

## **VILLAIN 451**

### Chapter 451: The Rise of the Black Crown (1)

The Belgrad Summit.

The summit, once an annual political gathering, had somehow transformed into a war council ..

A council attended by the Empire's greatest powers, led by the current Emperor...Sir Alon Valerion, who had reclaimed the throne after his eldest son, Maekar Valerion, failed so miserably.

Maekar himself was absent, but without a doubt, he remained one of the Empire's most powerful assets in the upcoming war.

Among those gathered, the royal hall was filled with the leaders of the major families and guilds, as well as the full force of the Church, who had answered the call.

Normally, the Church would never attend such events ..

But Sir Alon had managed to bring them under his authority.

Also present were many young faces of the new generation, Both graduates of the Temple and the very youths who had once been victims of the recent hunt.

The Empire had been drowning in unrest and riots for the past several months,

Fueled by the public's outrage over the royal family's catastrophic failure.

Unlike the elite warriors who survived the prison cube, The ordinary soldiers had died in the worst way imaginable ..

Starved to death during their imprisonment.

The death toll had reached thousands.

And with the Ultras launching repeated attacks, The citizens were on the verge of collapse.

No matter what happened, no matter how the tides of war shifted, They always found themselves the victims ..

They were the first to suffer, the first to die.

As if their lives meant nothing.

Cannon fodder.

No different from worthless cattle.

And now, the Iron Emperor was telling them they must fight in the coming war ..

A war far more brutal and devastating than anything they had faced before.

Naturally, it could be said that the people of the Empire were completely against this war.

After all, who would be the first to die on the battlefield?

Who would be thrown into the front lines?

Them. And no one else.

Their fury had reached its peak.

And so, Crown Prince Aegon proposed broadcasting the Belgrad Summit to the entire Empire ..

Claiming he had a plan that could turn the tide.

At first, his suggestion was rejected, fearing that the enemy might learn of the meeting's contents.

But Sir Alon eventually accepted Aegon's proposal after the prince showed him the full picture.

And thus, the long-awaited moment arrived ..

The moment the war would officially begin.

Inside the grand hall of the royal sanctuary ..

The Empire's great powers sat apart, each group in their own place, Their eyes fixed on the stage before them, and the massive screen behind it ..

The place where everything would soon be revealed.

On the side of the Sunlight Household ...

Once regarded as the strongest family in the Empire ..

The young lord Phoenix sat at the front,

Claiming his rightful place as the next Lord for the world to see.

Phoenix was still the same as ever ..

The brilliant star, the greatest talent of his generation.

But the look on his face had changed completely since the events of the Ultras Continent.

Though many of the elite students had survived, A great number of them had perished.

No one blamed Phoenix for it .. NovelBin

But that didn't change the fact that they were just children, And Phoenix had been the one responsible for them.

He had made most of the decisions in that cursed land .. And thus, their lives had rested on his shoulders.

What happened in that nightmare cast a long shadow over the young Lord of the Sunlight family ..

Especially since among the dead... were members of his own family.

Scarite Sunlight.

Evan Sunlight.

The two he had treated like younger brothers ..

The sons of the current lord, Iris Sunlight—

Had died because of him.

And now their ghosts haunted him still.

For the first time, dark shadows appeared beneath Phoenix's blazing eyes,

A clear sign of the harsh toll the past months had taken on him.

"You look awful, my nephew."

From behind Phoenix, a familiar old man appeared ..

With a burning beard and a warm gaze.

He had lost much of his weight after his time trapped in the prison cube,

But the current Lord of the Sunlight family still burned with his usual fire.

Iris Sunlight had finally arrived, taking his place beside his nephew.

Behind him stood the strongest warriors of House Sunlight ..

Most notably Phoenix's own father, Gal Varion Sunlight.

Although Iris tried to start a conversation with his nephew, Phoenix said nothing.

He didn't even look him in the eye.

Was it arrogance?

Of course not.

The truth was simple:

Phoenix no longer knew how to face his uncle ..

Not since his sons had died under Phoenix's command.

And Iris, who had lived long enough to witness most of life's hardships, understood it all too well.

"My nephew, listen to the words of this old man while we still have time before the summit begins."

Sitting beside Phoenix, stroking his fiery beard, Iris spoke calmly.



"You need to understand something, Phoenix. In this life, you cannot save everyone.

No matter how strong you become,

The idea of a hero who saves everyone ...

Is nothing more than a fairy tale for children."

"Even the great Abraham Starlight lost his life... and his wife's.

And the hero before him, Kazis Valerion, was no exception either.

To give us the peace we enjoyed for so long .. He had to sacrifice himself and many other heroes alongside him."

Phoenix didn't know how to respond to those words.

He had avoided his uncle all this time, unable to face him.

But who would've thought that the first words Iris would speak to him ...

Were the exact same ones Frey Starlight had told him long ago...

Back when they were both still trapped in the Ultras Continent,

And when, except for Xiver, everyone else was still alive.

There is no such thing as a hero who saves everyone.

Those destined to live will live.

And those fated to die... will die.

"I know... I know there's no meaning in the idea of a hero who saves everyone..."

He had accepted it long ago.

"But... how many lives were in my hands?"

How many people could have survived if I had made better decisions back then?

How many souls might have lived to see tomorrow if I had simply been stronger?"

The line between life and death was nothing but a series of fragile details ..

A single right decision, a timely intervention...

Sometimes, it was even simpler than that.

There was no way he could escape the burden of responsibility, Especially when the father of those he had failed to save was sitting right beside him.

"Phoenix... not everything you wish for in life will come true."

Iris gently placed his hand on his nephew's head, pulling him into his chest, speaking softly.

"I've been watching you this whole time.

You tried to run from me, But I've been right beside you all along.

I saw how you spent these last months training like a madman.

I know how much it hurt you."

"Uncle..."

As Iris embraced him, Phoenix finally allowed himself to feel weak,

Releasing all the emotions he had bottled up for so long.

"It was hard, wasn't it?

I know.

They were like your brothers.

All of you... have always been my sons."

Though Iris had rarely shown his emotions throughout his life .. He had loved his children.

Even though they resented him, NovelBin.

Even though they spent their lives hating Phoenix, Believing he had stolen everything from them ..

The truth was far different.

"I've seen what you've accomplished.

You've mastered the family style ..

The Eternal Flame ..beyond what I ever dreamed of witnessing.

And you've broken through to the SS+ Rank, haven't you?"

The moment Iris spoke those words,

Shock filled the entire Sunlight household.

And beyond them ..

Anyone who overheard was equally stunned.

"We have gained another SS+ warrior..."

Phoenix had never announced his breakthrough.

Until now, only Iris had noticed it.

"You've raised the name of this family.

You are our pride, Phoenix.

So hold your head high, and always look ahead.

Who knows?

Maybe one day, you'll reach the Ilios State . the final stage of the style,

One that only the first Lord of this family ever achieved."

Sitting behind them, Gal Varion quietly listened to Iris's words.

He had no idea his son had reached SS+,

And now he was hearing his brother speak of the Ilios State...

A combat state spoken of only in legends within the Sunlight family.

It was said that whoever attained it would manifest flames as hot as the sun itself.

Reaching that state meant the user had officially entered the mythical SSS Rank.

Gal wondered ..

Did Iris truly believe Phoenix could reach that level?

Yes, Phoenix was the greatest of his generation...

But the ancient heads of the great families were on an entirely different level.

After all, there was a reason no one had reached SSS Rank in all these long centuries.

In the end, Gal Varion thought...

Perhaps the Ilios State would remain lost forever.

And there, in that place ..

Phoenix embraced his uncle, A single tear falling from his eye, mourning the younger brothers he had lost, And all the other students who had died under his command.

"The past is gone, and it cannot be changed.

But the future still lies ahead of us,



Full of possibilities..."

What mattered now was the future before them ..

The future where everyone would have a second chance.

As Iris spoke those final words,

The hall darkened, And the long-awaited summit finally began, A single spotlight illuminating the platform below.

At the same time, a live broadcast began streaming across the entire Empire,

Allowing every citizen to witness what was about to unfold.

But the man who stepped onto the stage wasn't Sir Alon.

It was someone else entirely.

Chapter 452: The Rise of the Black Crown (2)

Wearing his royal robes, smiling with that same familiar expression ..

