a scowl, Gavid Lindman walked past his peer and locked eyes with Aegon.

"Let's get this over with. Do you have the keys?"

Aegon nodded.

"There's no need to rush. Everything is prepared... though I can only guarantee two of the keys."

"We've already secured the others," Gavid replied as he pulled a strange metallic bracelet from inside his cloak.

"Madam A recovered the Moonlight key. And a certain guest delivered the Starlight key to us."

At the mention of that second key, an old man stepped forward from among Gavid's followers and bowed deeply.

"I offer my service to the Higher Blood."

The elderly man, with long white hair and a pristine beard, was no stranger to Aegon—who couldn't help but let out a mocking laugh.

"Well, well... look who we have here. Isn't that the Immortal Lion of House Starlight? Hehehe."

The old man was none other than Leonides Starlight, the former patriarch who abandoned everything the moment he lost to Ada.

"Leonides Starlight has pledged his allegiance to the Higher Blood and proven his worth. He shall have what he desires," Gavid declared.

"My gratitude, my lord," Leonidas said, still bowing—never once showing his face.

"Immortal Lion? They should've called you the Immortal Cat," Aegon snorted.

Leonides pursed his lips, humiliated by the prince's ridicule.

"Tell me, Leonides... how does it feel to have your face in the dirt after turning your back on your family? Do you feel proud?"

"..."

He said nothing. But Aegon could easily read everything through his body language.

"A pathetic, filthy coward. Immortality is the only part of your title you managed to live up to, you damn cat who's lived 150 years yet failed to beat a little girl—Pffft hahahaa!"

Aegon burst into laughter, and Leonides began to tremble.

Trying to retort, the former head of House Starlight reached for his blade—only to be pinned to the ground by a crushing wave of pressure from Gavid Lindman.

"What were you about to do, Leonides?"

With crimson eyes filled with killing intent, Gavid froze him in place.

"My deepest apologies..."

On his knees, Leonides bit his lip in frustration, unable to escape the miserable state he'd fallen into.

"Yes, that's it! Stay down. Groveling suits you."

"That's enough."

Impatient, Gavid raised the second key beside the first.

"We've recovered the bracelets of House Starlight and House Moonlight. This had better not be a waste of time, Aegon Valerion."

Aegon gave a slight nod, unfazed by Gavid's thinly veiled threat.

"There are four keys—each entrusted to the three great houses, and the royal family, just as I told you."

Aegon then revealed two more identical bracelets.

"I acquired the key of House Valerion, and the one belonging to my vassals in House Sunlight. That makes all four pieces complete."

Gavid couldn't hide his hunger as he stared at the remaining keys.

With these bracelets... they could finally release him.

Smiling, Aegon affirmed it once more.

Chapter 343: The Devil's Bargain (2)

"Seventeen years ago, the War of Light ended with Abraham Starlight's victory over his opponent—the immortal human demon, Dragoth."

"But contrary to what everyone believed, Dragoth... the only man who ever stood on equal ground with Abraham... didn't die. He is still alive."

Dragoth, the former wielder of the Moonlight Sword, and the once-king of the Ultras.

"No one in the Empire—not even my father, Maekar—could kill him once the truth was discovered. So they locked him away in a secret prison, sealed with four keys."

Now, those keys had been brought together.. for the first time.

"All that's left... is for you to play your part."

What Aegon had just revealed were secrets known only to a select few. Even the lords who had been entrusted with safeguarding the keys had no idea that the monster they were guarding... was Dragoth himself.

Dragoth was unique .. unlike the current leader of the Ultras, the Rank 19 demon Astaroth, Dragoth was human...

A human from the Ultras—born in filth like the rest of them—climbed his way through mountains of corpses and death until he reached the peak. He became the only contractor in history to break free from his demonic pact and completely liberate himself from the demons' control.

He was a symbol within the Ultras continent. No one ever truly accepted the notion that he had died at the hands of Abraham Starlight.

That's why the old ones—like Gavid Lindman—could never let go of the possibility that he might still be alive.

"You really are a strange one, Rogue Prince."

Mergo cut in, his eyes fixed on Aegon and the keys in his hand.

"I know we're making a deal here, and you've held up your end of it... but I don't get it. Aren't you taking a huge risk?"

"Oh? And how exactly am I risking anything?"

Aegon didn't flinch. He met Mergo's approach without a hint of hesitation.

"For example, don't you think I could simply take those keys from you and call off this entire thing?"

Faced with two Lords of the Ultras and their followers—what could one prince do?

How would he respond to such a threat?

Aegon didn't show the slightest concern. He leaned on one hand, still smiling calmly at them.

"Go ahead and try. You'll find out soon enough."

That reply made Mergo burst into laughter, unable to hold it back. Gavid Lindman, meanwhile, simply observed from the shadows as Aegon—speaking from atop a pile of corpses—continued to look down on them with composed arrogance.

"Fascinating... truly fascinating, Rogue Prince."

Mergo, for the first time in years, felt something he hadn't felt in ages—ignorance.

What did this strange prince possess that allowed him to remain so confident in front of two Lords who could kill him in a single blow?

What kind of plan... what kind of leverage gave him the right to act this high and mighty?

That was when Mergo noticed it.

In that dark place, beneath the moonlit sky, the moon cast its light directly upon Aegon's figure sitting atop the corpses.

His thin, lean frame cast a giant shadow—so massive it encompassed both Mergo and Gavid beneath it.

What he said might've sounded like empty bravado... yet no one dared to test it.

"We'll hold up our end of the deal."

This time it was Gavid who spoke, his tone cold and steady.

"Glad to hear it."

Aegon nodded with satisfaction, tossing the keys toward Gavid, who caught them effortlessly.

"Gavid Lindman. Your blade will be the one to sever this thread of fate and open a new path. There's no turning back now."

"..."

Gavid said nothing. He simply turned and began walking away, the others following him—including Leonides. Only Mergo remained a while longer near Aegon.

"So? How does it feel, Prince, now that everything has gone exactly according to plan?"

Aegon shrugged, unconcerned.

"I don't feel anything in particular."

As if this outcome had been inevitable from the start.

Failure had never been a consideration.

From the very beginning, Aegon had known everything would fall into place.

Mergo found himself growing more and more curious about the prince.

This level of confidence... just what is he hiding beneath his sleeve?

For now, the Lord of the Hollow Swarm decided to stay close, if only to uncover the secret behind the mask worn by Aegon Valerion.

"But I do wonder... will you really be able to fulfill your end of the deal?"

This was a perfectly balanced exchange. Aegon gave them the key to unleash a monster on the level of Dragoth.

In return, what he wanted was something of equal weight—and Mergo wasn't worried about that.

"No need to worry. Lindman and I will handle it."

As he spoke, Mergo pulled out his flask and attempted to take a swig—only to find it empty.

"...Ran out. Did I say we would handle it? I meant Lindman will handle it."

As always, Mergo wasted no time shifting the responsibility the moment he got the chance.

"Are you sure? He'll die if he goes alone."

"Hmmm... you're probably right. But who knows? Lindman's actually serious this time."

"Then I look forward to your performance."

Aegon leapt down from the corpse mound, ready to leave now that his work was done.

His last words felt like a farewell—but Mergo stopped him one last time.

"You're awfully greedy, Rogue Prince. Your ambition reaches the heavens. Wasn't the Empire enough for you?"

Mergo never expected an answer to that final question. He had asked it purely out of mischief...

But the prince turned toward him, his smile fading as if he'd just heard one of the dumbest questions imaginable.

"What's so special about ambition that makes me crave something as trivial as Earth? That's not ambition. It's simply... inevitable. That's all there is to it."

Leaving Mergo stunned by the unexpected response, Aegon finally departed, setting off in search of the remaining elite students.

"This land is more cursed than I thought..."

