

VILLAIN 481

Chapter 481: Wrapped in His Arms

Raising his head, he looked up at the long horns emerging from behind.

Sansa had appeared from the shadows as she always did, catching Frey's exhausted body and laying him gently on the bed, his head resting on her lap.

"You look wrecked. Am I really looking at the same man who just defeated the Ultras on his own?"

As she gently brushed his hair, Sansa mocked the broken state Frey was in. Right now, even the weakest Ultras could've beaten him.

In response, Frey wore that same smile...

The same smile he had shown the Imperial soldiers earlier.

"Not bad, right?"

Staring at him, Sansa couldn't pretend to be strong anymore...

His face, his eyes, his expression .. even the way he spoke, the aura he gave off...

He seemed more mature. Stronger. Different.

This transformation made it difficult for her to tease him the way she used to. The longer she looked at him, the faster her heart began to race.

With a slow nod, she replied softly,

"Yeah... I never thought you'd still be stronger than me, even after I became a demon."

Even though she had spent more time near Frey than anyone else in recent months, she never truly knew the extent of his strength .. she always avoided staying with him too long, so she wouldn't interrupt his training.

Even she was shocked by how far he had gone.

"I told you before... I'm the monster here, not you."

Frey rose to his feet. Though he was clearly exhausted after unleashing everything he had, he somehow managed to hide it with perfect control.

Sansa recalled his words from the past .. how he once told her he was a far greater monster than those beings called demons.

After witnessing his power just now, she was finally starting to understand what he meant.

But to her, he didn't look like a monster at all.

After all, what kind of monster had that strange, magnetic pull around him?

A pull so powerful that people followed him blindly, just like they did before.

Lord Starlight had become beloved by everyone .. when once, he had been hated by all.

That was the kind of influence Frey held now.

More and more people would follow him in the future. She wouldn't be the only one standing by his side anymore.

Frey was born to be a king... a leader.

Both of them had emerged from darkness, but unlike her... his darkness was special.

He would only grow more distant with time. Sansa already knew it.

And that knowledge stirred a strange confusion deep in her heart.

She was someone who had lost her way long ago.

A lonely girl who had lost most of her reasons to keep living. She didn't know what to feel when the only reason she kept going began to soar far beyond her reach.

Even if he denied it and refused to admit the truth—Sansa was a demon.

A filthy creature that fed on life itself. A being born to bring death and misery.

No one could ever be happy having her around.

As these thoughts invaded her mind, Sansa considered distancing herself for a while.

But she was far too perceptive .. and she had already noticed Frey's condition earlier... how much strain he had put on himself after unleashing all that power.

When she saw him bearing the weight alone, she found herself walking toward him without even realizing it ..just to comfort him, just to be there.

And that was how she ended up in Frey's room, aware of her own conflicted state... wondering if what she was doing was the right thing at all.

So much had been weighing on her lately. She had hit a dead end a while ago.

Lost in her own thoughts, Sansa was snapped back to reality when Frey suddenly approached her without warning.

"Seems like your mind's full."

His expression was unreadable.

He was so close ..and Sansa was in no shape to hold her composure around him. She immediately tried to push him away.

"You've pushed yourself too far lately. You need to rest."

She turned her head, trying to stand and walk away.

But Frey grabbed her immediately, pushing her down onto his bed.

Now lying beneath him, with both her arms pinned by his grip, she couldn't do anything but stare at him in shock as he hovered over her.

"I really have pushed myself... I've never gone this far before," he said, his voice low. "But I still have enough strength left to do this."

Catching her off guard, Frey leaned down and stole a kiss ..one Sansa couldn't escape from.

It was the first time Frey had taken the initiative like this, and her face turned bright red.

She tried to resist, but no strength came to her.

This wasn't an ordinary kiss.

It was deep .. so deep she felt like Frey was about to rip her soul right out of her body.

Seconds passed. The kiss continued.

Sansa's strength slowly left her... until she could no longer resist at all.

Frey, still locked in the kiss, felt her arms begin to loosen. Her entire body had gone limp now.

That's when he knew.

She had completely surrendered to him .. allowing him to do whatever he wanted.

