

VILLAIN 461

Chapter 461: A Last Embrace

"Are you jealous of your sister now? If you wanted me by your side, maybe you shouldn't have assigned me to hers in the first place."

What she said was true—

I was the one who had her follow Ada in the first place.

But thinking about it now...

Having Carmen follow me everywhere, just like she now followed my sister ..

I found the idea downright amusing.

"Come to think of it, I suppose you fit better beside Ada now. Besides, plenty of women have barged into my life lately..."

There was no place for Carmen among them.

"It's been a long time, Frey... Since those days when our biggest problem was dealing with that old fossil Leonides."

"You haven't changed a bit since then."

"But you have."

Carmen turned to look at me.

She had lived for a long, long time ... long enough that a few years weren't nearly enough to change her.

But for me, the past few years had changed everything .. Whether for better or worse.

"There's no need to hold back anymore, boy.

You've been suppressing yourself this whole time, haven't you?"

So she noticed.

I lifted my palm and glanced at my body...

"I've spent so much time among monsters, I've forgotten how to live among humans."

I had pushed my body to the peak of perfection ..

My mind, my reflexes... everything sharpened and refined.

I had dedicated myself wholly to the art of war.

And because of that, this body now craved it.

It craved battle.

Every fiber of my being screamed at me to release the pressure I had been bottling up inside.

My hands tingled more and more with each passing day I didn't wield a blade...

Whether it was Balerion or the Dark Sister.

For the first time in my life...

I found myself yearning for it.

Yearning for war.

"Let them know what fear truly means, Frey.

Let them witness the rebirth of a star ..

The star of Abraham Starlight."

Placing her hand gently atop my head, Carmen smiled one last time.

"But remember... Don't lose yourself."

"I won't."

I replied simply ..

Savoring these brief moments with one of the few people I truly cared about in this life.

Carmen felt the same.

But at that moment, I didn't realize it yet—

That my body had already begun its strange transformation...

The change that would shape what I was to become.

Without warning, a strange violet spark flickered from the point where Carmen's hand touched my head.

A spark only she could see.

But it was enough ..

Enough to trigger a sudden shift that shattered her smile... and darkened her face.

Carmen possessed deep experience and unshakable composure.

She managed to hold herself together, despite what she had just seen.

But that didn't stop a faint shadow of grief from surfacing on her face ..

A look I rarely saw from her.

"What's wrong?"

I asked.

She responded immediately.

"Nothing..."

With a heavy sigh, Carmen regained control of her expression and slowly withdrew her hand.

"I guess I'm just tired .. after chasing your sister around for months."

"Then take a break while I'm around," I offered, showing a bit of concern.

But she gently refused.

"Don't underestimate me.

I may be just an old lady, but I've still got plenty left to offer."

"Of course you do."

We stood there, the snow falling gently over our heads,

In the bustling port of Winterfell ..

Sharing a quiet moment, until Ada finally arrived and joined us.

"Look at you, sister... Somehow, you remind me of myself."

The fatigue on her face was unmistakable.

She, too, had developed those dark circles under her eyes ..

A consequence of the constant pressure placed on her shoulders due to her high position in the army.

"It's still not enough,"

Ada muttered with a frown.

I shook my head.

"No... you've already done more than enough."

I cast a glance over the bustling war camp that had taken shape here, Amid the frozen lands of the Moonlight family.

Over the ships that stretched across the horizon, And the vast preparations Ada had orchestrated on my behalf.

I couldn't have asked for more.

"It's details like these that win wars.

Be proud of yourself, Ada ..

You've proven yourself worthy of being the lord of this family."

I meant it.

And my sincerity brought a bittersweet smile to her face.

"Why are you suddenly acting like the older brother? It doesn't suit you."

But despite her words, I could sense the quiet happiness blooming in her heart.

She never was good at hiding her true feelings from me.

Ada's gentle smile didn't last long.

Her eyes drifted to the distant horizon, where the sun was nearing its descent.

"So... it's time."

I nodded.

"Yes. The first Imperial Campaign begins now.

The ships set sail at dawn."

I would be aboard the one leading the charge from the front.

"Here we are again... saying goodbye."

I nodded again.

"Yeah."

It had happened so many times in recent years

That we'd almost grown used to it.

Ada knew better than to try stopping me anymore.

No matter how hard she tried...

Her brother would always find his way back to the battlefield.

That was the place I belonged to now.

"I won't ask for much, Frey."

Stepping closer, Ada spoke firmly.

"All I ask... is that you come back to me in one piece."

As long as I was alive,

As long as I returned to her in the end,

Ada would never ask for more.

And yet, once again, I found myself forced to make a promise I wasn't sure I could keep.

"I promise."

Ada would be fighting her own battle ..

Commanding from the rear.

While I... would be thrown into the heart of the storm.

In that moment, it hit me.

Once I crossed the Demonic Sea,

It would be a very long time before I saw her again.

Without meaning to, I pulled my sister into a tight embrace ..

One final hug.

Carmen watched silently from the side,

Smiling gently and allowing us to have our moment.

After a few seconds, I let go.

But Ada held on ..

She didn't want to let go.

She didn't want me to leave.

But I couldn't grant her that wish.

"I'm sorry, Ada."

Pressing a kiss to her forehead,

I took my first step away from her.

"I'll see you later."

With those parting words, I left her behind ..

Before the emotions between us could deepen further.

"See you later... Frey."

Ada echoed those words in a soft whisper,

Fiddling with a strange device in her hands.

There was a lot on her mind lately.

Right now, she wasn't just Ada Starlight ..

She was the second-in-command of the Empire's Grand Army.

And I...

I was just a soldier.

A simple fighter playing his part in the vanguard.

But in the end, both of us were heading toward it ..

War.

The War of Darkness.

Chapter 462: Glory to the Empire (1)

– Frey Starlight's Pov –

As the snow continued to fall endlessly over the western edge of the Empire...

Winterfell stood shrouded in white.

One by one, the ships were prepared, battered constantly by the freezing sea waves.

The Empire's fleet was moments away from launching its most decisive raid yet against the Ultras.

Among all the ships, there was one that stood out ..

A black vessel bearing the banners of the major noble families and ruling powers of the human side.

It was the ship leading the vanguard.

And I was on board.

Unlike the other ships, which were packed with soldiers, this one held only the members of our special squad ..

With the exception of the ship's captain, who handled the helm.

That man was an old sailor with rough features and a missing eye, giving him the look of a pirate in my eyes.

He spent most of his time chatting with Bloodmader, the two of them speaking endlessly about life, past wars, and stories they both lived through.

The old man wasn't exactly normal.

He could even be called insane.

After all, only a madman would willingly board the vessel destined to be the very first to encounter the Ultras' retaliation.

But when I really thought about it, maybe that old man was wiser than the rest.

Given the sheer amount of power packed onto this ship, our odds of being completely wiped out were very, very low.

Standing on the starboard side, I gazed out into the void ..

Toward the frozen sea we were about to cross.

"It'll take us two full days to reach the Bay of Shezclar... the same place where the last battle took place."

As I stared into the waves, a voice joined me ..

My friend, and partner-in-crime: Ghost Umbra.

He wore a full black outfit that resembled the assassins from games like Assassin's Creed, complete with a hood and lightweight gear that made movement easy.

What I wore wasn't all that different... except mine was much heavier.

"Not much left then."