The First Prince, Aegon Valerion, stood proudly at the center.

"Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the first military summit in the long history of this Empire .. The first and final War Council against our eternal enemies...

The Ultras."

Aegon walked across the stage with steady steps, Drawing the eyes of the entire world upon him.

"People of the Empire,

The beating heart of this nation,

Allow me to begin this summit with you.

For you are its foundation ..

It is because of you that this civilization still stands. So please, let the noble lords wait a moment longer."

Aegon spoke with skillful charisma,

Giving priority to the people instead of the elite and noble commanders.

It was a smart move ..

Subtly, he made the entire world witness him valuing the common folk and soldiers above the elites and leaders.

"Now, my dear citizens,

I would like to ask you a simple question.

And I hope you will answer me honestly.

Tell me ... where is the enemy?!"

His question echoed through every corner of the Empire.

The answer was obvious.

And yet the hall fell into complete silence,

For no one dared to respond.

But this only deepened Aegon's smile,

As he raised his hand, causing the massive screen behind him to come to life, displaying the footage he had carefully prepared.

In that moment, the screens showed riots and destruction ..

The chaos caused by the citizens themselves when their anger had consumed them.

The footage was extensive, Showing the faces of everyone who had committed such acts, With a level of detail so precise it left the world wondering...

How did the prince obtain such recordings?

"My beloved citizens,

You are angry, aren't you?

And who could blame you?

Because of others' mistakes, You have been forced to suffer the horrors of war and death."

"While most of the great names survived,

It was your loved ones, your families, who died on the battlefield."

"We have lost so much ..

So much that my heart aches whenever I recall the death toll from the last battle."

"Those who died were not mere soldiers ..

They were heroes who gave their lives for their homeland.

My words may sound empty to you,

But from the bottom of my heart,

I apologize to each and every one of you—

On behalf of myself and the entire royal family responsible for such a fate."

Before the entire world,

Aegon Valerion bowed deeply ..

A sight rarely witnessed from someone standing at the top, Bowing before the common people.

His gesture didn't ease the people's anger,

But somehow... it made them fall in step with his rhythm.

And this was exactly what the prince had counted on to deliver the finishing blow he had prepared from the very start.

Raising his head slowly, Aegon cleared his throat before shouting once more, louder this time:

"Soldiers of the Empire, Let me ask you again .

Where is the enemy?!"

Taking another step forward, he continued his performance:

"Is it the leaders of the Empire,

The ones who sent your loved ones to war?

Are they the ones forcing you to fight again,

Throwing your precious lives away like they mean nothing?"

To that question, Aegon gave his own answer.

"No. That's not the answer."

With a wave of his hand, The footage on the screen shifted entirely ..

Revealing something else...

Something dark.

Something that made several people jump from their seats the moment they saw it.

"What I'm about to show you...

Is the fate that awaits us all if we do not rise and fight against our one true enemy.

Forgive me for the filth you are about to witness, But this is necessary ... so that you may see the dark reality of what lies beyond, on the other side of this world."



And at that moment..

The truth was revealed.

The truth that made Phoenix rise from his seat, His blazing eyes burning with an uncontrollable fury as he glared down at the prince.

And how could he not ..

After what his eyes had just seen.

On the massive screen, footage was displayed that silenced the entire world...

Leaving them staring in rage and disgust at the scenes before them.

Meanwhile, Aegon's smile quietly grew wider.

The first scene showed the suffering of a particular girl ..

The saint candidate, Emilia Atrax.

The video revealed to the entire Empire how the Ultras had raped that poor girl,

Beating her relentlessly, Then tearing her body apart and devouring her alive.

The footage was so horrifying and real that many turned their eyes away, unable to watch.

The footage shifted again, showing the deaths of the other elite students one after another.

Jan Dover and Kyle Walker, eaten alive.

Xiver Adams, killed by the bite of a mutated human.

The footage was brutally detailed, perfectly capturing the savagery of the Ultras ..

Filling the citizens of the Empire with unrelenting fury as they watched this tragic display.

Seizing that moment of collective outrage,

Aegon shouted at the top of his lungs, his eyes turning bloodshot with rage,

Revealing a wrathful face no one had ever seen before.

"People of the Empire ... where is the enemy?!"

"Allow me to answer you!

It is right here!"

"The enemy is the one who killed your loved ones and left them to starve to death!

The enemy is the one who raided your homes,

Murdering your husbands and wives,

Raping your women and children!

The enemy is the one who committed all these massacres against those of your own flesh and blood!"

"This vile enemy, Who sold their souls to demons, Is now preparing to wage war against the Empire built by mankind,

Lived in by mankind, And defended by mankind with their lives!" f r\eeNovelBin.c(o)(m)

Aegon's voice thundered,

And his emotions reached the hearts of the entire world.

He appeared angry, sorrowful, furious ..

And within mere seconds, Aegon had ignited the hearts of every citizen of the Empire.

"My brothers and sisters!

Will you sit idly, refusing to fight,

Until the day comes when you share the same fate as all those poor souls we've already lost?

Will you allow these defilers to take the lands your ancestors died to protect?

Of course not!!"

Raising his fist, Aegon roared ..

And at the same time, the citizens of the Empire roared with him.

"We will fight!!!"

"For the land our ancestors, our fathers, and our sons died for!"

"We will fight!!!"

"To give the next generation a chance to live ..

So they won't suffer as we did!"

"We will fight!!!"

At last, Aegon fell silent.

But in return, the entire Empire exploded this time...

Chanting his words,

With a burning fire igniting in their hearts.

"We will fight!!!"

Quietly, Aegon stepped away from the spotlight, Leaving those dark images playing before the world ..

Withdrawing from view,

Hiding the devilish smile that crept across his face.

Inside the royal sanctuary hall...

Iris barely managed to hold Phoenix back,

Who was moments away from leaping toward Aegon.

The Lord of House Sunlight burned with rage.

How could he not ..

After seeing those horrific scenes in which his students had died?

But the problem wasn't the scenes themselves.

The problem was how Aegon had acquired them.

To obtain such footage and record it in such detail ..

One had to be present at the very place where all of it happened.

In other words... Aegon had been there.

When Emilia was raped...

When Xiver died...

When the students were massacred...

He had been there.

And what did he do?

Nothing.

He did nothing ..

Simply recorded their final moments,

Saving them for this very day ..

As if he had known all along that this was how it would end.



Aegon Valerion.

He had presented the Ultras to the world as demonic monsters worthy of death.

But the real question was ..

Between him and the Ultras...

Who was the true monster?

The rogue prince had united the entire Empire beneath him, Crowning himself the supreme commander of the coming war.

Only the gods knew what fate awaited the Empire

Under the leadership of a man whose cruelty surpassed even that of demons themselves.

Chapter 453: Vanguard of the Apocalypse (1)

The first phase of the summit concluded when Crown Prince Aegon Valerion succeeded in making the people of the Empire follow him blindly ..

With nothing more than a few well-crafted words and carefully chosen footage that revealed to the entire world the brutality of the faction known as the Ultras.

With confident steps, walking like a king among men, Aegon stepped back where the Iron Emperor stood waiting, nodding at his grandson with approval.

"Well done.

Even if I had taken the stage myself, I couldn't have given a better performance."

At the honest praise of the Iron Emperor,

Aegon gave a faint smile, wearing his usual mask.

"Your words honor me more than I deserve."

"No need to pretend to be humble, boy.

You were born to rule as a king .. So act like one."

Sir Alon's words only deepened the smile on Aegon's face.

"It's time for the second phase."

"Yes."

Working together with the mages responsible for the broadcast ..

The same broadcast the entire Empire had just watched ..

Aegon Valerion began manipulating the feed.

"What we've shown the world was only the first part.

As for the second part, where we'll discuss the real details of the war, We'll alter the broadcast, feeding the public false information, While the truth stays within the walls of Belgrad's royal hall."

Even here, inside the hall,

Aegon never intended to reveal everything he had planned.

This was the prince's strategy ..

Deceive the common folk into believing they were so important ..

That they were treated better ..

Even better than the nobles and military leaders.

But all of it was nothing more than a carefully orchestrated play, Staged by the rogue prince.

His strategies were undeniably cunning.