Mergo muttered before vanishing into the shadows himself.

That day, in the desolate lands of the Nightmare—

One of the most diabolical deals in the Empire's history was struck.

A pact whose shadow would stretch deep into the future...

...

...

...

Since the random teleportation, days passed—one after the other—each bringing new shifts and unknowns.

The elite students scattered in every direction, some searching for their comrades, others choosing to move alone, desperate to survive in their own way.

Among them, on a rainy night, Frey finally reached one of the cities nestled within the forsaken plains.

He already knew how the Ultras lived—divided into two castes.

The Highbloods, the elite of the second generation who had successfully integrated demon blood, made up less than 10%. They lived in great cities, more advanced and prosperous than even the Empire itself.

The rest... the Lowbloods—those who failed to assimilate the demon blood—were left to rot, either as mutated creatures or as outcast humans stripped of dignity and basic rights.

Now, standing before the gates of one such forsaken city, Frey had spent the last few days searching for his lost classmates.

And now, frozen at the entrance, unable to tear his gaze from the sight before him, he simply lowered his head beneath the hood of his cloak... and entered.

"You've done well to survive this long..."

Calmly, he walked deeper into the heart of the city—built of stone and brick, nothing more.

Frey leapt from rooftop to rooftop, his movements catching the attention of the townspeople below as he soared silently overhead.

Eventually, he reached the city's center.

Standing atop a slightly taller building, he looked down with chilling indifference. Then, when he'd seen enough—he summoned his swords.

Frey felt nothing as he stared, yet for some reason... the image burned itself into his memory.

Severed heads... mounted on pikes above the gate like grotesque works of art.

Their bodies had likely been devoured from the neck down.

The heads alone were displayed at the entrance—a proud trophy for this savage city.

"Jan Dover and Kyle Walker."

That was their names.

Foolish lackeys of Feyreth, ones Frey hadn't even realized were still alive.

Now, he knew for certain..they weren't.

He scoffed as his skin began to crack, violet aura surging violently from within.

"Eaten alive..."

They were nothing but disposable pawns for a third-rate villain once—but in the end, they were still just kids. Unlucky children caught in the chaos of a protagonist's destructive path.

"I can't change anything... but at the very least, I can send the bastards who did this to hell."

Without an ounce of mercy...

The violet aura detonated, consuming the city in a single sweep—erasing it from existence.

The colossal beam of aura tore into the sky, ripping everything below into oblivion... including the heads of the dead Jan and Kyle.

"Ignition."

That was the last word the city's inhabitants ever heard ..

Before the world was swallowed by darkness.

Remaining Elite Students: 18

Chapter 344: The Cost of a Few (1)

– Frey Starlight's POV –

I was still wandering through the endless deserts of the Ultras continent, trudging forward as a violent sandstorm howled around me, tearing apart everything in its path.

But even so, I didn't stop. I wrapped a piece of my clothing around my face, leaving only my eyes exposed, and pressed on through the blinding sand.

It had been four days since I parted ways with the other students after our battle against the witch Beatrice.

I'd spent those days running like a madman, searching for them, but I found nothing. No trace.

There weren't many people in this world whose deaths would truly affect me. The ones close to me were so few, I could count them on one hand.

Yet ironically, most of them were now among the other elite students...

I wasn't the kind of person to break down if people around me died randomly. I'd already grown numb after losing those I held dear again and again.

But I couldn't accept the idea of losing the few who remained.

Step by step, I pushed through the storm, refusing to stop.

Whenever I had the chance, I opened the system interface to check on them...

Affection Points:

Snow Lionheart: 50

Sansa Valerion: 75

Danzo Smasher: 50

Ghost Umbra: 50

These were the only four whose affection points had surpassed 50, which meant I could still locate them using the Third-Person Perspective skill.

That's how I confirmed they were all still alive.

But knowing their location was another matter entirely. All the terrain here on this damned continent looked the same.

I kept staring at their names on the screen, even as the sand whipped into my face.

Sometimes, I hesitated to use the skill, afraid of what I might find. Afraid they'd be dead. Torn apart by the Ultras. I couldn't shake those thoughts from my mind.

But deep within that anxious heart of mine... I knew I was a hypocrite.

Because I was still clinging to the Nameless Mask. I still remembered the Unnamed King, the man who once fought Agaroth himself.

And somewhere inside my exhausted heart, I feared him more than I feared losing my friends.

If the people I cared about died one by one... what would I have left?

I know myself better than anyone. If that happened, I'd become nothing more than a cold, unfeeling killing machine... incapable of caring about anyone ever again.

And that... is the very definition of one man.

A king without a trace of emotion — Nameless.

The more I became like him, the more something inside me began to die. I feared I was losing myself piece by piece.

Maybe that's exactly what the blue-eyed one wanted ... the one who knew my future and was paving the road toward it by any means necessary.

Against a power that immense, all I could do was fight back against the current of fate that kept dragging me into new suffering, hoping what I had would be enough.

I could never escape my own pessimism — this cursed mindset that always turned my worst thoughts into reality. It gave me insomnia. These eyes of mine had seen enough horror to last a lifetime...

Then, in a fleeting moment, my eyes fell upon another name — one I had left off to the side.

Affection Points:

Ada Starlight: 99

My sister Ada, the last remaining member of my family. The only one who held this much affection toward me...

I wondered how she was doing on the other side.

How was she dealing with everything? Would she try to save me?

"Of course she would."

With a faint smile, I kept moving forward, unaware of the storm that was unfolding across the world...

...

The disappearance of the temple students — of the strongest generation — was no small matter.

A war between the Empire and the Ultras was already inevitable. What happened only accelerated the process.

—

— Shezclar Bay —

Part of the Demon Sea that divided the two continents... located on the eastern shore of the Ultras continent.

This bay was known for its perpetual fog — so thick it completely blocked visibility year-round.

Normally, it remained quiet, teeming with nightmare creatures swimming freely below.

But now, that calm had been shattered.

Even the dense fog could no longer hide what was coming.

For the first time in history, Shezclar Bay had become a battlefield .. one where armies prepared to tear each other apart.

The mighty fleet of the Empire, its colossal ships casting vast shadows across the sea, had forcefully broken through the Ultras' naval defenses, clashing against them in the open waters.

For countless hours, the thunder of long-range magical cannons and mortar shells echoed without pause.

The nightmare creatures that roamed the seas fled in terror, unable to comprehend the madness of humans so eager to slaughter one another.

"Fire, you useless bastards! I know you're not out of shells—I gave them to you myself, damn it!"

Iris Sunlight roared from the main mast of the Sunlight family's flagship, his flaming beard dancing with the wind. The family had taken command of this sudden assault.

"Fire!"

With every order, artillery shells ripped through the sky like rain, bombarding the enemy from above.

At the same time, Iris's fists ignited with flames as he launched explosive fireballs with his own body .. turning himself into a walking artillery cannon, obliterating enemy ships single-handedly.

But they weren't the only ones attacking.

The Ultras retaliated just as fiercely, dealing heavy damage in return.

"Damn it..."

Iris clenched his teeth, his gaze fixed on the chaotic battlefield.

Hundreds of Imperial ships clashed against hundreds of Ultras, who refused to let them advance an inch.

Iris had rushed to the frontlines the moment he heard about what had happened to his sons—and his nephew.

Yet, to his surprise, it was as if the enemy fleet had been waiting for him.

"Iris! The situation's bad!"

He turned to the voice beside him—a younger man clad in a crimson combat suit, with blazing red hair and an eyepatch over one eye.

It was Gal Varion Sunlight, second-in-command of the Sunlight family and father of Phoenix Sunlight.

"Gal... what happened?"

With a grim expression, Gal pointed westward.

"Something's tearing through our ships on that side."