I commented indifferently, standing shoulder to shoulder as we both stared out at the sea.

"Come to think of it... it was snowing hard that night too."

"Yeah. Red and white go well together, don't they?"

This pure snow is far too easy to dye red."

Ghost said that with a strange calm ..

And we both remembered that night.

The night we killed someone we once called a brother.

Thinking back, I remembered something Ghost said that night ..

Something about consequences. About paying the price.

That we had become sinners now... and would be punished for what we'd done sooner or later.

"Maybe the price will be paid soon."

"It will be."

Ghost's reply confirmed we were thinking the same thing.

We both smiled grimly, leaning against the railing of the ship.

"Just make sure we kill the bastards who caused all this before our turn comes. Let's make them pay."

He voiced what was already obvious.

He didn't even need to say it.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll make sure they do."

I could barely restrain my killing intent in this moment ..

The blades inside me trembled.

The Ultras, Gvardiol, and perhaps even Beatrice, since she was the one behind that cursed game...

They'd all get their fair share.

"What are you two doing, off on your own in a place like this?"

Wearing his gleaming armor, our third companion approached ..

It was Snow.

"Unlike you and your shining presence, we prefer the shadows."

I was serious.

We looked dull compared to him.

Snow sighed in frustration, clearly feeling left out again.

"It's not like I chose to be in the spotlight."

"I know.

But that doesn't change the fact that you're the star tonight, does it?"

"No comment."

Snow scratched his head, visibly annoyed by the responsibility that had been suddenly dumped on him.

As the crowned hero and wielder of Vermithor, he'd been chosen to give the speech before the raid began.

His words would be heard by the entire ten-thousand-strong fleet,

As well as the entire force stationed at Winterfell's military harbor.

I found the whole situation amusing ..

Because with my face, I was never going to be picked for that job anyway.

"What's with that look? All you have to do is go up there and say a few flowery words. That's it."

"Easier said than done."

Snow continued grumbling, leaning on the railing beside us.

He looked more nervous about giving that speech than about the war itself.

"Let me give you a little tip. It might help make your big moment better."

"Oh? I'm listening."

Once he showed interest, I gave him my advice.

"It's simpler than you think.

Humans are easy to lead.

All you need is something flashy ..

Like a bright explosion, or fireworks right as you finish your speech."

I was completely serious.

But Snow didn't seem to believe me.

"And here I thought you were going to give me some real advice."

"I am serious so you know."

"That just makes it worse."

Even Ghost agreed.

"I don't think something like that would work."

To him, it sounded just as ridiculous.

"Neither of you understand the art of presentation."

There wasn't much I could say if they refused to believe me.

We kept talking about it for a while longer, sharing moments that felt like echoes from the past...

Until silence finally settled between us.

"It's our first time again since Londor, isn't it?"

Snow brought it up—our old adventure.

The time we traveled to another planet in search of the unknown.

This time, it wasn't a different world...

But a different continent.

"Yeah. This time, it'll be even harder."

After all, this was war.

"Let's give it everything we've got..."

For those still alive ahead of us ...

And the dead we left behind."

Snow clenched his fist, golden eyes glowing with determination.

As for me and Ghost, our expressions darkened.

We both fell silent.

Snow was probably thinking about him.

Danzo.

A pang of guilt struck me.

He was the only one we had left in the dark...

The only one who didn't know what really happened.

Snow was the very definition of a hero—

Something far too bright when compared to someone like me... or an assassin like Ghost.

He would've never agreed to what we did.

He would never have killed Danzo ..

Not even in the final moment.

Maybe he would've let him fully turn into a demon first, Then fought him afterward.

Because... that's just the kind of person he was.

That's why we had to keep him out of it.

We both carried the weight of that choice—

And neither of us dared to imagine how he'd react .. If he ever found out that I was the one who killed Danzo.

And no one else.

I often wondered how he'd take it.

Maybe he'd resent me.

Maybe he'd hate me.

I didn't know.

What I did know... was that my friendship with the Empire's shining hero was starting to buckle under the weight of secrets.

And I didn't know what the future held for us.

Chapter 463: Glory to the Empire (2)

As the crashing of waves blended with the noise of men and the creaking of wood,

The three of us stood there in silence, lost in our own thoughts.

Then, without any of us noticing...

The moment arrived.

"Time to go embarrass yourself. Good luck."

I gave Snow a light slap on the back.

He waved us off, dragging his feet as he walked away.

After long hours of preparation and final checks...

The Empire's First Fleet was finally ready.

As the soldiers boarded their ships,

Those vessels became like massive beasts ... Ready to carve a path through the sea toward war.

The hum of magical engines, The roar of soldiers ..

All of it blended together in a thunderous harmony that shook the sky above.

But before the campaign could officially begin...

A single young man climbed to the mast of one of the fleet's largest ships.

From there, his golden eyes looked down on everything.

Snow Lionheart.

His white hair danced in the wind as he stood at the peak.

Clearing his throat, he gathered all of his aura into his voice, amplifying it to reach every soul present.

Then, without warning ..

The Empire's promised hero let out a commanding cry:

"Attention!"

His voice rippled like a shockwave,

Silencing everything around him.

Ten thousand soldiers raised their heads in unison, Their eyes fixed on him.

With all eyes locked in place...

Snow found himself wondering what exactly he was supposed to say.

The soldiers below were in all sorts of states .. Nervous, uncertain, afraid.

They were human, just like him.

In truth, they were ordinary people ..

Citizens of the Empire, not born warriors.

And at the brink of war, The dominant feeling in their hearts was likely fear.

Taking that into account,

Snow decided not to bother crafting a carefully written speech.

He would speak honestly instead.

"Soldiers of the Empire,

Thank you for gathering here today,

And for answering the call."

He scratched his head and sighed ..trying to put his thoughts into words.

"Despite my young age, I've spent my whole life within the walls of this Empire.

I've read its long history...

About the storms it's weathered for over 300 years."

His voice, amplified by aura, echoed clearly across the entire fleet as he continued.

"Even after seeing and experiencing so much, There's one thing I've never fully understood ..

Why people feel loyalty to a Empire.

Why they love the land they were born in."

"Some are born with those feelings.

Others love their homeland simply because it's where the people they care about live."

"But all of that... is relative.

At the end of the day, these are feelings—

Feelings that can be manufactured by the leaders of this nation."

"Just as parents can shape an entire family through how they treat their children,

Those above us... can shape the lives of the masses with their decisions."

The moment Snow spoke those words, the silence deepened.

It was a striking statement .. one that shook the very air.

The Empire's crowned hero had just implied that the soldiers who gathered here by their own will... were, in truth, merely individuals led by those at the top.

His words were both wrong and right.

Throughout history, people had often been manipulated by figures like Aegon Valerion...

Even by what remained of the ruling family.

Not long ago, Maekar had forced many into a hopeless battle against their will.

But Snow didn't let those poisonous thoughts linger long.

Summoning Vermithor,

He unleashed his power ..

Lighting up the entire port of Winterfell,

Making dawn arrive early on that frigid night.

The holy light of his aura washed over the soldiers, Warming their hearts, Filling them with something they didn't realize they needed.

Snow delivered a spectacle truly worthy of the chosen hero ..

And then shouted with all his might:

"The words I spoke to you earlier... I said them because I completely disagree with them!"

"Loyalty, faith, and love ..