Seeing her flushed face ..that rare expression of shyness she hadn't shown in a long time .. Frey finally pulled away after stealing her lips for so long.

Sansa looked utterly dazed, which made her look oddly adorable.

But Frey didn't stare for long.

Instead, he gently wrapped his arms around her, leaning close to her ear.

"Stay by my side, Sansa."

At that moment, the demon princess's eyes widened.

She realized what he was doing.

He had seen her pain, seen her desire to walk away... and took the first step himself .. stopping her before she could.

This time, it was him who held on to her.

Not the other way around.

Sansa had never been able to resist him when she was by his side.

Her affection for him had long surpassed any limit.

So when he came to her like this—asking her to stay—there was only one answer she could give.

She couldn't speak.

But her answer was clear in the way she nodded again and again.

That was her "yes."

Frey held her even tighter once he had what he wanted.

In the end, it was him who saved her.

Not the other way around.

Chapter 482: A Legacy of Fire and Lies

On the other side of the world...

In the lands of the Empire, a massive announcement ..broadcast across every corner of the nation ..was made by the High Command under Aegon Valerion:

"The Empire has claimed victory in its first clash against the Ultras!

Ten thousand imperial warriors triumphed over thirty-five thousand of the demon's hounds!"

Celebration swept through the Empire. The people, long starved of hope, finally breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing the first good news in what felt like an age.

And behind the scenes, pulling every string, was none other than Prince Aegon Valerion.

He stood at the forefront, basking in glory, while maneuvering carefully from the shadows.

As the remaining eighty thousand soldiers of the Empire's army were being mobilized and equipped, a long meeting was underway behind sealed doors.

Present were Ser Alon, several key figures of the Empire, and of course, Prince Aegon himself.

It was there the prince made his next declaration:

"The imperial campaign will proceed as planned. The mission must be completed."

This decision came immediately after the report from the vanguard fleet arrived. Aegon didn't hesitate for even a second .. which surprised many, and angered one in particular.

"Did you not hear what the report said just moments ago, Prince Aegon?" Ada Starlight's voice rose sharply.

"They faced an army three times their size! They barely survived after losing eight thousand soldiers!

And you want them to keep marching forward?!"

Even the two thousand survivors were in shambles, barely able to stand, let alone fight.

Taking everything into account, Ada could not stay silent. She had to speak out.

But Aegon remained unmoved.

"Lady Starlight, I would ask you to consider this .. this is also their decision."

Pointing to the fact that the surviving vanguard had chosen to move forward on their own, the prince reaffirmed his stance.

"You asked if I had read the report. Now let me ask you in return—did you?"

With cold logic, Aegon presented the facts:

"The world just witnessed the birth of a legend akin to Abraham Starlight.

Your brother, Frey Starlight, decimated the enemy's forces nearly singlehandedly."

"True, we lost eight thousand.

But the elite, led by Bloodmader, remain in peak condition.

In other words, the vanguard still retains enough strength to continue the mission."

"There's no need to waste more time, nor send reinforcements.

What they have is enough. My decision is final."

With unwavering authority, the prince declared once more:

"They will carry out their mission to the end."

In the face of Aegon Valerion's cold, calculated logic, there was little Ada could say. The prince had results on his side .. and so long as he continued to deliver, few would dare question him.

That's why Ser Alon remained silent.

With a mere ten thousand men, Aegon had snatched the Empire's first victory in the War of darkness. A small force that had crushed a vastly superior enemy army. And he did so while preserving the bulk of the Empire's main force for future battles.

Aegon had proven his strategic brilliance and cunning.

And yet, Ada could not help but wonder ..

Was it truly wise to view this as mere strategy?

After all, the vanguard's survival had nothing to do with Aegon's tactics. It wasn't his plan that turned the tide ..it was her brother.

And that... was the problem.

No matter how much she thought about it, there was no way Aegon could have known that Frey Starlight possessed that much power to begin with.

There was no way he could have anticipated that her brother would perform such a miracle.

Without Frey, the vanguard would've been slaughtered. The prince's strategy would have collapsed instantly.

In truth, what was happening now could only be described as luck. Pure, blind luck.

But Ada didn't believe in such a thing. Not in this world.