Iris narrowed his eyes, trying to peer through the thick mist. Then he saw it—destruction sweeping across that flank.

"What the hell is going on?"

Raaaaaaaagghhhhhh!!

Before he could grasp the situation, a monstrous, gut-wrenching scream pierced his eardrums like a dagger.

In perfect sync with that cursed cry, one of the ships was shredded into pieces.

Then he saw it.

A knight clad in dark armor, carrying a colossal sword on his back.

He leaped into the sea, running wildly across its surface on three limbs—his body defying logic as the ocean became his hunting ground.

With a single swing, he demolished another ship and slaughtered everyone aboard.

That knight was no ordinary being.

He was one of the Hollow.

He was Pontiff Sulyvahn.

Tearing through everything in sight, the Pontiff was ready to keep rampaging—until a massive beam of fire struck him from the sky, blasting him hundreds of meters back.

He landed unharmed, glaring furiously at Iris, who now hovered above the battlefield in midair.

"So, you're the one they were talking about? The Hollow, or whatever you are."

Iris's body flared with blazing heat, boiling the sea beneath him.

"Then burn in hell!"

Channeling a torrent of flame, Iris launched a meteor-sized fireball straight at the Pontiff, aiming to erase him from existence.

But Sulyvahn roared and leapt into the air, his sword cloaked in dark aura.

With one swing, he split the fireball in two and continued charging forward.

At that moment, Gal Varion appeared beside him and delivered a missile-like punch to the Pontiff's side.

The impact sent him flying once again.

Gal, still airborne, stared in shock as Sulyvahn stood up .. completely unharmed.

"Be careful, Gal. This bastard is SS+ class."

"I figured that much already, brother."

Ignoring the constant barrage of shells overhead, the Sunlight brothers focused their attention on the monstrous Pontiff, who snarled and lunged at them.

Chapter 345: The Cost of a Few (2)

Days had passed since the war began.

Countless lives had already been lost.

And amidst the ceaseless battle, no one noticed the blood slowly rising from the corpses left to rot—now nothing more than empty, dried-out husks.

That blood rose into the air, forming a colossal celestial mass that hovered over the battlefield.

It had grown so massive that even the warriors below began to notice.

The blood-soaked orb spun slowly for a long time...

...until it exploded—at her signal.

Blood rained from the skies like a crimson storm.

But those drops were not water—they were concentrated blood that exploded the moment they touched their targets.

The fog gradually turned crimson, colored by the sheer number of deaths caused by the blood rain detonating across the battlefield, slaughtering hundreds at once.

The most terrifying part was how the blood of the dead would gather again, forming yet another blood sphere, repeating the cycle over and over in a brutal process orchestrated by a single person.

"Ah... how boring."

Sitting at the bow of one of the enemy ships, unfazed by the cries and wails around her, the Blood Queen Evelyn complained about the situation.

The woman who once emerged naked from a man's stomach now wore full black armor. Her black hair and clean face exposed the spider tattoo on her neck.

As she sighed, a bolt of lightning shaped like a massive arrow struck and destroyed the ship to her left, yet she didn't react.

Her crimson eyes scanned the battlefield until they locked onto a man with neatly-combed blond hair holding a massive bow—the one responsible for the earlier strike: Ivar Valerion.

"An SS rank combatant..."

Her gaze shifted again, locking onto a woman in ragged clothes wearing a golden helmet and sporting red hair.

"Another SS rank fighter..."

Aside from them, there were only the Sunlight geezers.

"None of them are appealing."

With a wave of her hand, another blood sphere formed from the lives still pouring out around her.

Among the Empire's ships was one belonging to the Moonlight family, carrying their current Lord—Frost Moonlight.

At first, he seemed intriguing to her, but she quickly lost interest.

"He'll die after just one or two rounds of play."

Frost, who had only recently reached S rank, wasn't attractive enough, and orders had been given to keep him alive—someone else wanted him.

"This is boring."

With a frown, Evelyn questioned why she had come at all.

"Would've been better to stay with my toys."

"I see the Blood Queen has already grown bored of this battle."

Evelyn turned to see a large, heavily bandaged man appear behind her out of nowhere.

"And who are you?"

She looked him up and down, half-smiling.

'He'll last a while... but he's ugly.'

As if reading her thoughts, the hulking man introduced himself with haste.

"My name is Gvardiol, the empyrean assigned to Lord Godfrey."

"Empyrean? You?"

Evelyn was surprised. The odd man before her was clearly SS rank, putting him on equal footing with her and the other lords.

Gvardiol nodded.

"That's right."

It made little sense for someone of his strength to be just an empyrean, but Evelyn quickly lost interest once she realized they were on the same side.

"So what brought you here, Empyrean Gvardiol? I believe I made myself very clear when I told those damned lords to stay at least three ships away from me."

She complained loudly as Gvardiol apologized with a humorous grin on his grotesque face.

"My apologies, my apologies... that archer blew up my ship a while ago, so I ended up here by accident."

"Then leave."

She casually waved her hand at Gvardiol like he was an annoying bug.

But he remained where he stood, staring out at the chaotic battlefield rocked by explosions and screaming corpses swallowed by the sea.

The Empire's army kept advancing thanks to their overwhelming numbers. The Ultras were barely half their size, and their only hope was to rely on their elite fighters. Alongside the Pontiff and Evelyn stood Madam A, the Hollow Smough, and Gvardiol himself.

"Strange, isn't it? How life constantly reminds us that human lives are never equal."

Gvardiol gestured toward the ever-growing number of corpses.

"We've slaughtered them, butchered their kin, razed their lands... and they barely reacted."

"But now—now they launch a war of their own just because we kidnapped a few children who don't even make up 0.1% of their population."

He laughed, continuing:

"An emperor's son. A lord's heir. A church's chosen. Names that carried so much weight for their leaders that they overshadowed the tens of thousands of other lives lost without a second thought."

"I wonder how the common people of that Empire feel, being forced into a war by orders from people who've never even glanced their way. Hehehehe—"

"Hey."

Gvardiol's ramble was cut off by Evelyn, whose suffocating crimson aura flared in his face.

"Didn't I tell you to leave already?"

Faced with her crushing pressure, Gvardiol showed no signs of distress. On the contrary—he seemed to welcome it, laughing loudly.

"My apologies, my apologies! I'll vacate your personal space, milady."

Despite the polite words, Gvardiol answered her pressure with his own, unleashing a wave of dark aura.

But he wasn't foolish enough to provoke an internal fight.

Not yet.

With his filthy smile lingering, Gvardiol left Evelyn's ship, leaving her alone once more.

"This is exactly why I hate those highborn bastards."

Evelyn sighed, continuing to conjure more blood spheres.

"I'd better find someone to play with... or they won't like what I'll do next."

She attacked from afar, while the Pontiff held the front line.

Though the Empire was steadily advancing thanks to sheer numbers...

Their losses weren't insignificant. Worse, their pace was far too slow for a mission that demanded urgency—especially when trying to rescue a group of youths they didn't even know were still alive.

The words Gvardiol had spat out earlier hadn't been wrong...

How many husbands had left their wives behind?

How many fathers had hugged their children for the last time before marching into war?

How many dreamers had their hopes stolen, dying in vain—blown apart by a stray cannon shell, or butchered by an enemy whose face they never even saw?

This was the war the Empire's leaders had forced upon their people out of nowhere.

It confirmed what Gvardiol said...

Human lives were never equal.

"What's taking you so long?"

Without warning, the entire atmosphere shifted. A violent thunderstorm howled into existence, descending from the heavens above.

"Your enemies stand before you... so why aren't they dead yet?"

With every word, serpents of lightning exploded across the sky, as all eyes turned to the terrifying aura descending upon them.

A single man stood there—clad in majestic golden armor from head to toe, wielding a fearsome spear in one hand, and another forged of pure lightning in the other.