These aren't things to be dictated by those above us, Not even from a commander to a soldier, Or from a father to a son."

"These are things that cannot be forced.

They're born from within us .. From our own free will."

"Each of us defines loyalty in our own way.

For some, it's a strong friendship that drives them forward.

For others, it's love that makes them fight for someone dear.

Or devotion to a kind master they chose to follow."

"We all have our own reasons to fight—

Reasons that come from our own choices,

From the freedom we were blessed with.

That's why we stand here today,

To defend this land."

"Perhaps it's presumptuous of me to define it this way.

Everyone sees these things differently.

But what I do know is this—"

"Everything I just mentioned shines brightest

When the people of a nation are living in peace .. When they are free."

"To protect that freedom we've known until now, We gather here today ..

To launch a war against a merciless enemy."

"Victory isn't guaranteed.

This war won't be easy."

"In this war, Your loyalty will be tested ..

Not just to the Empire... But to humanity itself!"

Still bathed in Vermithor's light,

Snow continued .. Igniting every soldier's heart like a spark in a storm.

"You may be faced with impossible choices .. To die beside your loved ones,

Or run away and hide."

"I speak to you now not as the Empire's promised hero, But simply as Snow Lionheart."

"My loyalty is real.

It wasn't bought.

It wasn't manufactured."

"I was born here.

I lived my whole life here ..

Through joy, and pain alike."

"And now, I will prove that loyalty.

As the second hero.

As the successor to Kazes Valerion!"

"The leaders of this Empire are far from perfect.

Perhaps they've caused some of your greatest tragedies."

"But one thing is undeniable ...

Today, we all stand on the same side."

"This land we live on belongs to all of us,

No matter our differences ..

And we will not turn a blind eye to an enemy who seeks our death!"

"I can't speak for the entire Empire,

But what I can say is this ..

I, and every member of the vanguard,

Will fight to our last breath for this land!"

"We will defend the Empire against all who dare to bring war upon it!"

As the radiant light engulfed him,

Snow finished his speech.

He had said far more than he'd originally planned .. But in the end, he spoke from the heart.

He gave everything he had,

Trying to reach the ten thousand souls standing below.

At first... silence.

But then ..

After just a few seconds ..

The soldiers erupted, shouting one after another, their voices becoming one:

"Glory to the Empire!"

"Glory to the Empire!"

"Glory to the Empire!"

With a smile, Frey laughed softly as he watched the effect Snow Lionheart had on the army .. All with just a few words.

In the end, he had taken his advice,

And delivered a spectacular show using Vermithor.

"Looks like all that worrying was pointless... Snow."

In the end ..

He too had been born to be a king.

That destiny... was always expected of him.

And with his speech concluded,

Dawn had already arrived.

In that moment ..

The ships surged forward.

The soldiers roared in unison ..

And the vanguard fleet departed from Winterfell harbor.

Their destination...

The Continent of the Ultras.

Chapter 464: The Abyss Unleashed (1)

– Frey Starlight's Pov –

"Glory to the Empire."

Those were the words Snow Lionheart made everyone repeat ..Until they became a chant.

A battle cry that the Imperial Army kept echoing throughout the first day of our voyage across the sea.

Our fleet consisted of just over a hundred ships, Carrying the full strength of ten thousand soldiers.

Even in a place as terrifying as the Demonic Sea, A fleet like this was a force to be reckoned with.

Thanks to the overwhelming power we carried, Not a single nightmare creature dared approach us.

Despite their mindless, beastlike nature ..

They possessed a survival instinct strong enough to keep them away.

And so, the fleet advanced smoothly,

Slicing through the waves one after another.

For the past few hours, As I sat atop the mast of our flagship, I could hear the laughter of soldiers below,
As veterans shared war stories with younger recruits.

Swordsmen sharpened their blades,

Spearmen inspected their weapons,

And mages went over their incantations...

Everyone was eager ..

Ready to fight for their continent,

And for humanity itself.

Just a few hours remained until we reached the Bay of Shezclar.

The place that, in all likelihood, would host the first clash.

Everyone knew it.

Even though our vanguard squad was expected to handle the major battles,

The tension still weighed heavily on the hearts of the soldiers.

That's why they were doing everything they could to keep themselves busy ..

Trying to avoid being crushed by the pressure.

Followers of the Church quietly recited their prayers, Asking their god to light the path ahead.

Others spent time with friends ..

I even caught glimpses of couples sharing intimate moments aboard the ships as they sailed toward war.

Scenes like that weren't uncommon.

Many couples forged love—and even marriage—on the battlefield.

They say that life-and-death moments have a way of pulling hearts closer together.

And among the ten thousand troops in the fleet, The number of female warriors was far from small.

"How romantic... to fight beside the one you love."

When Sansa commented on the scene before me, I realized I had completely forgotten she was even there.

Up here, at the top of the mast where the wind howled the loudest, Sansa had been asleep until now, Her head resting on my lap, Leaving herself completely vulnerable in my hands.

She only opened her eyes the moment mine landed on the couples embracing their passion for love before battle.

Sometimes I wondered if she did these things on purpose.

"Do you really think fighting beside the one you love is romantic?"

"Of course."

She answered, clasping her hands over her chest, Those devilish eyes of hers gazing up at me from below.

"When you find yourself in the middle of a battlefield with the one you love ..

Willing to throw your life away for them if necessary...

Isn't that the purest form of romance?"

True enough...

To sacrifice yourself for someone you love ..

It was the ultimate proof of the bond you shared.

But I didn't see it that way.

"It feels more tragic than romantic to me.

If one of them dies, the other lives on, burdened with the guilt of a life lost on their behalf .. Haunted by it every single day."

"That's not true."

Sansa immediately refuted me, sitting upright beside me.

"If you ever died for me, I'd kill myself right after. So I wouldn't have to carry that guilt you're talking about."

I stared at her, Not understanding how she could say something like that so easily... and so bluntly.

"Romantic, sure.

But wouldn't that make my sacrifice meaningless?"

"Exactly.

That's why you must never sacrifice yourself for me .. no matter what."

There it was again.

Sansa trying to make me promise something.

But I didn't.

I wasn't sure what the future would hold,

So I decided to be honest instead.

"Tell me...

If one day you saw me about to die,

Would you throw your life away for me?"

"Absolutely."

She answered without a moment's hesitation ..

A smile on her face.

"Isn't that unfair?"

You ask me not to do something you're perfectly willing to do for me?"

"You're right..."

But my life is worth far less than yours, Frey.

That's why it's okay if I die .. But you're not allowed to."

"Isn't that just hypocrisy?"

What even defines the value of a person's life?

On what basis had she decided mine was worth more than hers?

That kind of thinking wasn't universal.

In fact, to me... it reeked of self-loathing.

As if she hated herself ..

And everything she represented.

"It's just my own selfishness."

That was her excuse.

And it didn't convince me at all.

"Sorry... but I'm going to have to reject that kind of selfishness."

Lately, I felt like I had begun to understand Sansa—just a little.

Behind that devilish smile she wore most of the time, There was something deeper.

Something darker, tangled in the depths of her heart.

She looked like a carefree demon on the outside ... But that wasn't true.

She once told me she was living only for me.

That I was the only reason she kept going.

Her feelings for me were real, and I never denied them .. Doing so would have been an insult to her.

But I didn't want her to keep living like this.

I wanted her to find a different reason ..