As she stared at the prince's cunning smile, a lingering thought echoed in her mind:

Just what kind of man was Prince Aegon Valerion?

And what secrets was he still hiding?

Only the future would reveal the answer.

...

...

As the world continued to shift with every passing second, far from the clamor of court and war, a solitary figure remained isolated .. cut off from everything.

The Emperor, Maekar Valerion.

He was no longer the blazing beacon of power he once was. The signs of age had begun to show clearly on his face. A faint beard covered his jaw, and the sparkle of his prime had dimmed.

Now, the Emperor was treated as a weapon of mass destruction ..a last resort to be unleashed only when the time was right.

And so, he spent his days alone, in complete seclusion, within a room no one was permitted to enter.

A frozen chamber, soaked in frost and silence.

At its center lay a strange sarcophagus of pure ice.

Often, Maekar sat with his back against it, whispering to himself in strange, disjointed words.

Sometimes they were aimless, like a man lost in thought.

Other times, they were utterly hollow .. meaningless ramblings spoken to no one.

His mighty spear, Sunfire, rested beside him, along with the legendary Fume Knight shield .. great weapons only he had the right to wield.

And yet, even with such power at his side...

The Emperor sat still. Alone.

Waiting.

Staring at it, Maekar recalled a few old, beautiful memories .. ones that made him chuckle like a madman, all alone.

"Now that I think about it... I used them against you that day,"

"I fought you with everything I had, and yet, you defeated me so easily.

That... really stung, back then."

He sighed lightly, continuing his monologue as if speaking to an old friend.

"Did you ever know, old friend, that we're just fragile creatures, living our insignificant lives in some forgotten corner of the universe?"

"We're nothing more than a tiny fragment of an endless cosmos, A cosmos crawling with monsters ..

monsters so mighty they make me,

the man once hailed as the strongest,

seem like a meaningless fool."

His voice drifting, Maekar gently tapped the surface of the icy sarcophagus with an annoyed expression.

"What's that? You don't believe me?

That's awfully rude of you, my friend..."

"But let me tell you something ..

I met one of them."

His eyes dimmed with unease, the memory still vivid.

"He was... strange. Unlike anything I've ever seen.

He taught me things ..bizarre things ..

including the method I used to recover your body, my friend.

So be grateful. Be thankful.

And don't you dare doubt me again."

Gazing up at the frozen ceiling above him, Maekar remembered the encounter with that strange being.

Without a shred of doubt, he was not human.

"I wonder... what kind of monsters walk among us without us even realizing it.

The thought terrifies me, my friend.

I don't believe we humans will ever reach that level."

"Ah... but you were different. You were special. The best of us ..

I truly believed you could reach them."

"But you let me down, my dear friend..."

Resting his forehead against the front of the sarcophagus, Maekar cast another glance at the man sleeping within.

His features hadn't changed much.

He had closed his eyes long ago, peacefully .. without resistance.

His hair had turned completely white, a side effect of the power that preserved his body.

He looked like a slumbering king .. departed from life after giving it everything he had.

At that moment, Maekar finally rose to his feet and stepped away.

"You betrayed me...

You left alone...

and abandoned me behind..."

"Abraham."

Chapter 483: Stairs to Oblivion (1)

– Frey Starlight's POV –

Morning had arrived, heralding the start of a new day .. another step in this long journey known as life.

I felt my body stiff as I stirred awake. For once, I had gotten a good night's sleep, something rare as of late.

Ever since I obtained this superhuman body that set me apart from all other beings, sleep had become unnecessary .. no longer a need, but rather an escape.

A realm of dreams I fled to when the weight of the world threatened to crush me.

I rose quietly, sitting up on the bed as I checked my body.

Running my fingers along my limbs, I could feel the power once again surging through my veins after the recent exhaustion I had endured.

There wasn't a single scratch on my bare torso. My body was flawless .. thanks to my regeneration ability, which had erased every trace of injury as if they never existed.

It had been three years since I reincarnated into this body.

Three long years of trials that forged who I had become.

I could see it now so clearly .. the version of myself from the past.

That weak version of me, the one who once broke down in despair in his room upon realizing he'd been reincarnated into the world of his own novel.