But Sir Alon, who judged people by their merit and the results they achieved,

Didn't object in the slightest.

As long as the results spoke for themselves, he had no complaints.

And this was why the Iron Emperor favored his grandson above all others.

He saw in him the signs of greatness—

An emperor who would rule the world with an iron fist.

Aegon had what it took.

And beyond his individual strength, which raised several unanswered questions,

He excelled in every other aspect of leadership.

After the first presentation ended,

Both Sir Alon and Aegon stepped forward again, Standing before the Empire's great powers.

"Ladies and gentlemen,

The time has come to begin this summit in earnest."

Aegon spoke calmly,

Leaving the rest to Sir Alon.

The projection screens lit up one after another, Displaying the military might that Sir Alon and his grandson had prepared over the past several months.

"After relentless effort,

And thanks to Prince Aegon's strategic brilliance, We've gathered an army of 88,000 soldiers .. Made up of warriors from the great families, major guilds, and even the common folk.

Following my grandson's speech,

We expect the army's size to easily surpass 100,000."

Sir Alon pointed to the main force the Empire would use in their large-scale raid against the Ultras.

It could be said the Empire had drained much of its wealth to prepare an army of this size, Equipped with all manner of weapons and gear.

In addition to thousands of magical cannons and hundreds of ships built in record time ..

All prepared to cross the Demonic Sea and reach enemy territory.

"Our first major challenge is the distance our army must cover once the war begins.

An army of 100,000 cannot cross the Demonic Sea all at once.

Which brings us to the main point of this meeting."

If the army crossed the sea in one massive wave, They risked falling into the same fate as Maekar and his forces ..

Who fell into Beatrice's trap.

Therefore, it wasn't realistic to launch a full-scale invasion by sea from the start.

"Individual strength, huh?"

Leaning with one hand on his chair,

Iris spoke softly, having already guessed what the Iron Emperor was about to say.

"Individual strength?" Phoenix asked,

To which Iris responded with a smile.

"Sir Alon will announce it now."

And indeed, the Iron Emperor addressed that very point.

"We must remind ourselves of something many of you already know ..

The true deciding factor in war."

"What will tip the scales in favor of one side over the other

Is not the size of the armies, nor their numbers... Though those things are important, of course ..

What truly decides a war is the final battle fought by the strongest warriors on both sides."

Quality, not quantity.

In the end, a single SS+ ranked warrior could destroy an entire army by themselves if needed.

What the witch Beatrice had accomplished not long ago was the perfect example.

"In other words, individual strength will be key in this war.

Our armies cannot cross the Demonic Sea all at once.

We need a foothold on the Ultras Continent,

Where we can build a warp gate that will allow our armies to cross safely."

Instead of sending their full force across the sea, The Empire would first send a much smaller team,  
Tasked with establishing a foothold within enemy territory.

But no matter how you looked at it ...

It sounded like a suicide mission.

"It may seem like a suicide mission,

But it all depends on the individuals we send on this raid."

If an ordinary army were sent,

They'd be slaughtered to the last man in no time.

But the outcome would be entirely different

If those sent were strong enough to accomplish the mission.

The only question was .. who would go?

"The Emperor and his son cannot go this time.

They are our main forces in this war.

In other words, Sir Alon and Maekar Valerion will only join the battle if the enemy's main forces appear on the battlefield."

Iris's remark was right, and Sir Alon's next words confirmed it beyond doubt.

"For this raid, a special unit will be formed .. A vanguard that will take the first step in this war.

And leading that vanguard, Will be the man who once committed an unforgivable crime, Sacrificing the lives of many of the Empire's finest talents.

Now, he will have to wash away that blood with the blood of our enemies."

As Sir Alon's declaration echoed through the hall, The doors swung open, and an old man entered, dragging chains behind him.

He wore nothing but tattered clothes that hadn't been changed in years ..

Though his body still radiated strength, maintained by the Empire itself,

Preserved at its peak for this very moment.

With eyes that showed only white,

Long grey hair, And a scarred face ..

The former Headmaster of the Temple knelt before the Iron Emperor.



"Raphael Bloodmader,

You will lead this war's vanguard.

You will shield your allies with your body and soul.

You will take their blows, Fight in their stead, And die for them if necessary.

That is your punishment for your sins."

Raphael Bloodmader, a veteran SS ranked warrior, Who once fought in the War of Light, Now about to wage the War of Darkness ..

But this time, at the very frontlines.

The first man to stand before the enemy,

Bearing the brunt of the assault for his kin.

It was the price he paid, After being blinded by the visions of the Engineer and committing his crimes.

It seemed like a dark fate,

But Bloodmader welcomed it ..

He had wagered on this outcome from the start.

"I will serve this Empire...

Until my final breath."

The former Headmaster spoke calmly,

Declaring himself the commander of the special vanguard.

But Bloodmader alone was not enough.

Soon after, the rest of the members were announced.

"From the Church's side, their main forces have volunteered for this mission !"

From the followers of the Lord of Light,

Snow Lionheart appeared,

Holding the sacred sword Vermithor,

Followed closely by two women, both dressed in pure white from head to toe.

Snow Lionheart was still a young man in the prime of his youth, And many were shocked by his willingness to return to the enemy's continent ..

The place he had barely escaped alive once before.

But as the crowned hero,

It was only natural for him to stand at the front, As the sword of the Empire.

And beyond that .. he had debts to settle on the other side of the world.

Snow Lionheart's decision to participate revealed an important truth...

The crowned hero never walked alone.

Wherever the hero went, the Saintess must follow.

"That means..."

Some whispered quietly,

And Sir Alon confirmed it aloud:

"The Church's Hero, Snow Lionheart,

Along with Saintess Yurasha, will join the special unit."

Sir Alon's announcement stirred great commotion.

Setting Snow Lionheart aside, The Saintess was an SS+ ranked warrior ..

One of the Empire's most powerful weapons.

Her presence on the frontlines raised many questions ..

But no one dared to object,

For Snow Lionheart's decisions were considered the will of the Lord of Light himself.

Beside Yurasha, another woman, five years older than Snow, stood tall.

"Alongside Saintess Yurasha,

The Saintess candidate Uriel Platini will also participate .. Chosen as the next Saintess to inherit the mantle of her predecessors."

The Church had deployed three warriors at once. .

All of them towering names in the Empire.

The announcement turned into a showcase of just how formidable this special unit truly was ..

It would be no exaggeration to say they would shoulder the first phase of the war on their own.

Chapter 454: Vanguard of the Apocalypse (2)

After highlighting the side of light,

It was time to reveal the darkness.

A chill ran through the hall as the lights dimmed, And a certain girl stepped forth from one of the darkest corners.

The aura she exuded was unnatural,

So dark and foul that many present instinctively rose from their seats, preparing to fight,

Thinking an enemy had invaded the hall.

But Crown Prince Aegon Valerion raised his hand to calm them, Pointing instead toward his only sister ..

As Sir Alon refused to even look her way.

"No need to panic, my esteemed guests.

What you're looking at now is one of the Empire's strongest weapons in the coming war...

And my beloved sister .. Princess Sansa Valerion."

Wearing her Shadow Dress, With white hair, dark eyes, And a pair of ivory horns ..

Sansa, the demoness, stood before the world, Facing them all with her true, dark self.

And despite the oppressive aura surrounding her, Sansa remained unfazed,

Meeting their fearful gazes with a sweet, carefree smile.

"The truth is no longer a secret.

You all know of her demonic nature.

After the tragic experiments she was subjected to during her abduction,

She ended up like this.

But in exchange... she gained immense power.

The pressure you're feeling now is but a fragment of that strength."

Sansa Valerion.

A full-fledged demoness who had reached SS+ rank ..

A monster among monsters.

Though Aegon introduced her as his sister,

The audience couldn't help but stare at the black horns crowning her head.

No matter how they looked at her ..

This was no princess.

This was a demon.

"Sansa Valerion will fight at the vanguard,

Serving as a shield that protects the Empire from the Ultras' invasion!"

Her survival up to this point,

And her participation in the war ..Had been Aegon's plan from the very beginning.

Had it been up to Sir Alon, She would have been executed long ago.

But the prince had other plans for her.

And for that, Sansa smiled at him.

"Thank you for your kind words, dear brother."