A reason to live for herself, not just for me.

Unfortunately, I couldn't help her much with that.

How could I, when only a few hours separated me from the enemy?

Placing my palm gently atop her head,

Feeling those ivory horns, I rose to my feet, ready to leap down from the mast.

"Until the day we commit that double suicide you spoke of and die together...

You're not allowed to die before me ..

And not after me either.

So cling to life with everything you have,

Because I won't allow you to die."

As I lifted my hand away,

Sansa pressed both of hers to her head,

Fingering the roots of her snow-white hair.

Unlike her usual hostile stance,

She was remarkably calm now.

That always happened whenever I took the lead in this strange bond between us.

And it made me certain ..

That devilish persona she always tried to wear was never her true self.

"Let's go."

I smiled at her one last time ..

And jumped down.

Sansa didn't follow immediately.

She remained sitting there for a while,

A storm of thoughts no doubt raging inside her mind...

Then, without warning,

She vanished into her own shadow ..

Joining me.

We were close now.

Close to them.

To enemy territory.

Chapter 465: The Abyss Unleashed (2)

On that freezing night, As snow and rain took turns falling from the heavens...

The Imperial Fleet neared its destination ..

A fact we confirmed the moment a thick fog swallowed the entire fleet.

That fog was a signature of Shezclar Bay, the gateway to Ultras territory.

Entering it meant only one thing:

We had arrived.

Standing at the bow of the lead ship,

We all gathered behind Bloodmader,

Who stared silently into the horizon with his empty white eyes.

The silence was eerie ..

Beyond the creaking wood and crashing waves, No one dared make a sound.

It was a moment of pure tension and focus.

A strange phenomenon, As ten thousand men fell into perfect silence at once.

We were now officially within enemy land.

Everyone knew...

This calm wouldn't last long.

Slowly, I clenched my fist, Feeling a violet light begin to swirl within my eyes.

I could sense them.

And so could every warrior on this ship.

The enemy.

Hundreds—no, thousands—of auras closing in around us.

They were close.

Very close.

But the thick fog still kept them hidden.

"They're right in front of us, but we can't see a thing."

Bloodmader turned to us,

Nodding toward a certain person.

"Do it, Snow Lionheart.

Light up this world once more ..

Reveal the enemies lurking behind this veil of fog."

With a heavy breath, The crowned hero stepped forward.

Behind him stood Saintess Yorasha.

"I'll support you."

"Thank you."

Their words carried weight ..

A clear sign that a deep bond had formed between them during Snow's months of training in the Church.

Channeling her holy power, Yorasha poured her aura into Snow's body.

In turn, Snow summoned Vermithor,

Unleashing the explosive energy that fused his aura with the saintess's divine force.

Manipulating the elements bent to his will,

He moved the thick fog surrounding us with surreal ease .. As if it were part of him.

Across a radius of over twenty kilometers,

Snow drew in all the fog ..

A breathtaking sight that left everyone stunned, Witnessing the ease with which he commanded nature itself.

Then, with the fog absorbed into his power,

Snow raised his sword ..

And fulfilled Bloodmader's request by lighting up the world once again.

"First Sword: Solar Judgment."

With a single swing of his blade,

Snow reminded the world why he had been chosen as the next hero.

The sky, dark just moments ago, Became flooded with light .. As if dawn had arrived early.

His light pierced through the veil,

Shining directly upon the enemy that had been hiding behind the fog all along.

It took a moment for the Imperial Fleet to grasp what had happened.

They were mesmerized by Snow's Solar Judgment.

But they quickly snapped back to their senses ...

Once the scene before them became clear.

"They're here."

Bloodmader's voice rang out.

And at that exact moment ..

Reality trembled.

Swords were drawn.

Auras exploded.

And battle cries echoed.

The soldiers of the Empire, eyes burning with bloodlust, Prepared themselves for the imminent clash.

And how could they not?

Because finally ..

On the far horizon ..

The enemy had arrived.

Black ships ..dozens, perhaps hundreds lined the horizon on the far end of the sea.

Though we could barely make them out through the distance, it was enough to grasp the scale of what we were about to face.

Their fleet was massive—undeniably larger than ours—and I could sense the auras of several powerful individuals among them. Auras I had already grown familiar with.

But the numbers didn't matter much. Numbers had never been the deciding factor in war.

"Give the order, Bloodmader."

With eyes glowing purple and killing intent I could no longer suppress, I turned to him .. no, pleaded.

"Give the order and let the bloodbath begin."

Now that I had reached the battlefield I'd long craved, I found it nearly impossible to hold back.

This Aura, this strength I had cultivated over months .. I wanted to know just how far it could take me.

I knew I was still a mere insect compared to those who watched from above. But this moment—this very battle—was the threshold. A chance to glimpse how far I could ascend.

To break my chains, I needed overwhelming power. The kind of strength few ever reach.

Time was against me. And the time I did have... was running out.

But Bloodmader didn't share my impatience. He raised his hand to halt me and pointed toward something else entirely.

"Not yet... Look carefully at your enemy, Frey Starlight."

Following his gaze, I finally understood what he meant.

To the east, the Imperial fleet. To the west, the fleet of the Ultras.

And in the stretch of sea between them, a platform had been erected .. an ornate stage constructed in the middle of the cursed sea.

The Ultras had sent a signal. The experts of the Empire understood it immediately.

"Before the battle begins... they want to talk? That's unexpected of them."

Unlike their usual brutality, the Ultras were asking for a meeting between the two sides. We didn't know why ..but surprisingly, Bloodmader didn't reject it.

"This is the first time they've requested anything like this... since the First War, three centuries ago."

He stroked his beard thoughtfully.

The war was inevitable. No words would change that.

But these kinds of meetings were often used to shake an enemy's morale .. to make a psychological strike before the real one.

That the Ultras would request such a thing meant they had something prepared.

Bloodmader chose to go himself, bringing only a small force meant to intimidate rather than negotiate.

And just like that, in a matter of minutes, an unspoken agreement delayed the war.

From the Empire's side...

Bathed in radiant white light, Bloodmader launched himself into the sky, flying toward the platform like a streak of lightning.

Behind him, Snow and I followed.

We were the Empire's finest talents, our strength eclipsing our peers by far.

That's why Bloodmader chose us .. for the enemy to see the true face of Imperial might.

We crossed the distance in the blink of an eye and landed with flair upon the solid platform .. only to find them already there.

Three of them... and three of us.

Chapter 466: The Abyss Unleashed (3)

But the auras of the Ultras were suffocating.

"Two SS+ ranks... and one whose aura just brushes SS."

I commented calmly as I scanned our enemies.

"Your senses are truly sharp... Frey Starlight."

Sitting front and center was the infamous Lord of the Ultras, dressed in formal wear and that same luxurious coat... his beloved sword by his side.

"Gavid Lindman."

Behind him stood a masked youth around our age. Though his face was hidden, his crimson eyes peered through the gaps and never left Snow.

Just the sight of him was enough to trigger killing intent.

It was V.

And the third figure... made a cold smile creep unconsciously across my face.

A grotesquely massive figure wrapped in black bandages .. none other than the cursed half-demon, Gvardiol, his sly grin fully intact.

"Well, well... welcome to my humble stage, dear guests from the Empire."

Oddly enough, Gvardiol took the lead, speaking instead of Gavid.