It felt as if I had climbed an uncountable number of mountains since then.

I had become stronger .. far stronger.

I had gained the kind of power that could shake the world... and crush the enemies that walked upon it.

But deep down, I knew this wasn't the end.

Many mountains still awaited me ahead .. peaks far taller than any I had faced before.

The trials to come would only grow harsher, and I had known this from the moment I saw Wesker's name in the final mission forced upon me by the System.

To face such horrors, I needed to grow stronger .. much stronger.

I had to keep moving forward.

I had to become a monster powerful enough to stand atop the same stage where the titans of this world stood alone.

To achieve that... I knew I would have to pay a steep price for the power I sought.

Perhaps I would lose myself.

Perhaps I'd lose something so precious I could never live without it again.

Perhaps life would break me harder than ever before.

I was bound to lose many things... but there was one thing I could never afford to lose, no matter the cost.

My goal.

That single goal I had set for myself .. the one that gave me the will to walk through hell itself if that's what it took.

The goal that gave me the strength to keep moving, to keep fighting, no matter what stood in my way.

In some way, I felt like I had started losing parts of myself .. even the emotions that once clouded my vision in the past.

Brushing aside the long white strands of hair that had grown longer recently, I stared up at the ceiling of my room .. a room that trembled from time to time, proving the ship was still moving forward.

In this rare moment of quiet during war, my mind drifted back to the moment I stood face to face with the half-demon Gvardiol.

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I'd be able to control myself in front of the man who had killed someone so dear to me.

The man who killed Danzo.

I thought I would go berserk the moment I saw him.

I had spent countless hours thinking of the perfect way to exact revenge.

A way to make him suffer. To kill him in the most excruciating, merciless fashion.

I wanted to unleash every ounce of strength I had gathered through my training all of it .. on him.

But when the moment of truth came...

Those feelings vanished.

As if someone had doused the raging fire in my heart with ice-cold water.

No matter how long I stared at him... Gvardiol no longer felt like anything more than an enemy to be eliminated.

Just like any other wretch from the Ultras.

Another insect.

A filthy creature this world would be far better without.

That way of thinking ..that mindset .. was what allowed me to survive the first round of war the way I did.

And it brought the best possible outcome.

I earned the love of every soldier in the Imperial Army, making them follow me without even realizing it.

I gave them hope when darkness engulfed their hearts. Showed them miracles when it felt like the world itself was ending.

I told them what they needed to hear at the right time, in the right place .. and I did it all with full intention.

I didn't do it out of love for them.

Nor out of pity.

I did it because I needed them to follow me in the future, so I could achieve the goal I had carved for myself long ago.

I manipulated them .. all of them.

Me... of all people.

Just as those above toyed with my fate and tried to bend it to their will, here I was, manipulating those around me in return.

Actions fit for people like Prince Aegon .. those I once despised.

"...I've changed. I truly have."

But that's okay.

Even if I seemed like a hypocrite...

Even if I turned into scum...

It didn't matter.

The people I truly cared for were few .. so few I could count them on one hand.

This was only the beginning...

"I have to endure... until the very end."

Firming my resolve once more, I broke free of my thoughts and tried to rise from the bed.

But I froze mid-motion when I felt a pair of slender arms wrapped tightly around my waist.

They had been there since the beginning .. so much so that my body had grown used to them, and I'd completely forgotten.

Beside me, Sansa slept peacefully and quietly.

Despite the dark horns that grew from the crown of her head, she looked like a sleeping angel.

She really was... gorgeous.

Slowly, I slipped away, pulling the blanket over her body to hide the curves my eyes had so often been drawn to .. unconsciously, at that.

In that moment, we looked like a married couple. A peaceful pair living a quiet life in a modest home.

And strangely enough... it didn't seem like a bad thing. In fact, it felt like a beautiful ending I might actually wish for someday.

But that wasn't who we were.

We weren't a serene husband and wife .. we were Frey Starlight, the monster, and Sansa Valerion, the demoness. Two beings destined to be the first to plunge into the flames of war.

Wherever we walked, death would follow.

We'd come to terms with that a long time ago. And we were ready to keep moving forward, no matter the cost together.

I pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, then withdrew silently, leaving her behind as I left the room. I donned my black armor and prepared myself to face another day in enemy lands.

"See you later," I said with a faint smile, closing the door behind me.

The moment I did, I sensed her stir .. clumsily, at that.

She had been awake the entire time. She hadn't moved a muscle, but I knew. I could read her like a book. She was still shaken from last night, especially after I'd taken the lead the way I had.

Pretending to be asleep... how foolish. Especially when she knew I could hear her thoughts.

Still, I played along.

Because honestly, flustered Sansa was far more entertaining than the usual cold, domineering demoness.

That was the kind of relationship I had with her.

I suppose the future held countless twists and turns for us. But one thing was certain.. Sansa was someone I genuinely wanted by my side.

And so I chose to keep her close. Because she was one of the few people I truly cared about.

Whatever the future had in store for us... we'd face it.

Together.

Chapter 484: Stairs to Oblivion (2)

"Lord Starlight. I didn't take you for someone who sleeps in."

Upon returning to the deck, I was greeted by none other than the former Temple Master, Bloodmader .. the old man still standing exactly where he'd been since the war began.

"My apologies," I replied. "I suppose the last battle finally caught up to me."

He nodded.

"No blame from me. Who am I to criticize the hero who saved all our asses?"

With a dry chuckle, I joined him at the ship's prow, where he led what remained of the fleet.

Bloodmader had changed the way he looked at me ever since the previous battle .. that much was obvious.

"I haven't saved anyone yet," I said. "Any one of us could lose our head at any moment. That was just one battle. The war is far from over."

"True."

He answered simply, and both our gazes shifted toward the horizon.

It felt like he wanted to continue the pleasant conversation .. there was a genuine curiosity in his eyes ..but something ahead quickly stole our full attention.

"We've finally arrived..."

For the first time in days, dry land came into view.

Something other than the endless blue sea that had surrounded us day and night.

That land ..was the enemy's.

The land of the Ultras.

And now, I was returning to it once more.

"Time for round two," Bloodmader said.

I nodded. "It's going to be a brutal one."

Our numbers were small, and the enemy would be fighting on their own soil.

By the numbers, our chances looked bleak.

But numbers didn't matter in the face of overwhelming strength.

Here and now, I was ready to flip the land on their heads .. bury them if I had to.

I exchanged a meaningful glance with Bloodmader, and we both nodded.

He might've been the official commander of this fleet ..but we both knew who truly held command now.

So, clearing my throat and charging it with aura, I let my voice ring out ..an order that fell like thunder upon the troops.

"Attention!"

As if heaven itself had spoken, every Imperial soldier snapped to readiness, abandoning whatever they'd been doing.

"Brothers and sisters in arms, prepare for battle.. we have reached the enemy's land!"

With both of my swords drawn, I stood at the vanguard.

"Follow me .. and let's make the earth quake beneath their feet."

There was no need for a long speech this time.

Those few words were enough to make every soldier shout as one, ignited with fervor.

They were ready to push themselves to the last breath.

Just as I wanted them to be.

"Now then... let's see what the enemy has prepared for us this time."

The shores of the Ultras were still dozens of kilometers away—but that distance was more than enough for me to deploy my domain.

With eyes glowing a fierce, violet light, I focused my aura and senses to their limit—casting them out across the cursed land.

And as I sensed what waited on the other side... my face instinctively darkened.

The land that first gazed upon the Demonic Sea, the land that had been declared as the battlefield for the second round...

Had ended up being—unexpectedly—empty.

"They didn't even bother to station a single soldier..."

The place that was supposed to be the enemy's most vital military stronghold... was completely deserted.

What I had just said was clearly heard by everyone nearby .. and none of them had expected such a thing.

"Are you certain about that? Perhaps the enemy is simply hiding,"

Saintess Yorasha interjected, clearly doubting my judgment. Even she, who had reached SS+ rank, lacked the means to sense enemies from such a distance.

"Don't underestimate my senses, Saintess. There isn't a single creature below SS+ that can escape my domain."

This body, forged through iron and fire, would never lie to me.

"We can't risk moving in at full force. The possibility that the witch has set a trap still stands."

