

VILLAIN 35

Chapter 35 Nostalgia

-Frey starlight POV -

...

With both hands tucked into my pockets, I wandered through the temple.

In the past few hours, I had explored various parts of this vast place—from classrooms to training grounds, and even shopping centers.

Yet, despite all that time, I had barely scratched the surface. The sheer size of this place was staggering. It didn't feel like I was walking through an academy—it felt like I was exploring an entire city.

Checking my watch, I realized it was already midday. That's when it hit me—I hadn't eaten a single thing since morning.

"Should I find something to eat?"

If my memory was correct, there was a famous street within the temple, one dedicated solely to food. A place where restaurants lined the road, each offering cuisine from different cultures and races.

After the Gate Catastrophe and the rise of the Empire, the borders that once divided nations had vanished. Though humanity was now united under one rule, the diversity of origins remained evident from one region to another.

The temple had taken this into account when constructing this street, the very one I now stood in.

As I walked, I let my gaze wander over the many restaurants and food stalls that stretched along the road.

Every kind of dish imaginable was here.

Some establishments specialized in French cuisine, while others served Italian dishes that had drawn in a massive crowd of customers.

Seafood, roasted meats, pastries—everything one could want was within reach.

Students strolled about in groups, enjoying themselves after surviving the chaotic opening ceremony brought upon them by Director Bloodmader .

Yet, for some reason, nothing appealed to me.

Even foods I would normally be eager to eat now felt... unappetizing.

"Ah... how I miss your cooking... and how I miss you."

At this moment, I would have traded Balerion himself just for the chance to taste my mother's food again.

How ironic. Who would have thought that the simplest dishes could one day feel so priceless?

I absentmindedly rubbed my left hand where the Great Serpent's tattoo lay, chuckling softly.

"Haha, sorry, my friend. I didn't mean it—don't be mad."

As I toyed with my sword, my footsteps slowed.

Something had caught my eye.

A strange sight... or rather, a familiar one.

Before me stood a massive tent, its shape reminiscent of a circus tent, adorned with old-fashioned, multicolored lanterns.

At the entrance, an aged wooden sign hung above the flap.

"Traditional Cuisine Tent."

I froze, staring at the isolated tent with a blank expression.

"Impossible..."

Before I even realized it, my feet had already started moving.

After all, the Empire was built atop what was once known as the European continent. The odds of finding this here... should have been close to none.

Stepping inside, I was immediately hit by the sharp, pungent scent of spices.

The interior was a stark contrast to the modern restaurants outside. Everything here had a traditional charm. The tables and seating were so low to the ground that anyone unfamiliar with them would find it odd.

But that wasn't what unsettled me the most.

I had never written about a place like this in my story.

I moved deeper inside, finding the space eerily empty.

For a brief moment, I wondered if there was even anyone here.

Then, a raspy voice shattered the silence.

"Oh? What do we have here? Did I finally get a customer?"

A short old man stepped out from behind a simple curtain. His thick white beard framed sharp, weathered features.

Despite his age, his body was packed with muscle—muscle that came not from careful training, but from years of grueling labor.

He eyed me with suspicion.

"What? Did you lose your way and come here looking for directions?"

I smiled and took a seat on one of the low stools.

"No... I came to eat."

"Oh? Really? You sure about that, kid? You didn't just stumble in here by mistake?"

I nodded, my gaze sweeping over the rustic surroundings.

"Tell me, old man, does this place really serve traditional cuisine?"

The old man stroked his beard, then gave a small nod.

"That's right, kid. This place has been in my family for generations."

"Generations?"

"Indeed."

He settled onto a stool across from me, placing a wooden menu on the table with an air of ease.

I couldn't help but chuckle at his casual attitude.

"Is it really okay for you to just sit in front of your customer like that?"

"Don't worry about it, kid—you're my only customer."

I picked up the wooden menu... then froze.

My heart skipped a beat.

"This... this is real."

Zaalouk. Shakshouka. Bissara.

Dishes I had only ever seen in my past life... in the region where I once lived.

I found myself reading the menu over and over again, unable to believe my eyes.

Meanwhile, the old man spoke, his voice calm and steady.

"My roots trace back to one of the regions that have now become the Southern Nightmare Lands."

"To be precise, my grandfather was one of the North African survivors."

"Most of that culture is gone now... but my grandfather made sure to pass down everything he knew to me. And so, here I am, running this tent—serving food that no one truly appreciates anymore. Hey, you listening, kid?"

With a gaze full of longing, I nodded.

"I'm listening."

"Good... Most young folks these days don't bother listening to old men like me."

He paused, then asked,

"So? Have you decided what to order?"

Without hesitation, I pointed at the menu.

"I'll have two of these."

The old man leaned forward, glancing at my choice before letting out a small chuckle.

"Zfiti, huh? A bold choice, kid. But are you sure you can handle two servings?"

"Don't underestimate me, old man. I can handle it just fine."

"Haha, we'll see about that."

He stood, tying an apron around his waist.

"This dish, in particular, is my favorite. It relies heavily on a variety of strong spices—that's what gives it its unique kick."