"A fine delegation indeed. The former Temple director, Bloodmader. The Hero of the Empire, Snow Lionheart. And you..."

He turned to me with particular interest.

"Frey Starlight. They call you the Black Death on our side. You're famous, you know. Hehehe."

He chuckled.

But Bloodmader stepped forward, towering before him.

They were the same size, true—but Gvardiol's power far surpassed his.

That monster had already broken into SS+.

"You brought us here just to sing praises of our heroes, Ultras lord? If that's the case, then I believe fists would be a far better choice than words."

"Hold your horses, old man. You're rushing things. Isn't your generation supposed to be more... composed?"

Gvardiol laughed, standing chest-to-chest with Bloodmader, as if the two were seconds away from throwing hands.

But then ..

"That's enough, Gvardiol. We didn't come here to play games."

Interrupting from behind, Gavid Lindman finally stood and cut the tension with a cold, clipped tone.

"Champions of the Empire... I've come here today not as your enemy ..but as your mercy. I came to offer you a choice."

He raised a hand in front of Bloodmader and spoke with grim finality.

"Surrender. Don't start a doomed war that will lead only to your annihilation. If you do, I promise... those of you deemed worthy will be allowed to live."

For a moment... silence reigned.

Then Snow Lionheart stepped forward, his multicolored Aura flaring violently ..each hue a reflection of the elements gifted to him.

"Is that really all you have to say, Lord of the Ultras? And here I thought you had something worthwhile to offer... but what came out of your mouth just now was nothing more than a hollow threat."

"Look at where you're standing. You're on the battlefield. Do you honestly think that someone who came all this way, prepared to die, would just fall to their knees at the sound of your pathetic words?"

Snow's fury was unmistakable ..and his Aura reflected it.

But his pressure was immediately countered when V's body ignited in terrifying black flames, evening the scales in an instant.

"Don't be so eager to die, Snow Lionheart. And don't interrupt the Supreme Authority when he speaks. Lord Gavid Lindman hasn't finished yet."

And indeed, Gavid hadn't.

Closing his eyes for a moment, the Lord of the Ultras opened them again, revealing a strange darkness swirling within.

"Tell me, Imperial Hero... who do you think you're fighting in this war? The Ultras?"

I already understood what Gavid was getting at. But I chose to let him continue—there was no point in hiding the truth any longer.

"You wanted something interesting? Fine ... here it is."

Raising a single finger to the sky, Gavid Lindman made a declaration that echoed across the world.

"The gates sealed by your First Hero, Kazes Valerion, have been opened once more. There's nothing left separating us from Hellmond... the land of demons."

There it was.

The moment he spoke those cursed words, I saw Snow and Bloodmader's faces turn to a grave ... completely unable to process what they'd just heard.

"Even if you somehow manage to defeat the Ultras—what then? Do you really think that would be the end of it?"

Gavid laughed at our foolishness.

"No. That won't be the end. Because your true enemy isn't the Ultras... it's the ones above. The Ten High Seats ... and the Demon King himself."

"Beings who could erase insignificant creatures like us with a mere snap of their fingers. So tell me ..what exactly do you hope to accomplish by waging a war you've already lost?"

It hit hard. That much was clear—even Bloodmader snapped.

"Lies! You're lying!"

"Lying? And why would I do that?"

Gavid smirked.

"Everything I've said is truth. You'll come to face those horrors soon enough."

And just like that—I realized Gavid had succeeded.

Even if only slightly...

He'd shaken our morale.

But he hadn't broken it.

"We will not surrender," Snow said with steel in his voice, despite everything he had just heard.

"Just like our ancestors fought until their dying breaths... so will we. Even if the gates of Hell open right before our eyes."

"How naive... Imperial Hero."

Gavid sighed, seemingly disappointed by our ignorance.

Then .. with a flick of his sword ..everything changed.

"If you're that desperate to die... then die! Right here, right now!"

At his words, the platform beneath us trembled violently. It felt like an earthquake—but it wasn't.

The sea around us began to churn ..as something stirred beneath it.

Not something... many things.

Monsters ..horrid creatures of the nightmare ..surged from the depths like a curse summoned from the abyss.

Snow and Bloodmader both flinched in genuine shock ..they hadn't sensed them at all.

From nothingness, the nightmare beasts had emerged. Their numbers were staggering.

So many, in fact, that they immediately attacked the Imperial fleet from behind—striking when no one was prepared.

Surrounded by tentacles and writhing limbs .. we knew then, without doubt, we had been completely deceived.

"You cowards!!! Dogs will always be dogs!"

Bloodmader roared in rage.

He had made a critical mistake .. believing the Ultras would respect custom and spare the envoys.

He had been far too naïve.

With the Ultras' trio before us...

And the nightmare monsters at our back...

We were completely surrounded.

It was a position no one would envy.

Chapter 467: The Abyss Unleashed (4)

Gavid Lindman and V were about to make their move—but they stopped...

Because Gvardiol suddenly burst into laughter.

"Hahahahahahahahaha!!!"

He laughed so loudly it threatened to rupture their eardrums.

He was truly ecstatic—completely intoxicated by the moment.

"Beatrice was right!!!"

Gvardiol screamed under the puzzled gazes of Gavid and V, who couldn't understand the reason for his sudden madness.

Until he shouted ..

"You really are the best... Frey Starlight!"

The moment Gvardiol said my name, every gaze turned toward me, leaving both sides in confusion.

Unlike Bloodmader and Snow ..who were visibly shaken by what the Ultras had shown .. I wore just one expression from beginning to end:

A smile.

A smile I hadn't even realized I was making. A sadistic, terrifying smile that hid a monstrous thirst for blood.

"You've been trying to kill me with your stare this entire time, Lord Starlight. I wonder... do you hate me? Do you want to see me dead? Maybe I did something to upset you... But right now, I'm curious about something else entirely. Why, in the name of hell, are you smiling like that in a situation like this?"

Gvardiol asked, sounding genuinely intrigued.

I took my first step forward since arriving at the platform they'd built with their own hands.

"My apologies, gentlemen. There seems to be a misunderstanding here."

Step by step, I moved closer to Bloodmader and Snow.

"But before I clear that up... I have a question for you, bandaged freak ... Gvardiol."

Fixing my gaze on him, my eyes blazed with a violet glow.

"Ever since we entered the Shizclar Bay, I've been tracking everything .. your army of 35,000 men, the presence of the Hollows and the Lords, even the nightmare creatures you hid in the depths."

They all stared at me in disbelief, especially when I gave the exact number of their forces.

"But you, half-demon... I never sensed your Aura, never heard your breath, not even the beat of your heart. It was as if you didn't exist at all. Before we begin, I have to ask... how did you do it?"

It was genuine curiosity. Gvardiol was the only one who surprised me .. because unlike the others, I couldn't feel him.

During my training, I had honed my senses to perfection—to the point where I could detect anything within my domain.

For him to escape that meant he was hiding something. And indeed, he laughed in response.

"My heartbeat? My breath? You're truly insane, Lord Starlight. To go that far... what kind of senses do you even have?"

With a filthy smile, Gvardiol ripped away the black bandages covering his chest, revealing a grotesquely mutated body leaking foul black fluid, with gray skin riddled in deep, unnatural holes.

What lay within those holes wasn't flesh or blood .. but rot and corruption.

"You're right, Lord Starlight. I have no pulse, no breath. I've been dead for a long, long time."