Taking the first step, I ignited my aura, preparing to move.

"I'll scout the area myself. Those with the strength to follow ..do so."

With a simple command, my body flared one final time before I vanished from their sight.

The very next second, I was already standing on enemy ground.

My teleportation always functioned as long as the target location lay within my domain, which meant appearing on the enemy's land was no challenge for me.

The moment my feet touched that barren wasteland, I began scanning my surroundings.

No matter how much I probed with my aura, I couldn't detect a thing—not even a single trace of energy.

"They really abandoned this place..."

Would the Ultras truly allow us to set foot on their territory this easily?

I didn't expect that. Not after seeing the way they fought us off in the Battle of Shezklar Bay...

They seemed ready to unleash every ounce of their strength to keep us from invading their lands. And now you're telling me they just gave all that up?

Something felt completely off.

"It seems the second round is going to be... unexpectedly delayed."

From behind me, those words rang out as shadows deepened beneath my feet—and Sansa calmly stepped out to stand by my side.

She had finally arrived.

"Knowing their leader, Beatrice would never do something meaningless... There's definitely a scheme of some sort."

I said plainly, eyes fixed on the horizon.

"But there's no point in trying to figure it out now."

It wasn't like I could uncover Beatrice's plan that easily. So, I had no choice but to ride the current for now.

As the ships breached the shores of the Ultras continent one after another, that was the true signal...

"The vanguard's mission was a success."

We had reached enemy territory. Now there was only one task left.

The moment they arrived, the soldiers spread out across the land while Bloodmader issued his orders immediately:

"Prepare the Warp Gate at full speed! We must ready the battlefield for the main army as quickly as possible!"

In response to his command, the mages immediately began preparations for the massive teleportation ritual that would soon take place.

They had taken it upon themselves to construct the gate that would receive the true Imperial army...

The army that would fight the real war against the Ultras.

Yes, the vanguard's mission had been successful so far, but that didn't mean the Ultras wouldn't retaliate.

There was still a chance they might appear before the gate was completed. That's why we had no choice but to form a defensive perimeter around the area .. to protect it from any sudden threat.

But no matter how long we waited... our fears never came to pass.

"It seems the enemy thinks in a way completely different from ours..."

Staring off into the distance, Phoenix spoke in a fiery tone, remaining on alert.

He was right. Our enemy was utterly unpredictable.

"We have no choice but to rely on our assassin friend to show us the path."

I replied as we both stood at the very front of our forces.

At the mention of Ghost, Phoenix couldn't help but frown.

"You're still convinced sending him was the right move, Frey?"

I nodded firmly in response.

"Don't underestimate Ghost. He has more hidden under his belt than anyone else .. and what he's doing right now is precisely his area of expertise."

"...I hope you're right."

Yes...

It happened at the end of the first battle against the Ultras. Ghost, who had been hiding within my shadow the entire time, took advantage of the chaos that erupted during the fight... and infiltrated the enemy's ranks without anyone noticing.

It was a bold move he proposed himself .. to uncover what secrets the enemy might be hiding and I had approved it.

Ghost was now fighting his own battle, far away from us, having taken on a perilous mission that could very well lead to his death at any moment.

But because it was Ghost, of all people... I believed he would pull it off.

Tracking him through the third-person player perspective, I continued observing my assassin friend.

"Alright then... Even if you fail, my friend, I'll come rushing to save you. So don't hesitate .. show them what you're truly made of."

Chapter 485: Stairs to Oblivion (3)

– Ghost Umbra's Pov –

Few have ever seen this world from the shadows.

To perceive everything through darkness .. taking that ominous color as your sanctuary, turning it into your greatest weapon.

That's how I've lived my life until now.

Thanks to the skill I've honed since childhood, I became able to completely erase my presence. When I roam between the shadows, no one ..not even someone stronger than me .can detect me.

As long as I don't reveal myself, no one can sense my presence.

That's what I relied on when I slipped between the shadows of the Ultras' soldiers.

The other side of the world holds its own secrets. The gates that once shielded us from the wrath of the higher beings above have now swung wide open.

The horrors of the past could return at any moment .. no, they may have already returned.