The Emperor—Maekar Valerion—had finally entered the battlefield.

His golden eyes stared down upon the Ultras below.

With a simple gesture, bolts of thunder rained down like furious serpents, crashing upon the Ultras' fleet and obliterating them in brutal fashion.

The lightning strikes continued, one after another, as Maekar incinerated his enemies without mercy .. single-handedly turning the tide of battle.

"Let's end this farce... once and for all."

With those words, Maekar descended upon the Hollows and the remaining lords, while the Empire unleashed its full might in a final, merciless push.

Chapter 346: Maekar Valerion vs Astaroth (1)

Without warning, Maekar Valerion appeared... the final boss of the Empire, descending upon the battlefield.

Wearing the mighty Fume Knight Armor and wielding the Sunfire Spear in his right hand, Maekar shook the heavens as a terrifying storm of lightning slithered through the clouds like giant serpents.

The Emperor showed no mercy. With a simple motion of his hand, lightning bolts crashed down, illuminating the sky and violently tearing through the Ultras fleet.

The lightning incinerated ships and humans alike, setting them ablaze and ripping them apart one after another.

The thunder was so deafening it drowned out every other sound—the screams, the tearing of flesh and bone—all vanished beneath the roar of nature's fury.

Thousands perished in that single assault... but among them, a few survived.

The Lords and the Hollows withstood the onslaught, their eyes locked on Maekar, who floated calmly above their heads.

"So this is the current Emperor."

Removing his reading glasses, the orphanage director Smough stepped forward, unfazed by the lightning that had annihilated everything around him.

"Let's see what the strongest man in the Empire has to offer."

As he spoke, Smough lowered his stance and stomped with such force that veins bulged beneath his darkened skin.

Gathering all his power, the Hollow launched himself into the air, soaring toward the figure in the sky.

Maekar reacted instantly. With a flick of his hand, a column of lightning shot downward, swallowing Smough entirely.

"Return to where you belong."

His voice rang out with the same ferocity as the storm, but to his surprise, Smough emerged from the lightning column, still charging upward.

His clothes had been burned away, revealing his disfigured, coal-black skin. His body was massive and grotesque... yet he'd absorbed the strike without injury.

"...Disgusting."

Maekar muttered, visibly disgusted by the sight before him.

"Sorry, but piercing this body won't be so easy," Smough boasted, coating his fists with a terrifying amount of dark aura as he targeted Maekar.

But the Emperor showed no concern. Adjusting his stance and gripping the Sunfire Spear tightly, his golden eyes blazed as the weapon ignited in flame—so hot it warped the air around them.

"I've faced many like you before... fools who blindly rely on their so-called toughness."

With each word, the fire around his spear intensified, growing into a devastating inferno.

"Your arrogance led you straight into my domain. Foolish Hollow."

Then, like a human warhead, Maekar hurled the spear—now a blazing projectile—straight at Smough with terrifying accuracy.

Smough felt the overwhelming power it carried but was confident he could endure it.

Taking a defensive stance, he prepared to absorb the impact mid-air.

'I'll block it... then strike back the moment he's disarmed.'

His dark aura twisted into a metallic cocoon, shielding his entire body like iron.

He was certain of his defense.

But his expression collapsed the moment the Sunfire Spear tore through his arms, then his chest, and burst out of his back, leaving behind a charred, gaping wound.

He spat blood, staring at the massive hole in his chest... then at the flaming spear that returned to the Emperor's hand.

"You thought you could block that? Idiot."

With his right hand, Maekar reclaimed the spear. With his left, he raised his palm, black lightning coiling in his grip.

"Who exactly do you think I am?"

The black lightning surged into a colossal beam, obliterating Smough and launching him far into the depths of the sea.

"...This is bad. He's stronger than I expected."

"Hehe, so this is what reaching the peak of SS+ looks like."

Madam A, Gvardiol, and Evelyn gathered as soon as they saw the Emperor's destructive display.

"Hey, did that Hollow bastard die?" Gvardiol asked.

But before anyone could answer, Smough resurfaced, clutching his chest, blood pouring from his mouth and nose.

"His weapon... it's not ordinary..."

Resisting the flames still burning within his body, Smough joined the others.

At that moment, Maekar descended like a meteor, his golden eyes glowing through the fog.

The sheer pressure of his presence silenced them. None of the four dared move.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you attacking?"

Step by step, Maekar advanced across the sea's surface as if it were his own ground.

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere... so come at me, all of you."

In a flash, Maekar erased the distance between them, appearing in their midst.

All four SS ranked fighters lunged at him at once—but the Emperor was too fast, cloaked in black lightning as he effortlessly dodged every strike.

Simultaneously, he spun his flaming spear with expert precision, sending them all flying one by one.

Madam A tried to surround him with her speed—but she was stunned when Maekar surpassed her in an instant. With a rocket-like thrust of his spear, he impaled her with ease and hoisted her high into the air...

"Say goodbye."

With a single motion, Maekar unleashed a blazing wave from the Sunfire Spear, incinerating Madam A as she screamed, her body consumed by fire at a terrifying speed.

At that moment, both Smough and Gvardiol lunged at him from opposite sides, hurling devastating punches.

Maekar blocked the first with his free hand, while the second slammed into the shoulder bearing his spear.

The Fume Knight armor absorbed the impact instantly, before Maekar repelled both attackers with a devastating surge of black lightning.

"This emperor is fucking insane."

Evelyn chuckled as she backed away from the battlefield.

"I don't get paid enough to deal with this shit! See ya, and good luck, everyone!"

Maekar tossed Madam A's charred corpse aside as she struggled faintly, then turned his palm toward Evelyn, gathering black lightning once again to finish her off.

But he froze when a tendril of divine lightning struck his head from above—so powerful it evaporated the surrounding seawater, creating a vast crater.

Unfazed, Maekar slowly raised his head, his armor enduring the deadly sparks trying to tear him apart.

In that instant, the Emperor spotted the source of the strike.

"Fall back. You're no match for him."

The voice was venomous and rough, the aura vile.

Black wings. Long horns. Ash-gray skin. Snow-white hair.

"So, you finally decided to show up."

The battlefield plunged into chaos as the 19th-ranked Demon —Astaroth—appeared.

It was their first face-to-face meeting since the raid on the Ultras.

Maekar calmly ascended to meet him in the sky.

"King of humans, you're toying with a power you cannot endure."

Astaroth unleashed his full pressure, trying to bring Maekar down. But the Emperor met his gaze with the same chilling calm—and detonated his own overwhelming aura.

"You misunderstand something... demon."

The Sunfire Spear ignited once more, while Maekar's body was wrapped in black lightning.

"You're the weakest one here. So give it your all—try to endure."

And with that final word, Maekar suddenly appeared beside Astaroth .. his speed so immense it felt like teleportation—swinging his spear in a blazing arc.

"Because if you don't... this will end far quicker than you think."

BOOM!!

A thunderous explosion erupted as Astaroth caught the Sunfire Spear with both hands, summoning lightning to block the searing flames.

Both unleashed their full auras, clashing with such force that the sky quaked—the embodiment of raw, divine power.

"Lowly human!"

Astaroth roared, trying to retaliate, but the spear's heat surged beyond control, overwhelming him.

He retreated swiftly, but Maekar chased after him relentlessly, raining down blows.

"People think the first Emperor, Kazes Valerion, was just a swordsman..."

BOOM!!!

The battlefield exploded once more in waves of infernal flame.

"...but they forget—he fought from every position. Vermithor in his right hand, and Sunfire in his left!"

Wielding a weapon that blazed with the heat of the sun itself, the SS grade Sunfire Spear was a terror incarnate.

Maekar and Astaroth moved so fast they left afterimages in the air, exchanging thousands of strikes in mere seconds.