He laughed as his body erupted with a massive Shadow Aura.

"As for my Aura, I simply suppressed it with a skill I possess. That's why you couldn't sense me. There. Are you happy now?"

Hearing his answer, I nodded.

"I see... Impressive, really."

"Well, you're going to die anyway, so no harm in granting one of your last wishes, right?"

He was absolutely convinced he had me cornered.

"I told you earlier—you're misunderstanding something."

I placed my right hand on Snow's shoulder... and my left on Bloodmader's.

The smile on my face deepened.

"These two... they came here as emissaries. For a conversation."

With a snap of my fingers, Snow and Bloodmader vanished from the platform in an instant .. leaving me alone with the enemy.

Back aboard the ship, neither of them understood how they had returned—completely unaware of my teleportation ability.

And after sending them away, I slowly lowered my arms ..then spread them wide, facing my foes.

"As for me... I came here for one reason, and one reason only."

At that moment—those words—

The world darkened.

The void trembled.

And the nightmare creatures screamed in terror.

The expressions on the Ultras' elite turned to horror.

Releasing my Aura, I finally drew my swords, letting loose the bloodlust I had kept buried until now.

"I came here today... to slaughter every last one of you!"

"And I'm starting with you, bastard who killed Danzo!!"

My hysterical scream .. laced with overwhelming killing intent .. left the Ultras unable to react. They realized, far too late, that their entire plan... had been effortlessly obliterated by a single man.

"That Aura... this cursed Aura..."

Staring at me in disbelief, Gavid Lindman couldn't comprehend what he was seeing.

"How?! How in the hell is his Aura beyond SS+?!"

What he felt wasn't SS+...

It had surpassed it entirely .. reaching the mythical realm of SSS.

The three of them couldn't make sense of it. But I didn't give them the time to think.

One second I was in front of them ..

The next, I had vanished entirely.

With blades burning in merciless black Aura, I unleashed the full power I had gathered until now.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow – Supreme art : Abyssal Wave!"

I didn't have the luxury of fighting the nightmare creatures and the Ultras one by one...

So I made my choice ..

I would annihilate them all in a single strike.

An all-out assault ...

The unleashed peak of the Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow...

Abyssal Wave.

The impact was devastating. Using pure Shadow Aura, I tore through everything in the battlefield ..ripping apart the nightmare creatures, the waves, the very land itself... and even the Ultras' elite ..all in one blow.

Shadow slashes appeared out of nowhere, tearing through everything in their path.

Within seconds, the sea turned crimson with blood. Those once-mighty beasts that ruled the ocean screamed as they fell ..one after another .. slaughtered by my overwhelming strike.

And the moment I cleared the battlefield of those nightmarish abominations ..

I surged forward, riding a dark meteor, charging straight at Gvardiol, who was still struggling to comprehend what had just happened.

But Gavid Lindman reacted instantly, rushing to his side as soon as he saw me coming.

Grasping the Aether , ready for battle...

But it didn't matter.

I had been prepared to face all of them .. from the start.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow – Supreme Art : Void Carving!"

With a dual slash of my blades, I released a colossal wave of dark Aura .. a devastating tide that shattered the entire platform and buried the Lords of the Ultras deep within the boiling depths of the demonic sea, which evaporated under the sheer pressure.

And as I tore through my enemies ..

I laughed.

Like a madman.

"Finally..."

At long last, I could release it.

The power I had built.

The emotions I had buried.

"I can let it all out now!"

I didn't have to hold back anymore.

Not here ..

Not on this battlefield.

Here... I could finally kill them.

"I can finally kill all those bastard sons of whores."

In that moment ...

It had officially begun.

The first battle... of the War of Darkness.

Chapter 468: Slaughter in Shizclar Bay (1)

The Ultras had never been a people one could reason with using words. That was a well-established fact .. a fact that had been proven beyond any doubt today.

After luring the Empire's forces into their territory, the Ultras managed to trap them in a carefully prepared ambush.

The waters of the Shezcelar Gulf erupted in a terrifying explosion, revealing the horrors that had been lurking in its depths.

A massive swarm of sea-dwelling Nightmare Creatures launched a synchronized assault, unleashing devastating destruction upon the Empire's fleet.

The scene was terrifying .. a perfect painting of death unfolding upon the ocean.

Tentacles and feelers wrapped tightly around ships, dragging them down one after another, along with everyone on board.

These maritime disasters were mostly of rank S and even beyond that...

And the worst part was that there were hundreds of them ..flooding the sea like a swarm of monsters.

"How the hell did the Ultras manage to control so many of them?!"

One of the imperial officers screamed, wiping the blood from his face as he tried to cut away the tendrils threatening to sink his ship.

The Ultras had long used Nightmare Creatures in war, but never before had the Empire seen them control such a vast number.

Especially sea-type Nightmare Creatures ..

the kind that dwelled in the deep, rarely surfacing...

Beasts that resembled Krakens from another world, some mutated oceanic horrors akin to giant sharks.

These monsters had hidden far below the surface, completely out of the Empire's detection. That was why Snow and the others hadn't sensed their presence at all.

At the exact moment the Nightmare Creatures struck, the Ultras seized the opportunity .. bombarding the fleet with magical cannons, arrows, and destructive spells.

The attacks rained from above like a torrential storm.

From below and from above ..

The Empire's vanguard was completely surrounded.

And yet, despite the desperate situation,

this was not a one-sided battle.

The members of the Special Unit quickly scattered, rushing to aid the other ships under siege.

Phoenix was like a moving volcano ..

a volcano that poured its fire into the sea,

vaporizing it along with every Nightmare Creature swimming within.

On the other side, Snow Lionheart unleashed his full arsenal of elemental powers, blasting everything in his path.

Saintess Yurasha and Uriel both channeled waves of divine energy across vast distances, forming shields around the imperial soldiers ..

Shields that not only blocked the Ultras' attacks, but also healed the wounded.

Meanwhile, Bloodmader's flagship forced its way through the monstrous tide,

desperately trying to reach Frey.

"We have to hurry! Frey Starlight is fighting their commanders alone out there!!"

Snow Lionheart shouted, his voice heavy with urgency.

"I know that, damn it!!"

Bloodmader growled, gritting his teeth.

Gathering his radiant aura, he punched forward ..

unleashing a wave of destruction that tore the sea apart in front of him.

"What the hell is that kid thinking?!"

To stay there alone ..

surrounded by three SS ranked monsters or higher, plus the Nightmare Creatures...

No matter how he looked at it, it seemed like a suicide mission.

He had been completely fooled by the enemy .. never expecting them to prepare a trap of this scale.

And to make matters worse,

he still didn't understand how Frey had managed to send him and Snow back to the ship with just a single touch.

"There's no need to worry. Frey is holding his ground just fine."

Standing atop the ship's mast,

at the highest point with a panoramic view of the battlefield, Sansa bombarded the surrounding sea monsters with her deadly Shadow Blades.

At the same time, she summoned her shadow tendrils to fight off any creature that dared approach the ship.

Her demonic eyes were locked far into the distance...

deep among the swarm of sea beasts.

From time to time, she tracked the violent aura bursts from Frey's attacks ..

each one leaving a wave of destruction in its wake.

Even though he looked like nothing more than a speck from that distance,

she could tell almost exactly how he was doing.

"Holding his ground? Did you not see who his enemies are?!"