He was talkative, but I didn't mind.

Every word he spoke slowly pulled me back into memories of my past life.

I remembered those nights when my friends and I would visit one of these tents. Just the thought of it was enough to make my hands tremble.

"Old man... can I ask for your name?"

He was kneading dough when I spoke.

"Hmm? What, you wanna be my friend or something?"

"Something like that."

"Haha, don't get all shy, kid—I'm just messing with you. The name's Shaheen."

A smile tugged at my lips.

"And I'm Frey."

"Frey? You mean like that infamous noble, Frey Starlight?"

It seemed my reputation preceded me, no matter where I went.

"That's right. Looks like we happen to share the same name."

For now, I would keep my identity hidden as long as I could.

Shaheen didn't seem suspicious at all as he frowned.

"Hmph. Unlucky name. But oh well, kid—your food's ready."

He placed two wooden bowls in front of me.

"And don't forget this. The dish isn't complete without it."

He poured a large glass of milk and sat back down.

The scent hit me like a tidal wave.

That sharp, spicy aroma I hadn't smelled in so long...

It was right here.

I grabbed the spoon, scooping up a large bite and stuffing it into my mouth.

"Slow down, kid. This stuff is—"

He stopped.

Staring at me, his expression shifted.

I had taken a bite of the food I had craved for so long, relishing the warmth I had yearned for.

And without realizing it—

A single tear slipped down my cheek.

Shaheen jolted upright.

"H-Hey... are you crying?!"

He shouted as he stood up, but I stopped him.

"Calm down, old man... I'm not crying."

I covered my face with my right elbow when I failed to stop the stream of tears.

They had fallen on their own—without my permission.

Yet, I was grateful. Deeply grateful.

"Thank you... Thank you... I can still cry."

Since arriving in this world—since enduring everything within the Nightmare Lands and the Shadow Sect...

Since returning to the Starlight family and being forced to take a human life for the first time...

At some point, I had become a killer.

No matter how much I refused to accept it, I had begun to lose my sanity—little by little.

I kept wondering... "Will I still be the same person when I return to my world... to my family?"

Would they be happy to see what their son had become?

As I slowly lost myself, something as simple as this came along—reminding me of who I used to be.

"Thank you... Thank you, old man... In the end, I can still shed tears. I haven't lost myself yet."

"What are you going on about, kid? Was my food so bad that it made you cry?"

I saw the old man reaching out to take the dish from in front of me, but I stopped him.

He looked at me in shock as I devoured the rest of my meal at an inhuman speed, not even giving myself a moment to breathe.

"Damn you... Damn you, old man... This is the best thing I've ever eaten in my life."

In the end, he simply stood beside me, watching as I finished every last bite with unbelievable speed.

The fiery spices burned my tongue, but I didn't stop.

Even when my body trembled from the overwhelming heat, I continued eating until the bowl was empty.

At that moment, Shaheen patted my back.

"I don't know what you've been through, kid... but this is the first time I've seen someone cry after eating my cooking. Stay here as long as you want."

"Thank you."

There was no mirror for me to see myself at that moment, but for the first time in a long while... I smiled.

A real smile.

I grabbed the cup on the table and drank the milk in one go.

Letting out a satisfied sigh, I slammed the cup down.

"Hey, old man, if you have a daughter, I'll marry her."

Shaheen, who had been sitting across from me, scowled.

"You insolent brat, you ate my food without even paying, and now you want my daughter too? Over my old ass, you damn rascal!"

"Haha! That kind of talk doesn't suit an old man like you. But you're right—I haven't paid yet."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a round gold coin, placing it on the table.

Shaheen's eyes widened in shock.

"Kid... This...?"

"Take it. Consider it payment for your troubles."

"You said your name was Frey, right? Do you even realize what you're doing?"

I nodded.

His reaction was only natural. After all, the meal I had eaten was worth just a few copper coins—not even silver.

One silver coin equaled a hundred copper coins.

And in the same way, one gold coin was worth a hundred silver ones.

In other words, I had just handed Shaheen enough money to last him for months.

He hesitated for only a second before quickly snatching the gold coin and slipping it into his pocket.

"Since you know what you're doing, I won't refuse."

This old man never failed to make me laugh.

"Huh? I expected you to at least try to refuse it. But look at you—you took it immediately."

Shaheen grinned, stroking his beard as he spoke.

"Listen, kid... Life has taught us many lessons. And the first two are the most important."

He raised two fingers.

"First—food. Never hesitate to take what satisfies your hunger."

"Second—money. Never be ashamed to take what lines your pockets."

"Pfft—"

"You're absolutely right, old man."

Since I was the only customer, I ended up chatting with Shaheen for a while.

By the time I finally left the tent, I felt completely satisfied.

"Old man! You've just gained a loyal customer!"

I waved at Shaheen, and he waved back.

"Haha! That's great! Bring your friends next time!"

Friends, huh?

Sorry... but I don't have anything like that here.

Making my way back to the Elite Dormitory, I let out a deep sigh, exhaling warm breath into the cool air.

"That was refreshing."

I had regained enough energy...

To deal with the main characters once again.