Maekar with his spear .. Astaroth with his bare hands.

Their impact churned the sea into a raging storm, shockwaves ripping through water and sky alike.

The Empire's soldiers watched in awe as their Emperor stood against a Demon high rank—and their courage surged.

They rose again with blazing resolve ..just in time to notice the green auras enveloping their bodies.

That's when they saw it.

A massive fleet of white ships emerging from the rear—bearing the insignia of the Church.

At the front were Ramiel Callestis, Michael Platini, and seven Holy Maiden Candidates.

The Church's forces spread across the battlefield, healing the wounded and restoring morale.

"What are you waiting for?! Follow the Emperor!!"

shouted Iris Sunlight, still locked in battle with Pontiff Sulyvahn, shoulder-to-shoulder with his brother.

"The enemy isn't dead yet! Keep fighting—until we wipe them out completely!!"

"YES!!"

"LET'S GO!!"

"KILL THEM ALL!!"

Riding the momentum the Emperor had forged, the Imperial side surged forward with everything they had.

The remaining Hollows and Lords were immediately attacked by Ivar Valerion and Melina Maiden, both of whom had remained in the heart of the battle.

The Church's support rained down again—flaming artillery tearing through the skies.

The Ultras had already lost their fleet to the Emperor's lightning—they had no defense left.

All of it happened... because of one man.

Chapter 347: Maekar Valerion vs Astaroth (2)

A man who fought Astaroth, the high Demon , one-on-one—and shattered the heavens in their wake.

Both were terrifyingly fast, wielding lightning as their weapon of choice.

Astaroth punched with monstrous power. Maekar countered with divine precision.

"Lightning Unleashed."

Furious, Astaroth released his full power, manifesting as a storm of gray lightning that swelled and surged around him.

"I told you before... you pathetic human."

Raising both hands toward Maekar, the lightning morphed into a colossal storm—large enough to engulf an entire mountain.

"You're nothing but an insect! More resilient than the rest, sure—but still just an insect!"

With a thunderous roar, Astaroth unleashed a blast of lightning that split the sky in two, swallowing Maekar whole.

The attack left everyone below stunned.

"If that had been aimed at us... we'd all be dead."

Even while locked in combat with the deranged Pontiff Sulyvahn, Iris and his brother Gal—both peak SS rankers—managed to endure.

The difference in power between fighters like Maekar and Astaroth and someone like the Pontiff was overwhelming. Even if the Pontiff had already reached SS+, the gap between him and those who stood at the absolute pinnacle was terrifying.

Astaroth laughed wildly, admiring the destruction his attack had wrought.

But that grin vanished when Maekar emerged—still in one piece—his face covered by both hands.

The Emperor's armor flared with a radiant aura of two colors: golden light, which shielded him from the infernal strike, and green energy that continuously healed his wounds.

"He blocked it?"

Astaroth stared in disbelief, unable to comprehend how Maekar had survived his ultimate attack unscathed.

Iris, watching from below, understood the reason.

"The Fume Knight's Armor... the greatest defense ever worn by the first Emperor, Kazes Valerion..."

It was no ordinary gear. The Fume Knight's Armor siphoned aura directly from the wearer to form a nearly impenetrable barrier .. and it housed a vast reserve of divine power that continuously regenerated its user.

A perfect suit for war.

When worn by Maekar Valerion, an SS+ powerhouse, alongside the Sunfire Spear, the Emperor became an unstoppable force.

"Where did all that confidence go, demon?"

Electricity swirled around Maekar, taking the shape of a new spear.

"A spear mightier than the tallest peaks!"

With a roar, he hurled the enormous weapon like a missile, striking Astaroth with such force that the demon was blasted away.

Maekar pursued him instantly, teleporting with a burst of lightning. Wielding the Sunfire Spear, he pierced Astaroth thousands of times in rapid succession, trying to tear through his thick hide.

The demon screamed in rage and retaliated by unleashing his own full power.

"I'll kill you here and now!"

BOOM!

The two clashed violently, their auras entangled in a brilliant storm of gold and black, exchanging thunderous blows mid-air.

Lightning against lightning.

Only one of them would walk away as the true master of thunder.

After countless devastating clashes, wounds began to accumulate across Astaroth's massive frame, while Maekar's armor remained barely scratched.

"Damn that cursed armor!"

Astaroth snarled—but Maekar silenced him with a thunder-infused punch straight to the face.

"Your kind has always looked down on humanity... and you still do!"

BOOM!

Grabbing Astaroth by the face, Maekar drove him deep into the raging sea, slamming them both into the ocean floor. He roared as he surged lightning through every molecule in his body, preparing for a final, obliterating blow.

"Lightning Formation: Plasma Detonation!"

Maekar's full power erupted, vaporizing the ocean water around them and forming a vast crater at the bottom of the sea.

Dragging Astaroth deeper and deeper, the Emperor buried the demon beneath sheer force.

"RAAAAAAAGH!"

Astaroth, now bloodied and broken, screamed with madness as he unleashed the last of his energy. A colossal wave of lightning exploded from him, blasting Maekar upward until he crashed into a collapsing ocean current.

Maekar soared back into the sky, gasping for air.

Below him, Astaroth began charging a new, far deadlier attack.

This one could erase Maekar—and everything behind him.

"He still has this much power left?"

Maekar gritted his teeth. He had struck Astaroth thousands of times .. but the demon's vitality was absurd, relentless.

Meanwhile, Maekar's own strength had begun to drain. Were it not for the healing power of the Fume Knight's Armor, he wouldn't have lasted this long.

Astaroth let out a bone-rattling scream that threatened to rupture eardrums, compressing particles of lightning into one final, annihilating strike.

"Die!"

The gray lightning was so bright it erased everything from sight.

Inside the blinding light, Maekar raised the Sunfire Spear once again, clenching his teeth and drawing every last drop of aura from within...

The Emperor channeled his lightning aura with full force, merging it with the scorching Sunfire blaze—flames as hot as the sun itself. He wagered everything on this final strike.

Infusing all his remaining strength into the spear, now empowered by both fire and black lightning, Maekar's rocket launcher mechanism activated one last time. With a thunderous scream, he hurled the spear straight toward Astaroth's raging explosion.

Gray lightning clashed against the fiery spear—an unstoppable force against an immovable object.

The screams of Maekar and Astaroth merged into one, followed by a deafening explosion that shook the entire world. The impact caused a massive quake, silencing the battlefield as the ocean itself recoiled in awe, the waters pushed away by the sheer magnitude of their collision.

Through Astaroth's storm, the Sunfire Spear pierced—its radiance shining like a dying star.

Seconds later, the blinding light began to fade.

The first to emerge was Maekar, gasping for breath beneath the Fume Knight's helmet. Blood poured from his brow, leaking from his eyes, nose, and mouth, as his right arm—used to throw the spear—hung shattered and limp.

Still, his golden eyes were fixed on the figure below.

Astaroth, face darkened and stunned, reached toward his right side—only to find nothing.

Nothing but emptiness.

Blood gushed from his mangled body, pooling around the Sunfire Spear that had obliterated half his torso and severed his right arm.

Astaroth collapsed instantly, screaming as he realized he couldn't regenerate.

"Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! Impossible!!"

He refused to believe it.

Refused to accept that Maekar's spear had pierced through his ultimate attack and erased half his body.

Falling into utter disarray, he crawled backward, still trying to deny what had happened.

And then he stopped.

Standing before him was Maekar—bleeding, battered, but victorious.

"I told you..." Maekar panted heavily. "...You were the weakest link here."

He raised his left hand, and the Sunfire Spear flew back into his grasp. Its flames reflected in Astaroth's wide, trembling eyes.

"This is the end."

"Curse you... filthy human!"

The flames surged around the spear, crackling violently.