Snow shouted from afar, still manipulating the elements one after another.

Meanwhile, Uriel Platini tried to support Frey with her divine powers,

but the distance was simply too great ..

leaving her unable to contribute much.

"I'll go help him.

I'm confident I can reach him quickly using Void Step."

Snow made up his mind ..

determined to rush in and aid Frey, who was fighting alone.

But a dense wave of shadows suddenly coiled around him, blocking his path.

It was Sansa.

"What you should be focusing on right now is the enemy around you.

If you leave, the Empire's fleet won't survive."

As she spoke, Sansa continued to conjure more and more shadow blades,

raining them down from the sky and tearing the Nightmare Creatures apart.

"Frey is strong.

He won't fall that easily.

Trust that if he were truly in danger right now, I would have gone to him myself ..

instead of staying here with all of you."

Between the lives of a hundred thousand men and Frey's life ..

Sansa wouldn't have hesitated for even a single second.

The fact that she hadn't moved yet

was the clearest proof that Lord Starlight was still holding on.

"The war has officially begun ..

and it started with a disaster on our side.

Frey is out there fighting alone to turn the tide in our favor.

So don't you dare throw his efforts away with a reckless intervention that's not even needed."

The Special Vanguard Unit's top priority right now was to get the fleet out of the nightmare tide with as little damage as possible ..preparing for the battle that would immediately follow against the Ultras' main forces.

According to Frey, the Ultras' fleet numbered thirty-five thousand soldiers.

In other words, they already outnumbered them .. without even accounting for the nightmare creatures.

In situations like this, the burden of turning the tables fell squarely on their shoulders.

That's what Sansa wanted people like Snow and Uriel to understand.

Bloodmader could only acknowledge how right the princess was—she had spoken the very words he himself should've said.

"Everyone! Focus on the enemies around us! The nightmare creatures are our top priority right now!"

There was no room for error. Not in this situation.

And so, under Bloodmader's command, the Special Unit took the burden of the entire war upon themselves.

"Let's clean up this side quickly. I don't like seeing one of my students fighting alone."

Using his full power, Phoenix Sunlight was the most effective warrior on the battlefield .. his flames the natural enemy of sea-dwelling nightmare beasts.

Racing against time, the Empire's forces tried to break out of the encirclement as fast as possible .. for what was to come...

And for Frey.

The latter had gone far ahead, taking on the strongest of the Ultras by himself.

Even though Sansa expressed confidence in him, it didn't reflect the growing worry festering within her with every passing second.

Her demonic eyes never stopped tracking him, which made it nearly impossible for her to fight at full power against the nightmare creatures.

Her body was here with the others .. but her mind was already elsewhere.

The moment she sensed he was in even the slightest danger, she was ready to go to him immediately .. even if it meant abandoning everyone else.

You could say that Frey Starlight had significantly reduced the damage suffered by the fleet.

His slaughter of so many nightmare creatures in the frontlines was the main reason the ambush had ended up weaker than what the enemy had planned.

Without him, the attack would have been far more devastating.

That alone changed everything ..not to mention the fact he held off the enemy commanders on his own.

Wherever he went, whatever battlefield he walked upon, Frey always seemed to be fated for the same thing ..

To fight more than anyone else, to bleed more than anyone else, and to kill more than anyone else.

It was a cycle he had repeated many times lately.

But unlike before, this time... he welcomed it. He wanted it. He craved it.

Which explained that damned smile carved across his face since the start of the battle .. a bloody grin that said more than words ever could.

Chapter 469: Slaughter in Shizclar Bay (2)

No matter how brutal the other battles in the Bay of Shizklar had seemed ..

They didn't even come close to what was happening here.

Amid the raging sea, surrounded by the screeches of nightmare creatures being torn apart by black swords ..

Lord Starlight fought his own battle ..the one he had been waiting for all along.

Using the water beneath their feet as if it were solid ground created for them alone ..

Two dark forces clashed. Two black auras collided violently, engaging in a dizzying high-speed exchange between two monsters no human logic could describe.

Frey danced with his blades like they were extensions of his body, slicing at Gvardiol who met each strike with bare fists.

The exchange was lightning fast ..and despite its brutality, both men wore grins on their faces.

Gvardiol unleashed shadows from his body, launching them at Frey ..but the latter shredded through them effortlessly.

"You've broken through to SS+, then... Gvardiol, I take it your training in Hellmond paid off."

BOOM!

Unleashing wave after wave of SSS class dark aura, Frey pressured him mercilessly, forcing Gvardiol to retreat.

"How long did you spend there this time? One year?"

BOOM!!

"Two years?!"

BOOM!!

Both the Dark Sister and Balerion tore through Gvardiol's hardened flesh relentlessly, while the newly crowned Lord of the Ultras failed to retaliate ..his grin cracking bit by bit...

Especially when Frey revealed he knew about Hellmond, and how time passed more slowly there.

No matter how hard Gvardiol struck, he always ended up with a more mangled arm .. his blood spilling nonstop.

But the damage was still shallow for now.

"You talk a lot, Lord Starlight... I'll admit .. you're the strangest opponent I've ever fought on this planet."

Despite the intense pressure Frey applied, Gvardiol didn't seem particularly troubled.

"You're getting ahead of yourself. Do you really think you can win?"

His aura swelled menacingly, and the shadows around him hardened into a black, metallic substance ..

Unnaturally dense and unbreakable.

That substance continued to take shape from within Gvardiol's body... specifically from the black pits scattered across his flesh.

"You have no idea how terrifying this world we live in truly is... Lord Starlight, the power you take pride in is nothing but a trivial speck... compared to real power!!"

Unleashing it, Gvardiol created hundreds of black spikes from the metallic substance, hurling them at Frey.

The attack was unbelievably fast—so fast that Frey couldn't even see it coming, let alone react in time.

As a result, he took devastating damage.

The assault was brutal... terrifying.

Dozens of bloody holes erupted across Frey's body. One of the dark spikes even pierced his left eye, carving a bloody crater across his face.

His blood poured out in torrents as his body staggered backward.

Gvardiol burst into manic laughter, having flipped the tide with a single blow.

"You're weaker than I thought... Lord Starlight!!! At this rate, you'll meet the same end as that friend of yours you came to avenge!"

With Frey left broken by the strike, Gavid Lindman suddenly appeared behind him .. wielding the Aether Blade and aiming straight for his neck.

The attack came fast, and Frey looked utterly ruined.

But just as the sword neared his throat...

Gvardiol saw it.

He saw something that instantly wiped the laughter off his face.

Because even in that state, riddled with gory wounds, with one eye completely destroyed...

Even as he collapsed before Gavid's blade, the cold smile on Frey Starlight's face never disappeared .. it only widened, becoming more menacing.

That sight... for some reason, sent shivers down Gvardiol's spine.

And rightfully so.

Because just before the blade could cut through Frey's neck... time froze.

The flow of the Aether halted just inches from Frey's face.

Time itself had been stopped ..for one second. And in that second, neither Gavid Lindman nor Gvardiol could move.

Just one second.

Yet in battles like these, a single second was fatal.

In that second of frozen time, Frey moved freely .. as if the laws of nature meant nothing to him.

Within that moment, he parried the Aether Blade with Dark Sister.

Then, with one swing of Balerion, he carved a monstrous gash across Gavid Lindman's chest .. making the Ultras Lord collapse backward, blood pouring from his body.