She seemed sweet and gentle ..

But the sharpness in her aura, And the piercing gaze she directed at Aegon,

Told a far darker story.

Despite the pressure and the clear threat in her gaze, Aegon only gave a light chuckle, asserting his dominance.

For his sister .. the girl who not long ago had been his direct rival for the throne ..

Was now entirely under his control.

She was nothing more than a weapon in his hands, A sword he could wield however he pleased.

It was a complete victory for the prince.

And with Sansa's inclusion, the shape of the special unit became clear.

But that wasn't the end.

Just as the Empire had its shields,

It needed another sword.

A sword to stand alongside Snow Lionheart.

Another young man, like Raphael Bloodmader, whose past crimes had stained his hands, And though he too was forced to participate, It was exactly what he desired.

With a motion of his hand, Sir Alon addressed a matter the Empire had neglected for some time.

"Thanks to the efforts of Lady Ada Starlight, We recently uncovered a critical truth."

Sir Alon casually displayed footage of the Empire's eastern borders ..

The ones bordering the Nightmare Lands.

Those borders had been eerily quiet for some time, Raising questions among the strategists.

But the information Ada Starlight brought back revealed the truth of what had been happening.

"It seems the Ultras are attempting to turn the Nightmare Creatures into part of their forces."

At this announcement, Most faces in the hall darkened.

It wasn't unusual for the Ultras to use Nightmare Creatures in battle .

It had happened before.

But this time, it was different.



The sudden disappearance of nearly all Nightmare Creatures from the region at once , Meant this was no ordinary raid.

If the Ultras succeeded in fully controlling the Nightmare Creatures, It would mean they could unleash the Nightmare Lords themselves in the upcoming war.

Though it was only a fear without confirmation, The possibility was far from zero.

Sir Alon used this revelation to announce the final member of the special unit.

"The final warrior of this squad is a young man of the new generation.

Despite his youth, He has already made a name for himself ..

A name that strikes fear into the hearts of the Ultras more than any other."

"The young man they call the Black Reaper ... The one who single-handedly killed a thousand Ultras, And fought one of their Lords one-on-one."

"The one who held the eastern Nightmare Lands by himself, And slaughtered most of the Nightmare Creatures alone..."

Sir Alon continued recounting his feats,

And many in the hall had already guessed his identity.

"The sole wielder of the twin blazing swords... Frey Starlight!"

Finally, it was time for the world to witness him again.

Many in the hall were curious about him.

Even his friends were no exception—

Frey had vanished since the death of his friend Danzo months ago.

It was said that he had gone into seclusion to train, And no one knew what the young man . who had achieved so many feats .. had become since then.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say

He was now the most feared figure among the Ultras, After all the horrors he had unleashed in their lands.

The one who fought armies ..

Fought the Emphyreans ..

Fought the Lords ..

And fought the Hollows...

He had done it all . And lived to tell the tale.

Even Sir Alon himself was curious about him.

'Frey Starlight has rejected all my summons until now...

Which makes him the only one I know so little about.'

There were many unknowns surrounding this young man, And Sir Alon wanted to unravel them at last.

This would be their first direct meeting.

And without warning...

He finally arrived.

But before they even saw his face ..

The entire hall froze, And even the strongest warriors darkened their expressions.

From out of nowhere, An overwhelming pressure crushed them all, Forcing many to the verge of their knees.

The entire hall trembled without warning,

And even Sir Alon himself couldn't immediately grasp what was happening.

He had expected much from the young man called Frey Starlight.

But this...

This far exceeded his wildest expectations.

How could it not, When the aura pressing down on him now ..

Surpassed his own by far.

Holding his ground, Sir Alon cursed under his breath as his body lit up with radiant aura.

'I'm at the peak of SS+ Rank, damn it...

If his aura exceeds mine, then this can only mean one thing...'

Sir Alon's expression darkened even further as the realization struck him.

Beside him, Aegon Valerion ..

For the first time since the summit began ..

Dropped his trademark smile, Replacing it with a cold, unflinching scowl.

Frey Starlight...

If even Sir Alon couldn't measure his strength, Then it could only mean one thing.

Many thought the same,

Though few dared to believe it.

"The mythical rank spoken of only in ancient legends...

A power most thought was nothing but a fable..."

It had returned.

From within the portal, He took his first steps into their world.

Long white hair.

Black armor.

Sharp features that reflected an uncommon maturity.

A body overflowing with so much power that it rendered the room speechless.

This was Frey Starlight.

The man who shook the hall with an aura that reached the mythical SSS Rank ..

A power many believed was nothing more than a fairy tale.

And after a few moments of suffocating silence, With all eyes fixed solely on him ..

Frey Starlight finally withdrew his aura and spoke calmly:

"Forgive me, esteemed gentlemen... I've spent too much time in the Nightmare Lands, and I seem to have forgotten how to live among humans."

In the Nightmare Lands, Frey had kept his aura fully unleashed at all times, To assert his dominance over that cursed land.

And now, upon his return ..

He often forgot to restrain himself.

Epecially now, After he had fully mastered the third stage of Shadow Adaptation,

Granting him complete control over his aura.

Because of this, Many mistook his aura for something far beyond their understanding .. Something otherworldly.

But that didn't change one undeniable truth:

The Frey Starlight standing before them now...

Was one of the strongest warriors on the entire planet called Earth.

Chapter 455: The Rise of the Vanguard

— Frey Starlight's Pov —

It had been a long time since I last stood before such a large crowd.

Standing there, face-to-face with the Iron Emperor, Sir Alon, for the very first time.

I withdrew my explosive aura, offering hollow words of apology that meant little to me .. And even less to those present, whose eyes refused to accept what they were seeing.

Their reactions drew a tired sigh from my lips.

Everything was unfolding exactly as I had expected.

Ever since I gained full control over my aura, I'd become capable of pulling off stunts like this.

"So, you say you've forgotten how to live among humans... what an interesting thing to hear from your mouth, Frey Starlight."

Taking a few steps toward me,

Sir Alon unleashed his full aura and power,

Trying to reassert his dominance.

The force he released made the very air tremble .. It was truly formidable.

But compared to what I had displayed earlier... It felt lukewarm at best.

When he saw me unaffected by his power,

A wide smile spread across Sir Alon's face.

"I wonder how far your strength has grown, Lord Starlight, For you to stand so calmly before me like this."

Standing face to face, The tension rose as sparks of radiant light shot from his eyes,

Colliding with the violet sparks flaring from my own.

"If you wish to know what I'm capable of,

Then send me to the battlefield and watch from afar.

Watch as I slaughter our enemies, one by one."

At those words, Sir Alon raised an eyebrow.

"What a bloodlust you have, Frey Starlight.

I've heard that in the past few months, your hands have been stained with so much blood .. That I can't help but be concerned about sending you to the front lines in this state."

Sir Alon was trying to size me up in every way, Since this was our first direct encounter.

To him, I must have looked like a monstrous force in the prime of its youth,

With unknown abilities and even more unknown motives.

"There's no need to overthink it, Iron Emperor.

You, more than anyone, know that you need people like me."

"Your eldest son once used my father to end the last war.

Now, all you need to do is the same.

That's why people like us exist."

Mergo once said the same thing to me...

Back when I fought him in the land of the Ultras.



"We are monsters, born for this purpose alone."

With a smile, Sir Alon nodded.

"True enough..."

As he looked at me, Sir Alon recalled the legends he had once heard about my father ..

Abraham Starlight.

"Unfortunately, I never had the chance to meet your father, But I've heard much about him. And I suppose a part of him lives on in you—his only son."

Placing a hand on my shoulder,

Sir Alon gave his final words before stepping back.

"You'll have your chance to spill the blood you crave, But always remember this, Frey Starlight .. Don't let that blood consume you, And don't lose yourself.

Even monsters have their limits."

With a simple nod,

I agreed to his words .. Though they meant little to me.

It seemed Sir Alon had already realized the truth:

That only my aura had reached the mythical SSS rank.

And because of that, He had instinctively lowered his guard.

Sharp senses indeed.

I'll give him that.

He figured out my true level faster than I expected.

As these thoughts crossed my mind,

I glanced at my system interface to check my stats.