At that moment, Astaroth finally understood.

He was going to die.

True fear twisted his face for the first time.

Death.

A mighty demon... about to fall to a single human.

He couldn't accept it—yet it was real.

But just when Maekar thrust the spear forward to finish it ..

It stopped.

An invisible force halted the weapon inches from Astaroth's face.

And from the void... a slender hand appeared, gently grabbing the tip of the Sunfire Spear and pushing it aside with ease.

"Apologies... but I can't allow you to kill him."

Maekar stared in disbelief.

She had come out of nowhere.

A strange woman with pale skin—much like Astaroth's grayish hue—wearing a refined violet dress and a small hat perched atop her purple hair. Her eyes were jet black with glowing violet pupils.

With a single wave of her hand, she released a pulse that sent Maekar flying back several meters. He dug his heels into the ground, managing to stay upright but clearly strained.

Bracing himself, Maekar shouted:

"Who are you?!"

"Ah... forgive my rudeness."

The mysterious woman curtsied with eerie elegance, lifting the hem of her skirt.

"Rank 17 among the High Demons—Beatrice sends her regards!"

Maekar stared at her, stunned.

"Rank... 17?"

The words struck like thunder. He had just finished battling Rank 19—Astaroth—and now, an even higher-ranked demon had appeared out of thin air.

"Shall we begin the real party?"

With a wicked smile, Beatrice drew her staff.

She was ready to play again.

Chapter 348: Maekar Valerion vs Beatrice (1)

Rank 17 — Beatrice

The sudden appearance of yet another demon shook the battlefield, revealing a side of Emperor Maekar Valerion that had never been seen before.

Beatrice had arrived in her true body this time, unleashing her overwhelming aura without restraint—an aura that far exceeded that of Astaroth, who lay defeated behind her.

"I will show no mercy to anyone who interferes with the Witch's Game."

Wearing her signature smile and brandishing her maestro's wand, Beatrice prepared for battle.

Maekar, clenching his flaming spear, let out a thunderous roar.

"The Church!!"

His cry thundered across the battlefield like a storm breaking the sky, heard by every soul present.

Among those who heard it were the bishops of the Church, still reeling from the events moments earlier. The Empire had crushed the Ultras, especially after Maekar's victory over Astaroth. But they hadn't accounted for the emergence of another upper-ranked demon appearing from thin air.

"Pour your damn holy power into me!"

Cornered and forced into another fight against a high-ranking demon, Maekar grit his teeth as Sunfire Spear surged with renewed lightning.

At that moment, a torrent of holy energy descended like a waterfall onto his body, absorbed instantly into the Fume Knight armor.

His wounds healed at an astonishing speed as seven Saint Candidates pooled their strength to restore him.

"You truly are gallant, Maekar Valerion... Even after surviving a brutal fight against Astaroth, you're still willing to fight?"

"Shut that damn mouth of yours—!"

Using his barely healed right hand, Maekar hurled the blazing Sunfire Spear straight at Beatrice.

Yet the demoness did not flinch. Instead, she twirled her wand playfully.

"Block it for me, Gloom. My one and only bringer of victory."

The moment her chant ended, a deafening explosion roared across the battlefield. Maekar's spear— the same one that brought down Astaroth—was stopped cold by a massive black shield that appeared from nowhere.

The black shield, Gloom, not only absorbed the impact but retaliated with a pulse of aura that sent the spear—and Maekar—flying back hundreds of meters in a single wave.

Before he could recover, Beatrice appeared in front of him.

"There's no use in struggling now, Emperor of Men. They may heal your wounds, but they cannot restore that broken, exhausted body of yours."

As her words rang out, hundreds of celestial orbs manifested behind her, all firing beams of aura in rapid succession. Maekar darted between them, his body cloaked in black lightning.

"Astaroth may have been worthless, but defeating him was no small feat."

Holy power could heal injuries, but it couldn't return Maekar to peak condition—not after the brutal toll Astaroth had taken.

Unleashing a storm of radiant destruction, Beatrice showcased terrifying magical might. Each of her hundred celestial orbs carried enough power to obliterate an elite awakened being.

But she was annoyed by the endless stream of holy power still pouring into Maekar.

With a flick of her wand, she turned toward the fleets still clashing in the distance.

"Kill them for me, my dearest shadow."

A catastrophe struck the Church's fleet as shrieks of the Saint Candidates rang out—skewered by dark spears that emerged from nowhere and slaughtered them instantly.

The bishops stood frozen, unable to sense the attacks until it was too late.

Maekar, now trapped in a storm of relentless attacks, realized he had only the strength of the Fume Knight armor left to rely on.

"What's wrong, Human King?"

Beatrice ascended into the skies, her voice mocking as she laughed coldly.

"No need for that face, even with all their support—nothing would change. You see... you are the weakest one here, hehehe~"

Maekar gritted his teeth, refusing to yield.

"Lightning Formation!"

Black lightning converged around him at terrifying speed.

"Dark Century Spears!"

Dozens of black lightning spears formed and launched, crashing into Beatrice's celestial orbs and detonating them in a chain reaction that sent waves of energy rippling across the battlefield.

"Well done! That was splendid!" Beatrice clapped mockingly as Maekar gasped, struggling to stay upright after unleashing such an attack.

"Now worry about my next move..."

With elegant grace, she twirled her wand as her body surged with violet aura. The entire Bay of Shezkelar trembled.

The earth shook. Eyes turned skyward, stunned by the phenomenon unfolding above.

"Bury them for me!"

Beatrice's laugh echoed like a curse across the skies, as the heavens themselves tore open, unveiling a cataclysm no one should ever witness more than once in a lifetime.

"This..."

Maekar muttered in disbelief, his voice trailing off—only for Beatrice to confirm it with a twisted smile.

"It's a meteor... A big one. Big enough to bury you all right here, kikiki~"

Clad in the Fume Knight armor and gripping his spear tightly, Maekar Valerion cursed aloud.

That wasn't a meteor. It was a miniature planet, one large enough to erase everything in the region.

A catastrophe like this was felt by all those across the Ultras Continent, who sensed the sheer magnitude of the disaster approaching.

"There are too many of you for me to deal with one by one. So... wouldn't this be the most efficient method?"

Before them stood Beatrice, having called down a massive flaming meteor hurtling toward them with terrifying speed.

Maekar took a deep breath, pulling in every ounce of air around him.

"What will you do now, Maekar Valerion?"

The meteor was already above their heads.

"You could dodge it easily. But what about your people? Will you save them—or abandon them?"

Beatrice's voice teased and mocked him.

But the emperor didn't answer. Instead, he unleashed his full aura, burning through the last of his SS+ tier reserves until there was nothing left.

Shrouded in black lightning, Maekar let out a primal roar that shook the heavens before launching himself with the Sunfire Spear straight toward the blazing meteor, now threatening to devour everything.

He passed Beatrice without so much as a glance, witnessed by all warriors still left on the battlefield.

All eyes locked onto the emperor, who poured every shred of his might into that one, final strike.

The meteor grew rapidly in Maekar's golden eyes, and despite the looming death, he smiled.

'I suppose... this is what you always wanted from me, isn't it? Father?'

For some reason, a flood of memories surged through him just before the moment of impact.

Lightning crackled violently, clashing with the searing fires of Sunfire. Both powers collided with the massive meteor, which bore down with overwhelming force.

Maekar felt every bone in his body break. Every fiber tear. Every muscle rupture.

The pain was beyond description—certainly fatal—if not for the Fume Knight armor, which protected and healed him at the same time.

His screams echoed for what felt like an eternity—until something unbelievable happened.

The meteor exploded.

Shattered completely by writhing serpents of black lightning, the destruction sent fiery shards raining down across the battlefield.