And before the second ended...

Frey appeared right in front of Gvardiol. The latter could see it clearly ..

Time had stopped for his body... but not for his mind.

In that single second, the world had turned into Frey's domain.

A realm where he could do as he pleased.

As they stared at each other .. with bloodshot eyes locking ..Gvardiol couldn't comprehend what was happening.

Frey, his ruined left eye still dripping, looked completely calm... as if he hadn't been injured at all.

Then, with a blindingly fast strike ..

Gvardiol felt his chest shatter as Balerion plunged deep into him.

That was the last thing Frey did before the one-second time-freeze ..his newly acquired ability, Screenshot came to an end.

As time resumed, Gavid Lindman fell backward, clutching the deep wound across his chest.

Meanwhile, Gvardiol and Frey stood facing one another.

Then, without warning, Balerion—still buried in Gvardiol's chest—flared with a massive surge of dark aura.

A devastating burst of energy tore through Gvardiol's body, exiting from his back and enveloping everything behind him in a curtain of darkness.

From that monstrous blast, Gvardiol coughed up a torrent of black blood and dropped to one knee before Frey, his face twisted in agony.

The Ultras Lord screamed, a tortured howl like a wounded beast experiencing a pain it had never known.

Kneeling before Frey...

The latter simply chuckled.

"You spoke of power, half-demon."

Looking down on him as if he were nothing but an insect...

Frey yanked the blade out of Gvardiyol's body, then shoved it into his opponent's mouth .. gripping his face tightly.

"Let me show you something interesting."

As if awaiting his command...

Violet flames erupted across Frey's body, swirling around his wounds with eerie precision.

And before Gvardiol's bewildered eyes...

Frey's injuries vanished completely. No .. his body regenerated, even growing back a new eye to replace the one lost.

He returned to peak form .. as if he'd never been wounded at all.

"It took me eight months to attain this strength you mocked."

Slash!

Chapter 470: Slaughter in Shizclar Bay (3)

Frey moved his hand .. so fast that it left nothing but afterimages.

Balerion, now fused with that hand, shone with a terrifying violet glow as he carved deep into Gvardiol's body.

One slash. Then another. Then a third.

Then dozens... hundreds...

Frey ripped his foe apart, torturing him, ignoring the torrents of black blood pouring from Gvardiol's shredded frame.

"I don't care how many years you spent training in Hellmond"

Slash!!

"But you must've worked really hard."

Slash!!!!

"Now look at you .. everything you worked for, wasted against a mere human who only trained for eight months. It's painful, isn't it? To lose in such a humiliating way?"

Slash!!

Gvardiol's blood flooded the surrounding sea without pause.

The previous exchange hadn't even lasted a few seconds, all due to Frey's monstrous speed.

As a result, Gavid Lindman couldn't reach in time, even after trying to heal himself.

The one who stepped in was the masked man, V. He attacked from behind, unleashing a massive wave of dark fire aimed at swallowing Frey whole. But Frey responded with a single flick of his free hand .. the one holding the Dark Sister.

With that simple motion, he launched a wave of darkness that clashed directly with V's own.

In the raging waters of Shizkar Bay...

Darkness and black fire collided, each trying to consume the other.

V kept hurling his flames relentlessly, launching attack after attack. But for every swing he made, Frey answered with ten.

The black flames were far stronger than ordinary dark aura . but Frey's aura was simply... endless.

Fighting V with one hand, and destroying Gvardiol with the other...

Frey continued to mock Gvardiol.

"I wonder... what does someone with a dead body feel? Do you still feel pain? Do you feel rage? If you're dead, can you even be killed?"

With the same maniacal grin, Frey laughed in his opponent's face.

"Let's find the answer together, Gvardiol!!!"

Amid the destruction caused by the clash of black fire and Frey's darkness...

After having his body mercilessly and repeatedly shredded ..

Kneeling before him ..

The world bore witness to a horrific sight: a man torn limb from limb by a merciless black sword.

Frey's strikes had been so precise, not a single spot was left untouched.

What remained of Gvardiol was nothing more than a mutilated chunk of meat, barely recognizable.

A tattered mass sank slowly into the raging sea.

This battle was far from over... and it would've been foolish for any of the strong to reveal their full power from the beginning...

Whether Frey or his enemies.

Everyone knew that well.

Yet Frey had overwhelmed them in terrifying fashion .. just one young man had pushed them this far with his incomprehensible power.

Gvardiol had been at a disadvantage from the start, unable to spread his shadow due to fighting above the ocean's surface.

One could say he was handicapped from the very beginning.

But to be humiliated like that...

It clearly shook him.

And that explained what happened the moment his body sank into the sea ..

Without warning, a terrifying explosion of shadow aura erupted, sending shockwaves across the entire battlefield.

The aura of shadows kept spreading at such an overwhelming volume that it took shape as a black pillar that pierced the sky.

The crushing pressure it emitted caught the attention of everyone in Shizclar—it was a declaration.

That monster was done playing.

Standing before the towering pillar of aura, Frey didn't flinch. He only laughed when he realized...

He had gotten exactly what he wanted.

"So you've finally decided to unleash your full strength."

Having been pushed to the edge, Gvardiol had no choice but to explode.

Bearing witness to that, rage flared on Gavid Lindman's face nearby.

"Gvardiol, damned bastard, you're going this far just from being pushed a little!? Damn you!"

Fixing his gaze on Frey, Gavid gripped his sword as his body lit up with the glow of dark aura.

'Frey Starlight is strong... and unpredictable. He's full of strange tricks. But he's still just one man.'

Surveying the battlefield, Gavid Lindman checked on his subordinate, V.

The latter was nearby too ... and like Gavid, he hadn't yet fought seriously. He had only been observing, just as his master had taught him.

Frey was the one surrounded here—not them.

He was the one who should've been forced to go all out.

But Gvardiol had ruined everything ..once again proving just how dangerous Frey was. He had toyed with them all far too easily.

'If it's come to this... then he must die.'

As his eyes darkened, Gavid raised his blade.

" Phantom Form."

The battle was about to escalate far beyond its previous limits.

And the main event was about to begin .. between Frey and the man who had risen from the ocean's depths.

The Gvardiol whom Frey had just destroyed was no longer the same as the one who now stood before him.

This new body was entirely coated in the same black metal from before—a shell of dark armor that made him look like an iron statue.

His muscles pulsed with terrifying power, encased in the swirling aura of shadow. His face had morphed completely .. eyes now glowing a blood-red crimson. Gvardiol was utterly serious.

Face to face with Frey.

The two exchanged glances for a moment... then, without warning ..

They vanished.

Two trails of darkness slashed through the air as they collided violently .. stronger than ever before, sending shockwaves through the sea beneath them.

As Frey's swords clashed with Gvardiol's iron fists...

They tore into one another, detonating waves of shadow and darkness alike.

Gvardiol's fists hammered into Frey's blades again and again ..

But this time, each impact sparked only blazing sparks of metal-on-metal ..no longer the flesh Frey was used to cutting.

In this new form, Gvardiol was absurdly tough... faster... stronger. He immediately pressed down on Frey in their clash.

Frey tried slashing again and again . but it was useless.

His opponent's body had become something else entirely.

"So this is your peak... Gvardiol."

BOOOOOM!!

Their auras erupted once more ..

The real battle had only just begun.