---

Host Name: Frey Starlight (Dual Soul)

Class: Swordsman

Talent: SS+

Current Rank: S

Strength: S

Speed: S+

Agility: S+

Endurance: SS-

Aura: SSS

Magic: —

---

Swordsmanship Level 7 (Max Level)

Talents:

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

Combat Style:

Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow

Skills:

Hawk Eyes (Rank A)

Phantom Steps (Rank A)

Seduction (Rank D)

Ascension (Rank S)

Ignition (Rank SS)

Screenshot (Rank SS)

Abilities:

Shadow Adaptation 3/7

Stage One: Adapt to all combat styles, creating natural counters against any fighting technique.

Stage Two: Adapt to all physical injuries, triggering rapid regeneration to heal the body automatically.

Stage Three: Adapt to all forms of aura, granting perfect control and absolute dominance over the surrounding aura—and the user's own.

...

Anti-Magic Level 2

Current Achievement Points: 1,000

...

...

...

I had truly come a long way.

After spending all my Achievement Points to raise my Talent to SS+ and training relentlessly for eight long months, I finally broke through to S Rank.

I even mastered the third stage of Shadow Adaptation, granting me absolute control over my aura.

All of this, combined with the secret training techniques I discovered within Nameless's mask.

My strength had grown immensely.

At my current level, I felt confident that I could stand against any SS+ opponent—

Even Sir Alon himself, if it came to that.

But despite how far I'd come, I was still not where I wanted to be.

Still far from the level I needed to reach.

The level where I could face all those entities who had marked me,

Those who sought to bend my fate to their will.

In this world, power is everything.

The strong live by their own rules,

And the weak... they have no choice but to crawl through life as slaves, bound by the whims of others.

That's why I yearned for bloodshed.

Why I wanted to fight again.

To force myself to ascend higher, through blood and fire—through battles where life and death balanced on a knife's edge.

That's why I was here.

To slaughter as many of those bastards on the other side of the world as I could.

Now, standing here, in the hall that hosted the World Summit before the war's official outbreak ..

I took a seat among the special squad I was now a part of, Silently withdrawing from the spotlight after causing a stir.

Taking my place, I found familiar faces all around me.

Most notable among them was Snow Lionheart, seated to my right.

"It's been a while, brother. You've changed a lot."

Just from the look on his face, I could tell ..

Snow was genuinely happy to see me again.

"I'm not the only one who's changed. I assume I wasn't the only one training."

Though he hadn't released the same overwhelming aura I did, Snow had grown tremendously since I last saw him.

I figured he had fully mastered his War King Form by now.

He had grown far stronger than the story's timeline should have allowed.

But I was glad.

Glad to see he had found his own path forward.

Just like I had my reasons for returning to that cursed continent, he had his own.

Without a word, we clasped hands, our grip firm.

"I'm relying on you there."

"Same here."

Chapter 456: Fate Carved in Black Steel

We'd fought side by side for so long that standing shoulder to shoulder on the battlefield now felt like second nature.

"Don't go getting lost in your little world. You're not the only elite students heading back to that continent, you know. This'll be my third time there, for your information."

With a playful smile, Sansa wedged herself into the conversation, Clinging tightly to my left shoulder.

She was seated on my left, of course.

Snow Lionheart fell silent.

I saw him try to speak, But his words died the moment his eyes caught sight of the dark horns crowning Sansa's head.

Among all those present, I was probably the only one who treated her like a normal person.

"You could've stayed home if returning to that continent scared you so much."

I threw a teasing remark her way,

And as if she had been expecting it, she answered without missing a beat.

"Home is wherever you are, Frey."

"You really are carefree, aren't you?"

To say something like that without a hint of hesitation...

Sansa had changed too.

She no longer bothered hiding her overflowing feelings for me.

Frankly, what was between us wasn't much of a secret anymore.

She didn't mind clinging to me in front of others, And by now, they had likely pieced together that something was going on between us.

And honestly?

They wouldn't be wrong.

Even when I was training in the Nightmare Lands, She visited me often.



I didn't mind her presence.

I still wasn't sure how I felt about Sansa,

But her presence was... comforting.

Like a quiet lullaby before sleep.

Having her in my life was something I had grown fond of, So I didn't bother pushing her away.

But of course, not everyone approved.

"Would you mind stepping back, demon? You're tainting him with your filth."

The one who spoke those venomous words was none other than Uriel Platini.

And honestly, I was surprised to hear someone known as the sweetest girl in the world speak with such hostility.

"Uriel..."

I spoke her name instinctively,

But she paid me no attention.

Her eyes were locked entirely on Sansa.

And yet, Sansa didn't flinch.

She simply smiled and clung tighter to my shoulder, meeting that hatred head-on.

"Why should I step back? Don't you see? Darkness suits him perfectly."

"I don't know where you found the audacity to show yourself before the world in that cursed form of yours.

But don't misunderstand ..

You are no longer Princess Sansa Valerion. That girl died a long time ago."

"What you are now is nothing but a cursed demon, A filthy weapon kept alive only because it's useful.

And when you're no longer useful, your only home will be the grave."

"That's enough, Uriel. You've gone too far."

It was Snow who intervened, cutting her off, While Sansa simply rested her head against my shoulder with a quiet shake of her head.

"I won't argue with what you've said .. because, for the most part, it's true. But I don't mind, as you can see. Unlike you, Saint Candidate, I've found my place in this life. So get used to my face... you'll be seeing it quite often from now on ~"

There were countless implications hidden within Sansa's words. On the surface, it simply meant that we would be seeing each other frequently, given that we were assigned to the same combat squad.

But for some reason, I couldn't shake the feeling that she meant something entirely different.

Back to Uriel...

I had almost forgotten just how deeply she despised demons .. and how fiercely the Church condemned them.

The pure-hearted Uriel, as usual, couldn't hide her blatant hostility. I saw the same cold resentment in Saintess Yorasha, who sat quietly beside her, casting a subtle glare at the princess.

Those sacred auras collided with the dark one surrounding Sansa.

Chaos swept through the squad before it had even been officially formed.

Trying to diffuse the tension, Snow turned back to me, asking about our third comrade.

"What about Ghost?"

He must have heard about it already.

"He'll be joining us later. He'll be the squad's assassin."

It was only natural. Ghost's participation had been decided from the very start. He would follow me wherever I went.

And so, the shape of our squad finally came together.

I saw it reflected in Bloodmader's eyes—the man who had remained silent until now, seated beside Yorasha.

It seemed he hadn't expected that, aside from Yorasha, every single fighter in this squad were students from his very own temple.

We had changed a great deal from the days when he still stood beside us...

Yet in the end, we were still the same elite disciples he once knew.

It must have meant something to him.

Bloodmader .. the Tank.

Snow and I—the main duelists.

Yorasha and Uriel .. the healers.

Sansa Valerion .. the Wave Controller, capable of taking on the role of a tank as well.

And Ghost Umbra ..the assassin.

There were many vacant roles, but we had the minimum required to be considered a complete combat unit.

With this much fighting strength, we could handle any battlefield situation that came our way.

As we sat together in our designated corner, the prince and the Iron Emperor continued their summit.

Our squad would lead a force of ten thousand men .. out of the empire's total army of one hundred thousand.

Ten thousand, it seemed, was the limit for those chosen to cross the Demonic Sea.

Our mission was to carve a path to the other side .. and establish a foothold for the empire beyond the sea.

The support will always be ready. and figures like Sir Alonne and Maekar Valerion would make their move the moment the enemy's main forces appeared.

It could be said that the demoness ranked 17th, Beatrice...

a fearsome witch of terrifying power ..and the human demon, Dragoth.

Those two were the great monsters Sir Alonne and Maekar Valerion had been saving their strength to face.

But beyond Beatrice and Dragoth, there were still the Four Lords, the Emphyreans, the Hollows... and countless others.

There were far too many variables in this war.

The prince addressed most of them as he laid out his plans and vision for the battles to come.

But despite all the details they accounted for, I couldn't help but wonder...

Were they truly prepared?

I watched them speak with passion, claiming they had calculated every risk, every scenario.

And yet, none of them dared to mention the dreadful truth the prince, Phoenix, and Ghost had uncovered.

The gates that once sealed this world were no longer closed. No longer was there a barrier separating us from the beings above.