It was a breathtaking sight. One that drove the soldiers of the Empire to cheer and roar in elation at the emperor who had saved them from annihilation.

But they hadn't yet realized...

Maekar Valerion was falling.

His body hovered briefly in the air before collapsing. His armor dented and cracked. His strength, gone.

"Impressive... Emperor."

Beatrice appeared beside his broken body.

"But what now?"

Powerless. Unable to move.

Maekar could only stare at the witch—still unscathed.

"I didn't think you were the type to make such foolish decisions. And now look—you're going to die. Just like the rest of them."

She waved her wand slowly. Maekar exhaled, unable to even speak.

He hadn't expected to make such a stupid choice.

He had destroyed the meteor... but lost the battle.

'If it were him... he would've cut the meteor down without effort.'

Maekar laughed bitterly, spitting blood as the image of that monstrous man from House Starlight surfaced in his mind.

The Fourth Emperor. The wielder of the strongest spear in the Empire. Maekar Valerion was on the brink of death as Beatrice, Demon of Rank 17, approached to deal the final blow.

He closed his eyes and waited for the end—

But it didn't come.

Instead, a pillar of divine energy descended from the heavens, blasting Beatrice away and healing Maekar's fatal wounds.

The witch quickly retreated, lifting her gaze to the sky—at the new arrival.

"Trying to copy my entrance? That's not very nice, darling~."

"Shut your filthy mouth, wretched demon."

Bathed in brilliant holy light that breathed life back into the battlefield, Saintess Yurasha descended with majestic grace, her overwhelming SS+ tier aura radiating power and authority.

Maekar, now regaining some composure, barely stood as he whispered:

"The Saintess..."

Chapter 349: Maekar Valerion vs Beatrice (2)

"Stand up, Emperor. Your battle is not over yet."

Yurasha spoke calmly, standing behind him.

The Church and the Imperial family had never been allies—in fact, they had once plotted to annihilate his bloodline.

But now, with upper demons rising one after another, everyone knew where their blades needed to point.

At the same moment, the high bishops appeared beside Yurasha—along with Ivar Valerion and Luc Valerion, Maekar's brothers.

"Sorry we're late..."

It seemed Luc, the mage, had been the one responsible for teleporting Yurasha to the battlefield—barely saving them all in time.

Elsewhere, the Hollow and Gvardiole regrouped with Beatrice.

The only one who did not retreat was Pontiff Sulyvahn, still locked in fierce combat with the Sunlight brothers.

Now standing face-to-face, Yurasha empowered everyone around her, infusing them with her holy energy, boosting them beyond their limits—up to 120% of their power.

"Listen closely, gentlemen..."

"My role as a Saintess... is support."

Yurasha continued speaking as she relentlessly launched waves of sacred power at Beatrice.

"I may not contribute much in direct combat, but I can save every one of you, no matter your condition—even if you're dead. And my power counters that wretched demoness."

Forming a massive field of light, Yurasha encompassed everyone within it, empowering them all.

"So don't hesitate—strike with everything you have!"

No one responded with words. Instead, Maekar stepped forward first, gripping his spear, now burning anew.

"This is more than enough."

With the Saint's support and the others at his side, the tide of battle turned once more.

Despite finding herself surrounded by a multitude of new enemies, Beatrice kept smiling, even though she was now at a numbers disadvantage.

"Hmm, killing all of you is going to be a bit harder now."

Everyone braced themselves for the fight, ignoring the witch's taunts.

Maekar surged forward, wielding the Sunfire Spear, followed by his brothers and the bishop. All of them drew power from Yurasha's divine field as they charged at Beatrice and the remaining Hollows.

"Our situation's completely fucked, guys," Gavardiol laughed, summoning his shadows.

"We'll have to fight to survive."

Smough reinforced his body while Evelyn groaned behind them.

All were ready to give it everything they had in this final clash—until Beatrice suddenly clapped her hands with a cheerful smile and closed her eyes.

"Oh, sorry! But this battle... is already over."

No one understood what she meant.

Opening her violet eyes, Beatrice smirked wickedly, twirling her staff once more.

"You've already lost!!"

With those words, a sudden tremor rocked the ground beneath them. The sea split apart as strange black walls rose, trapping Maekar and everyone around him within a colossal cube that engulfed a massive portion of the Shezclar Bay.

They tried to break through immediately, but the cube unleashed overwhelming waves of destructive aura and an oppressive gravity field that immobilized them all.

The cube had sealed them in—and it began to shrink slowly.

"Resistance is futile. This is a spell crafted by my great teacher, Izalith herself! Eternal Seal!!"

Maekar and his forces vanished within the obsidian cube, swallowed without warning.

The cube continued to compress at an alarming speed, shrinking from a towering barrier that once blanketed most of the bay to a small object Beatrice held in one hand.

"I set this spell up while the Emperor was distracted fighting Astaroth"

"It takes a very long time to prepare due to its complexity, but with all of you so busy fighting and unaware of what was happening around you, trapping you in it turned out to be laughably easy! . Then I waited... hoping to catch a big fish. But I caught a whale instead! Kihihihhi!"

Beatrice cackled maniacally, flicking her staff to part the sea. Then she tossed the cube deep into the ocean and sealed it beneath the waves.

"The downside to this spell is that I can't affect or touch those trapped inside—but they won't be coming out anytime soon anyway, kihihih."

With a wave of her hand, Beatrice summoned the raging Pontiff, who had been trapped with the rest of the Imperial forces, and flung him among the other Hollows.

"Calm this rabid dog down for me, would you, guys?"

Wearing her playful smile, she left Gavardiol and the others to fend off the enraged Pontiff as she slowly hovered above, savoring the chaos she had unleashed.

"There... now no one can interrupt my little game. Kihihih~"

With the Emperor, the Saint, and most of the Imperial forces sealed deep beneath the sea, Beatrice had successfully repelled the Empire's assault .. accomplishing what Astaroth had failed to do, even as he struggled to recover.

She approached him at once, not wanting to miss the chance to mock the defeated demon.

"Heeey? Would you look at this? Isn't this the mighty, arrogant Astaroth himself?"

She burst into laughter while Astaroth grit his teeth, too weak to respond as his body struggled to regenerate.

"What would Lord Wesker say if he saw you like this? I bet he'd call you pathetic, kihihih!"

"You damn witch! Arrgh..."

Astaroth groaned in agony, spitting up black blood as he lost control of his temper.

"You're a fool, Astaroth. No wonder the Great Lord hasn't bothered to appear before a useless wretch like you."

Beatrice shook her head, then touched Astaroth and instantly teleported him back to his fortress.

"Drag your defeat back with you and bury yourself in shame."

She muttered before vanishing, satisfied with what she had accomplished.

"Now then, shall we continue our game?"

And just like that, the rescue force that had once carried a glimmer of hope for Frey and his companions was wiped out.

...

...

...

This world was far too small.

News of the catastrophe reached the Empire almost immediately.

After a thunderous battle in the Bay of Shezclar, the Emperor—along with the church and family fleets—had succeeded in destroying the Ultras forces and defeating the Rank 19 Greater Demon, Astaroth.

But a sudden intervention from another demon, who had remained hidden until now, caused the Empire to lose a massive portion of its military strength...

Missing Figures:

Emperor Maekar Valerion

Saint Yurasha

Two bishops—Lord Iris of House Sunlight and his brother

The entire royal family

The Claymore Bearer—Melina Maiden

The current head of House Moonlight—Frost Moonlight

Thousands of warriors from every noble house

The report was catastrophic.

Although their deaths weren't officially confirmed .. reports indicated that a strange barrier had swallowed them whole .. the loss of the Empire's most powerful figures was treated as an undeniable truth.

Inside the royal hall, Oliver Khan stood beside an elderly servant as they received the news—just as the entire Empire did.

"This is a disaster..."