The final enemy in this war could change at any moment. It could very well be a being no human could ever dream of facing .. especially if one of the Ten upper Seats appeared.

That was why I couldn't place my trust in the empire.

Meeting Sansa's keen gaze, I reaffirmed the decision I had made long ago.

The only thing I could truly rely on were the black swords in my hands .. the blades that had cut down my foes and enemies.

I needed to become stronger ..faster than ever before. Strong enough to face whatever future this world had in store.

And it would all begin with this squad—the first to plunge into the fires of war.

Seated beside Snow,

I set my eyes on the future...

...

...

...

Snow... my friend, my brother.

This life has never been fair. Fate's currents have played cruelly with us, time and time again.

Now we stood on the battlefield, facing each other.

On one side, Snow held the Vermithor, his body shining with a brilliant light that pierced the darkness of night.

On the other side stood I—his opponent.

Clad in my black armor, wearing the Nameless mask...

I gazed at him one final time before unsheathing my twin swords, ready to fight.

"Ah, Snow... my old friend..."

I still remember the day the empire formed that special squad .. the one that brought us together. I remember how you and I fought side by side in the War of Darkness, a war that ended years ago but left behind scars that still haunt us.

I should have realized, back then, that the choices we made...

Were the very ones that led us to this moment.

If I could turn back time, perhaps I would have made different choices.

"Perhaps... I wouldn't have had to kill you with my own hands, my dear brother."

Chapter 457: The Promise (1)

— Frey Starlight's Pov —

Since the official introduction of the special unit that would lead the vanguard of the war, the summit proceeded smoothly as Prince Aegon Valerion laid out the various aspects of the coming conflict.

There was much to discuss .. ranging from the military forces contributed by the great houses to the financial and logistical support required for such a massive campaign.

Funding an army of that size was no easy feat, especially when the prince announced that every soldier would be equipped with at least Class B gear.

Granting ordinary soldiers such high-quality equipment was essential for Aegon's strategy to win the complete support of the empire's populace.

But at the same time, this placed an enormous burden on the great houses, forcing them to supply weapons and armor for an army one hundred thousand strong.

It could be said that the coming war would drain the empire dry. Sir Alon truly intended to throw everything they had into this conflict and end the war against the Ultras once and for all.

At some point, I lost all interest in the meeting. None of what they were discussing really concerned me.

As if she had been waiting for this exact moment, Sansa leaned in and whispered in my ear, noticing where my thoughts had drifted.

"Hey, what do you say we sneak out of this boring place? This is the first time I've heard my idiot brother talk for this long—it's actually making me nauseous."

She wasn't wrong. Aegon had been speaking endlessly, going over every aspect of the war with meticulous detail.

When it came to strategy and manipulation, I believed that prince was no less than Beatrice in any way.

As long as he was leading, that demoness would face hell against him. From a tactical standpoint, it was a perfectly balanced match, regardless of their combat abilities.



Back to Sansa.

She truly did whatever she wanted, without caring about anything around her.

"I don't mind, but where exactly are we going?"

I had spent most of my recent days in the Nightmare Lands, so my sense of what normal people did in situations like this was long gone.

You could say I was craving to return to the battlefield.

But Sansa had something else entirely in mind.

"Let's roam around the capital. It's been a long time since I was allowed to go out and walk freely."

What she wanted could very well be considered a date.

I might've thought of it differently if the princess was still the same person she used to be.

But with the way she was now, there was no room for doubt about what she meant.

"Are you planning to walk among the people with those horns of yours showing?"

I didn't mind her current appearance, but I was certain she'd attract attention wherever she went. That's why she had been banned from wandering among the populace ever since her return from the Ultras continent.

Since then, she only moved through the shadows, hiding herself in the darkness of her own power.

"The world has already seen me. There's nothing left to hide now."

And it was true. Her new form had already been broadcast across the entire empire.

"You're rushing things. Sure, they know about you now .. but that doesn't mean they've accepted you."

There was a huge difference between awareness and acceptance.

But it seemed Sansa understood that already... Like I said, she did what she pleased.

I figured she had been waiting for the right opportunity to drag me along on this outing she had been looking forward to.

For a moment, I thought .. maybe I should just go with her.

Lately, all I'd been thinking about was war and how I needed to grow stronger as fast as possible.

But just as I was about to answer her, a third voice interrupted .. someone who had remained silent until now.

"You've all changed so much..."

It was Bloodmader, whose eyes hadn't left our faces since this special unit was formed.

"The temple's students used to be nothing more than children, unaware of the true nature of the world they lived in .. lulled into a false sense of peace, deceived by others into believing they were safe."

"But when I look at your faces now, I can't help but wonder .. are these really the faces of people about to march into war?"

Everyone standing before him was a student of the very temple he had led for so many years.

And yet their faces showed a strange indifference, as if what they were heading into wasn't a war, but a vacation to some faraway land.

Maybe it was naivety, or perhaps arrogance.

But Bloodmader realized that wasn't the truth.

These students were no longer just students—they had become warriors.

True warriors, who had fought countless battles of life and death. Warriors who had been tempered by hardship to the point where most of them possessed the strength to not only fight him evenly .. but even defeat him.

Watching these once-raw gems, these young talents he had observed for so long, finally reach their potential... Bloodmader felt a small measure of relief in his tired heart.

Relief—and redemption.

That he had not been wrong when he made his decision back then, when he caused the deaths of hundreds of students.

Deep down, the former headmaster of the temple believed it had been the right choice. And perhaps what he saw before him now was proof enough.

But he was wrong.

"It seems you're misunderstanding something here, Raphael Bloodmader. What you see before you now is not your doing."

To correct the old man's misconception, I spoke up.

"What we are now... is the result of our own choices, of the trials we've faced on our own. What you did was nothing more than a small spark in the inferno of horrors we've endured since then."

Honestly, how could what happened during the temple raid even compare to the deadly hunt we survived on the Ultras continent?

"You may think you contributed to who we are now. You might be trying to console yourself with that thought. But what you're doing is nothing but hypocrisy. In the end, you chose to believe what you wanted to believe .. and blindly followed the visions that Blue Eyes man showed you."

"You!"

The moment I mentioned the Engineer, I saw Bloodmader's expression twist upside down.

I had struck a sensitive chord .. the one thing only he was supposed to know.

He was the only one who understood what I meant. The others simply stood there, confused by my words, struggling to grasp what I was talking about.

"You're truly arrogant, Bloodmader, to think you can change the future so easily."

With a sarcastic smile, I sighed at the thought.

"How much do you know?" he asked, unable to understand how the young man before him possessed such deep foreknowledge of his actions.

"At the very least, I know more than you do."

Change the future?

Defy destiny?

Ask me about those things. I've spent most of my life here fighting against them... struggling to swim against the current.

The future foreseen by someone like the Engineer couldn't be changed that easily.

To defeat a world-breaking power like his foresight, you needed a force equal to—or even stronger than it, capable of reversing the future he had seen.

This was a truth I had painfully come to understand recently, after endless suffering.

That's why the former head of the temple was nothing but a fool .. arrogant enough to think that something trivial, like launching a mere raid, could change the tragic future the Engineer had shown him.

"Who knows, Bloodmader... maybe what you've done with your own hands is the spark .. the very first spark that will ignite the disastrous future you're so desperate to avoid."

Unless the Engineer had tampered with the vision he showed him on purpose—just as he had done with my sister, Ada—that vision would inevitably come true.

People like Bloodmader lacked what it took to reverse a future like that.

Chapter 458: The Promise (2)

In that moment, Bloodmader remembered what the Engineer had shown him...

That dreadful future where flames devoured the world, rivers flowed with blood, and people died without rhyme or reason.

To avoid such a fate, Bloodmader had done everything he could to escape what he saw.

But all his efforts were in vain.

When everything he had lived for was denied... when his noble cause died before his very eyes...

I saw Bloodmader falter... unable to accept it.

He stood abruptly, slamming his hand on the table, about to speak.

But his voice vanished completely as the hall erupted in thunderous applause .. the summit had finally concluded, and Aegon had finished presenting his plan.

It seemed his strategies had been so brilliant that they made the royal hall explode with excitement.

Sadly, we didn't hear a single word of his speech. Practically speaking, we missed the summit, despite being there the whole time.