Having been forced to stay behind, Oliver Khan could now fully grasp the weight of the calamity that had struck them.

As for the citizens of the Empire, widespread panic broke out once the truth could no longer be hidden by their leaders.

"Never in the Empire's four-hundred-year history has there been such disgrace. What a shame... How will we ever face our ancestors now?"

The old servant muttered, shaking his head in bitter regret.

"Sir Gas..."

Oliver spoke the old man's name with respect—how could he not, when Gas was the longest-serving attendant in the palace and a formidable SS rank?

Expressionless, Gas moved forward slowly, signaling for Oliver to follow him.

"What are we going to do now?"

"This Empire cannot stand without a leader."

With his hands clasped behind his back, Gas led Oliver through the sprawling royal palace toward a hidden destination.

"The Fourth Emperor, Maekar Valerion, is now missing."

Following closely, Oliver soon found himself in a place he had never entered before—deep within the heart of the imperial palace.

"The next generation cannot inherit the throne either. Prince Aegon Valerion and Princess Sansa Valerion are also missing."

There were no remaining royal heirs within the palace.

Standing before an enormous golden door, Gas pressed his hands against it and pushed with all his might. As the doors creaked open, he spoke:

"It's time for the old era to return."

Once the massive golden doors opened, Oliver was stunned by what lay within—an enormous library, its floors draped in rich crimson carpets and walls glimmering with noble gold.

Gas stepped inside and knelt. Oliver followed, dropping to his knees under the crushing weight of a terrifying aura that filled the chamber.

"This aura...!"

Oliver gasped as Gas began to speak.

"This humble servant, Gascoigne, offers his sincerest apologies..."

His words were directed at the man seated above them, holding a book in his hands, his golden eyes burning with a light so fierce it threatened to consume them.

"I beg you... return, and save your people once more !"

As those words echoed through the chamber, the old man rose, stepping into the light—finally allowing Oliver to see him clearly.

"The Third Emperor... Sir Alon Valerion!!"

In that moment, fury and disdain twisted Ser Alon's face, shaking the chamber with a violent tremor.

This was Oliver's first encounter with the former emperor—the father of Maekar Valerion, and the grandson of the First Hero, Kazes Valerion.

Sir Alon had returned.

Chapter 350: Sir Alon

Sir Alon Valerion.

The man once known as the Iron Emperor, who had abdicated the throne in favor of his eldest son Maekar, had reemerged after years of seclusion from the world.

With a deep voice, Sir Alon finally spoke, despite having remained silent and alone for countless years.

"My son... Maekar... is he dead?"

Though his words were cold and devoid of emotion, the overwhelming pressure of his aura froze both Oliver and the servant, Gas, in place.

Sir Alon Valerion, the third emperor, had long forgotten how to restrain himself. After spending decades isolated from the world, his reintroduction to human interaction was anything but gentle.

It was Gas who answered the emperor's question.

"We're not certain, my lord. But it's highly likely he's still alive."

It made little sense that such a vast group, including so many powerful names, would perish altogether. The more logical assumption was that something had befallen them, but they yet lived.

Alon narrowed his golden eyes upon hearing that.

"So you're telling me that my foolish son not only lost... but dared to stay alive afterward?!"

Neither Gas nor Oliver could respond. The pressure continued to intensify with each word.

Alon descended toward them, leaning on a wooden cane, wearing only black trousers and an open white shirt. His long white hair draped over his broad shoulders and back.

His golden eyes blazed like lanterns, and his expression was harsh—no amount of facial hair or aged wrinkles could soften it.

"One hundred and eighty-seven years..."

His voice seethed with anger as he advanced, his aura expanding with each step.

"One hundred and eighty-seven damned years I stood atop this empire."

"I spilled blood and reaped souls until skulls formed mountains and rivers ran red. I slew enemies. I slaughtered innocents. I killed my own father. I killed my brothers!"

"I forged laws, raised this empire from a dump into a civilization that lasted over a century!"

With a roar, the library's windows shattered. Books tumbled from shelves as the building groaned beneath his fury.

"I gave this empire everything I had—until my blood dried and my sword cracked. And in the end, I laid it all down, leaving it to others. And now... you dare come before me again? For what?!"

Under the crushing pressure of the man once known as the Iron Emperor, the floor fractured, and both Oliver and Gas collapsed.

Oliver, in particular, was stunned by the sheer destructive force weighing him down.

He had heard stories of the Iron Emperor—but now he understood the truth firsthand.

'This old man... his aura surpasses even Maekar's...!'

While Oliver reeled from the realization, Gas lowered his head, unable to meet Alon's burning gaze.

"I'm sorry... truly sorry, my lord. I apologize for my failure... for daring to drag you back into this hell!"

The old servant spoke with sincerity. Having served during the Iron Emperor's reign, he had witnessed it all.

Sir Alon Valerion had lived through a bloody age where brothers murdered each other for power after the death of Emperor Kazis Valerion.

Kazis had left behind many children, hoping to build a long-lasting royal bloodline to lead humanity. But instead, his legacy turned into a blood-soaked dynasty where brother betrayed brother, and sons slaughtered fathers for the throne.

Alon had learned all this far too young—his own siblings had tried to kill him.

But the Iron Emperor ended the madness.

He possessed the resolve to end the life of his tyrant father and his power-hungry siblings.

He reformed the Valerion bloodline and established the Golden System—unifying the empire under one ruling power.

He subjugated the Three Great Houses, made them loyal to him, and boxed in the Church between his fingers, rendering it impotent.

He built walls and cities. He created a civilization strong enough to stand as humanity's last bastion when they once teetered on extinction.

With iron resolve, he ruled mercilessly. He forged laws and judged with blood and steel.

During the Iron Emperor's reign, the Ultras never dared breach the empire—not even once. They didn't even dream of it.

And for nearly two centuries, thanks to the vitality of the SS+ rank, which kept his body youthful, he ensured the survival of the empire.

He raised his children wisely. There were no feuds among them; they stood united as one.

And when the time came, when the Golden System began to rust, change was due.

Sir Alon passed the torch to his eldest son, casting away his sword.

After a magnificent reign, he secluded himself in his private library, away from the world, flipping through his cherished books, awaiting death. But death never came.

Now, the door he had shut so long ago had been opened once more.

The door to hell—the one he had walked through for decades—was calling him back.

"I gave everything to this empire. I gave it my entire life."

Sir Alon held his face in his hand, laughing bitterly—grieving a fate that had exhausted his weary soul, and a son who failed to seize the path laid out for him.

"I thought I had given everything... but I was wrong."

Step by step, Sir Alon walked forward, passing both Oliver Khan and Ghass.

Oliver, in particular, was struggling. The immense pressure bearing down on him made it difficult just to breathe.

"Hey, boy!"

Once he passed him, the Iron Emperor turned toward Oliver with a scornful glare.

"I don't have time to teach you how to breathe in my presence. So stop wasting my time and get out of my sight!"

Pierced by the harshness in Sir Alon's tone, Oliver Khan responded by unleashing his celestial aura, resisting Alon's pressure as he stood his ground once more—face to face with the Iron Emperor.

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"Good."

With a thud of his staff against the floor, Sir Alon finally stepped out of his library—for the first time in decades—followed closely by both Oliver Khan and Gas.

"There is still something I've yet to give this empire."

The one thing that comes only once...

The final gift he would offer to this land that had chained him down and refused to let him go ..

"Death."

It would be his death, on the battlefield he had long turned his back on, that would bring his bitter struggle to an end.

"My son ushered in an age of weakness and ruin... destroying everything I built."

Sir Alon continued his lament as Gas, the loyal servant, carefully summarized the current state of the empire.

"But now I've returned... and the Golden Order will rise again!"

Taking the throne once more...

A new era of the Golden Order had begun within the empire.