"This is truly hilarious,"

Sansa chuckled under her breath after witnessing the final exchange.

The timing was just too perfect.

"I suppose this marks the end of our delightful gathering..."

We all stood, bringing the summit to a close. I turned my back on Bloodmader, who clearly had so much more he wanted to say.

Unfortunately, I had no time to further emphasize his ignorance.

He would have to face his own future alone, just like the rest of us.

I was about to leave, but stopped when I saw a familiar face making his way toward us, deliberately radiating his blazing aura and drawing everyone's attention.

That pressure...

He had already reached the SS+ rank.

"Forgive my intrusion. Though the summit has ended, I have something to say before everyone leaves."

With steady steps and eyes fixed on Sir Alon, Phoenix Sunlight stepped forward, addressing the entire hall.

It's fair to say most of those present were surprised to see that he had already reached the SS+ rank at his young age.

You could say he was the fastest to achieve it since Abraham Starlight.

"Lord Sunlight, is there a reason behind your dramatic entrance?"

Sir Alon smiled, seeing another powerful individual emerge before him. Phoenix gave a slight nod.

"I would like to join Bloodmader's vanguard squad."

What Phoenix asked for caught most of the audience off guard.

Here he was, another survivor of the pursuit, willingly volunteering to return to that cursed continent where he had suffered so much... of his own free will.

"May I ask why?"

Sir Alon inquired as Phoenix turned toward us .. the infamous squad, the suicide unit that would lead the war.

"No matter how I look at them, those warriors standing there in the corner of this hall... they are not monsters. They are not a suicide squad. They are my students."

"Even though they graduated early from the temple, I am still their teacher. Do you expect me to stand by and watch them march to war while I simply stay behind?"

That went against Phoenix's very beliefs.

In the end, like me... like Snow...

He too had his own reason to return.

"Do you truly wish to return to that hell... for a reason like this?"

To that question, Phoenix had only one answer.

"Yes. And besides, I have a debt to repay."

Many of his students had died during the hunt...

Those deaths cast a long shadow over Phoenix Sunlight, and he did not want history to repeat itself.

That was why he showed his willingness to return to that continent once more.

Back to the place where it had all begun.



Phoenix's sudden volunteerism made many wonder .. just how many suicidal madmen existed in this world?

Until now, the war's vanguard looked like nothing more than a suicide squad—one that many believed was filled with war criminals sentenced to death.

But now, people began to question whether this was truly just a suicide squad.

With Phoenix having broken into the SS+ rank...

And with all the other powerful individuals joining the squad...

Perhaps this was the strongest force the Empire had assembled since ancient times.

A force that might very well become the decisive factor in the coming war.

Sir Alon approved of Phoenix's stance.

When the lord of the Sunlight family turned around, what he saw were the warm smiles of his students .. those who had fought by his side until now.

"We'll be in your care again, Professor Phoenix."

It was Snow who greeted him first, and Phoenix smiled without realizing it.

"With how insanely fast you've all been growing, I'll be the one under your care soon enough."

"Says the man who just broke into the SS+ rank. What growth are you even talking about? Aren't you the prodigy of our era?"

Snow wasn't wrong. Iris Sunlight had lived far longer, yet never managed to break past SS rank no matter how hard he tried. And now Phoenix had accomplished what Iris couldn't .. at only twenty-five years old.

Phoenix's addition was more than welcome.

Standing off to the side, I watched as they gathered together.

These were the people I would be fighting alongside from now on...

And as I stood there, quietly observing them, I couldn't help but wonder ..

What does the future hold for us?

Who will survive?

Who will die?

I had trained like a madman over the past few months, trying to grow stronger, desperately hoping to avoid repeating what had happened with Danzo.

But I already knew...

No matter how strong you became in this vast universe, there would always be someone stronger.

In the end, all I could do was hope that the power I carried under my belt was enough.

Among our so-called suicide squad, there was one member who had been on my mind for a while now.

And it was that very member who walked up to me alone, as we both stood apart from the others.

For once, Sansa had left my side, allowing Uriel to finally approach me.

"Hello, Frey."

Despite everything that had happened before, this was the first real conversation we'd had in a long time.

I suppose that was what prompted her to greet me.

"It's been a while, Uriel. Still as radiant as ever."

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been thinking about Uriel just a few minutes ago...

For the first time, the girl standing before me would be fighting by my side on the battlefield.

She was one of the main heroines I had once written about, naturally with enormous potential.

But among those gathered here, she was the weakest link.

I couldn't help but think about it, even though she would be stationed in the rear most of the time, where she'd be relatively safe. But on the battlefield...

You never knew what could happen.

With a gentle smile and her hands folded in front of her, Uriel had already guessed what I was thinking.

"Your eyes say it all, Frey. You see me as the weak link, don't you?"

With a hollow smile, I didn't try to deny it.

"I wouldn't say you're the weak link... but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about you."

"So, you are thinking about me."

She stepped closer, raising her head so that our eyes met.

"As the next Saintess, I am bound to follow the Hero wherever he goes. That has been my destiny since the day I was born."

"Destiny, huh?"

Chapter 459: The Promise (3)

To live your entire life following a fate written for you by someone else...

I was familiar with the idea .. and I hated it more than anything.

"Is this destiny something the Lord of Light set for you?"

"That's right."

Uriel nodded. In that moment, I began to realize I wasn't the only one whose fate was manipulated by the beings above.

In truth, it wasn't just Uriel. Even Snow... and most of the church, who followed the Lord of Light.

The Ultras who followed the whims of demons.

The Engineer, who played with me—and so many others.

When I thought about it like that, we were no different from chess pieces on a massive board, moved however those players above wanted.

Thinking about it that way... I couldn't help but feel suffocated.

This life was like a glass cage, trapping us all inside.

And Uriel was one of its prisoners.

"I can see you hate it..."

"Of course I do. That so-called destiny you follow blindly may very well lead you to your grave."

And now, here she was... about to march with us at the frontlines of the war.

It was a death sentence written across the sky .. And all because she was chosen by that wretched being, the so-called Lord of Light, revered and worshipped here as a god.

Uriel didn't deserve such a fate.

Not by any means.

"Tell me..."

Without warning, Uriel grabbed my hand and asked,

"Would you be sad if I died, Frey?"

Her question was strange... childish... and cursed, to the point that I felt as if it might really happen.

"Yes... I might even cry for you, if it ever came to that."

"Really? I didn't expect you to go that far for me."

Uriel smiled, wearing that polite, practiced smile she showed most people.

But for some reason, I saw something different in her eyes.

"Do you remember, Frey, the promise you made to me that day?"

She spoke of the countless times she had saved me before, pulling my ass out of life-or-death situations more times than I could count.

"I remember. I promised I'd do anything you asked. No matter what it was."

"I see... so you were serious about that."

For a few seconds, silence fell between us as she tightened her grip on my hand.

Something was weighing on her mind.

She wasn't acting like herself.

She wanted to say something, but she hesitated.

And so, I gave her that final push she needed.

Gripping her hand, I stepped closer, making the moment between us look awkward to anyone watching from afar.

"Even if your god leads you down a path to your death, know this .. I won't let it happen."

"Wherever you are in this world, I'll rush to you. I'll find you. And I'll fight the entire world if I have to. So don't hesitate. Speak your wish, and I'll grant it ..no matter what it is."

For a moment, Uriel was surprised, showing an expression she rarely revealed to anyone. Then, she laughed softly.

"You've become quite the smooth talker, Frey. You've really grown during the time we've been apart..."

Lowering her head, she could no longer meet my eyes .. not when we were standing this close.

"You've become... a wonderful man."

Her last words came out faintly, followed directly by her request, giving me no chance to respond.

Instead, I found myself facing a request I never expected from her.

"Frey... Just once, for once in my life, I want you to come for me."

"When the time comes, I want you to save me, just once. I know I sound selfish right now... but please, promise me."

"Promise me, Frey... promise me you'll come for me."

Finally, Uriel voiced her request ..

After saving me so many times without ever asking for anything in return,

Now was the time for me to be the one to save her.

But this request...

It wasn't something I had ever expected from her.

And for some reason...

It didn't feel like she was talking about the Ultras or the coming war.

She wanted me to save her... but from what?

I hesitated for a moment, wondering if it was right to promise her.

To make a promise I wasn't sure I could keep.

But this was Uriel .. Someone I was willing to go to any lengths for.

"I promise. I'll be there for you .. not just once, but as many times as it takes. So it's okay to be a little selfish."

She deserved that much.

Even if she asked for the craziest, most impossible thing...



I would never call her selfish.

After hearing the answer she longed for, I saw happiness light up her face, if only for a moment, as she held onto me without even realizing it.

"Frey..."

With a look full of emotion I couldn't quite define, she stared at me, tightening her grip on my hand.

But then, in that moment, something strange happened.

Something only Uriel experienced.

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Inside the royal hall where the Belgrade Summit was held, Frey and Uriel stood, holding each other's hands.

They were so close they seemed like they were about to embrace.

Uriel was truly happy in that moment .. he had just spoken the words she had longed to hear.

But in that moment of pure emotion, where her affection had grown stronger, raising her affection points higher than ever...

Something strange happened.

From between their clasped hands, a violet spark suddenly burst forth.

It passed through Frey and struck the Saintess candidate, sending a wave of nausea through her that made her stumble. Frey immediately caught her before she fell.

Uriel couldn't understand what she was seeing.

The Frey standing before her was still the same...

His white hair, now grown longer, and the maturing features that had begun to take shape on his face.

And that mysterious aura around him...

It was alluring to her.

That was what she saw for a fleeting moment, but in the next moment...

Reality flipped upside down, and the scene before her changed completely.

Now, she stood in the midst of blazing flames and scattered corpses.

She was still there .. with Frey.

The place was terrifying.

Destruction was the only word to describe it.

In the heart of death and despair, Uriel saw countless dead faces strewn across the battlefield.

But one particular corpse caught her attention.

And what she saw froze her in terror.

The dead girl lying there...

Was herself.

Uriel's body, slaughtered in the most brutal way.

Backing away in fear, she tried to run, clinging to her only hope in that nightmare.

"Frey..."

She grabbed his hand once more .. but it wasn't the warm hand from before.

It was cold.

Cold, lifeless... and cruel.

A hand stained with blood.

When she raised her eyes to him...

She realized her mistake.

This wasn't the Frey she knew.

Wearing a strange black mask and clad in a jet-black armor, holding a sword unlike anything she had ever seen...

Frey was drenched in blood...

Her blood.

And the blood of all the dead surrounding them.

"It's alright, Uriel,"

He spoke calmly.

Coldly.

In a voice she had never heard from him before.

"This is just a nightmare."

With a single touch, he brought her back to reality.

"Just a bad dream."

As his words echoed in her ears...

Uriel found herself back in the royal hall, staring at the Frey she loved.

But in his dark eyes...

She saw his shadow.

And instinctively, she took a step back ...

Gripped by a feeling she never thought she would have for him.

Fear.

Chapter 460: The Edge of War

The Belgrade Summit had come to an end, and the final touches had already been made.

At this point, it could be said that Frey and his companions were standing at the edge of the point of no return.

Toward the close of the summit, a strange moment unfolded between Uriel Platini and Frey Starlight.

The Saintess candidate appeared to open her heart to him, making a mysterious and personal request.

She wanted him to save her.

But from what, exactly?

Frey didn't know the answer.

Even so, he promised to grant her wish .. adding yet another burden to the many he already carried.

Not that it bothered Lord Starlight much.

Those shoulders of his had long grown used to such weight.

Their conversation had been smooth...

But what followed at the end was undeniably odd.

Without warning, Uriel suddenly stepped away, her hands trembling without her even realizing it.

Under Frey's confused gaze, she struggled to find the words.

'What did I just see?'

Was it a vision? A hallucination?

Or as that masked figure had said... a nightmare?

It had come the moment she touched Frey .. something had clearly triggered between them. And the experience felt far too real, like something she had actually lived through.

That masked man... was it truly Frey?

Could it be... what he might become?

Uriel questioned the future of the boy standing before her.

But she quickly rejected the thought.

'That couldn't have been Frey... it's impossible.'

She tried to convince herself .. just as Frey approached her once again.

"Are you alright?"

Her reaction earlier had left him full of questions.

He stepped closer and reached out his hand .. A simple gesture, meant with only good intentions.

Uriel knew that.

But she couldn't help but recoil from that hand.. the same one where she had seen his shadow...

The shadow of a blood-soaked monster.

"I'm sorry..."

She apologized, though Frey had no idea why.

"It's fine."

He replied gently, then instinctively activated the Affection System to read her thoughts ..

Only to be met with confusion... and fear.

What exactly had happened?

He didn't get the chance to find out—because, as expected, they were interrupted.

Sansa had arrived.

"Well, well... Uriel Platini," she said with a teasing smile.

"I thought you knew how to seize an opportunity when I saw you alone with him. But look at you now, throwing it all away."

She chuckled and casually took her place at Frey's side.

She had been watching from the beginning .. Choosing not to step in, as though she had known this would happen.

"See you later, Frey."

Uriel didn't bother responding.

Even though she hated leaving things like this with Frey, walking away now was the best decision she could make...

At least until she could process what she had seen.

"What happened to her?"

Frey asked, turning toward Sansa.

"She simply couldn't handle your darkness."

"Handle what?"

Frey didn't understand what she meant.

What he didn't know .. was that Sansa, too, had seen a different side of him for a brief moment.



She had seen that same masked monster, wreathed in flames.

But unlike Uriel, it didn't shake her.

'Even if you turn into a beast who lives off the blood of your victims... nothing will change.'

Where Uriel was pure and gentle, Sansa was the opposite ..

A creature who carried enough darkness inside her to walk that path alongside him... all the way to the end.

"Forget it. Let's just get out of here."

And with that, she pulled him along ..

Frey left the royal hall behind, and the curtain fell on the summit for good.

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– Frey Starlight's Pov –

Time passed quickly after the summit ended.

I spent the past few days split between intense training... and occasional moments with my sister Ada, or with Sansa .. whose face I'd been seeing more and more lately.

In the last few days, the first fleet set to cross the Demonic Sea toward enemy territory had officially been formed.

For the past few months, scattered skirmishes had erupted between the Empire and the Ultras...

But the battle about to begin now was something entirely different.

Ten thousand warriors from the great noble families, The Empire's finest fighters..

Led by the suicide squad I was now a part of.

Our departure point had been set: the western port of Winterfell.

It was there that I saw my sister Ada rushing around in every direction.

Although Aegon held the title of Supreme Commander of the war council,

It was Ada who had taken on most of the work as his deputy.

Preparing the army, managing its structure and logistics .. All of it had fallen to her.

And this was exactly where she shined.

In record time, Ada had managed to organize an army of ten thousand soldiers ... Perfectly, without a single mistake.

Her hair was tied back in a ponytail as she moved tirelessly from one facility to the next, checking on various units without rest, while I followed behind her alongside Carmen.

Carmen had been glued to her side around the clock—at my request.

As for me, I only stopped by from time to time.

But when I saw my sister shouting in the face of a man over two meters tall, built like a tank, and radiating S-rank aura pressure...

I finally understood why Sir Alon had appointed her as the Supreme Commander's deputy.

Despite the fact that man was a veteran warrior and one of the noble family leaders,

He did nothing but bow his head to Ada, apologizing for his mistakes ..

And in his eyes, I saw genuine respect.

It was the same respect I saw from most of the soldiers gathered here at the Winterfell harbor.

"She's truly incredible."

Standing beside Carmen, the two of us watched her from afar as she worked.

Carmen, who had observed my sister longer than I had, had already come to appreciate her brilliance long ago.

"At first, I had to step in myself just to get the soldiers to follow her. Ada Starlight, a D-rank girl who appeared out of nowhere, barking orders at them..."

"But somehow, she turned things around in no time .. Now they follow her without question."

She possessed a unique kind of charm.

A charisma that drew people in effortlessly.

"I suppose she was born to lead. Unlike me .. I was born to crawl through the dirt of enemy lands."

I chuckled softly, and Carmen did the same.

"Each of you is special in your own way."

"Sounds like you've started favoring her over me. Wasn't I the one who caught your attention back then?"

I smiled, recalling the early days in the Starlight family ..

Back when Carmen had saved me from death.

We had come a long way since then.