My mission now was simple: uncover what the Ultras were hiding and reveal their true intentions at last.

Hidden in the shadows, I continued to delve deeper and deeper into the heart of the entity known as the Ultras.

At first, I thought they'd concentrate their forces along the shore to repel the Empire's vanguard. It looked like our chances were slim compared to their overwhelming numbers.

But I was completely wrong. They didn't stop even after we landed on their lands.

After observing them for a while, I realized how strange they were. Their movements, the way they carried themselves...

They were so strange that I had to ask myself .. are they even human like us?

The deeper I infiltrated, the more I realized how little I actually knew about them.

They followed a strange blood-based system. It seemed their ranks were determined by what they called "the highest purity."

Humans who could endure the most demonic blood were the strongest among the high-bloods.

And their numbers were vast .. so vast I could barely comprehend it.

It's safe to say their total force surpassed 100,000 by far, easily outmatching the Empire's.

But that wasn't what I came here for.

There was more to uncover, so I kept going forward.

And I wish I hadn't.

Because as soon as I snuck deeper, I stumbled upon a terrifying sight...

Out there, in the barren plains, I saw massive armies...

Armies filled with Nightmare Creatures .. savage beings who lived only to feed and destroy .. now somehow completely submissive and obedient to the Ultras.

The rumors were true.

They really had tamed the Nightmare Creatures.

The mechanism that allowed them to achieve this was unknown, but I suspected the strange symbols carved into their bodies were closely related.

Still, I didn't get to dwell on it for long. Because what I saw next made me question everything.

How could I not, when I saw them dragging a colossal being... a Nightmare Lord like the Eight-Legged Lady... a massive creature being led like a tamed animal...

And she wasn't the only one.

Cosmos. Abyss Watcher. All of the Nightmare Lords were there.

They had really subdued Nightmare Beasts that had reached the SS+ rank.

This was a true catastrophe.

A disaster that Frey and the others had to know about.

My stealth skill kept me completely hidden. As long as I didn't get too close, no creature could detect me. But some high-tier monsters could sense my presence.

So I made up my mind to retreat.

What I'd seen was enough. The information I had gathered would suffice.

I tried to convince myself of that ..to pull back from the enemy lines.

Even I had struggled to accept this suicidal mission that Frey gave me.

Had I not known him personally, I would've thought he was trying to get me killed by sending me deep into enemy ranks like this.

That mysterious friend of mine... he's changed so much lately.

I suppose everything he's been through has finally caught up with him.

Thinking of the man he had become—that warrior who performed miracles on the battlefield...

He wouldn't be satisfied if I returned with something this pitiful, would he?

What he truly wanted from me was something greater. A vital piece of information that could change the course of the war.

He wanted me to risk my life.

"Frey, my brother... I feel like I have so much to say to you. But I've never been one to speak much, and I probably never managed to express what's inside. Still, you asked me to risk my life... and that's exactly what I'll do."

Resolved to press on until the very end—

I dove even deeper into the heart of the Ultras.

From a distance, I intentionally followed the strongest among them .. especially that lord... Gavid Lindman.

Being anywhere near him was like signing your death sentence. Just following him forced me to push all my senses and instincts to their limits, using my Shadow Technique with extreme caution.

I shadowed him and his forces for hours .. hours that turned into days.

Days where my concentration peaked so intensely, blood began dripping unconsciously from my eyes.

Fatigue gnawed at me, but I couldn't afford to stop.

Even a second of lost focus meant digging my own grave.

I followed him for days.

Many times, I thought what I was doing was meaningless.

But it wasn't. I realized that when I saw them finally reach their destination.

Gavid Lindman and his forces stopped in front of a massive structure—an enormous building that seemed to serve as some kind of forbidden place.

It was so tall I couldn't even glimpse the top, but I could clearly feel the overwhelming fluctuations of power radiating from above.

That ominous pressure froze me in place for a long time...

Just what in the world lay at the top of that staircase?

Standing there in the shadows, every cell in my body screamed at me to run—to turn around and flee as fast as I could.

But my legs betrayed me.

No matter how hard I tried, they simply refused to move.

For countless hours, I remained frozen in place, eyes locked on the summit of that monolithic structure.

A war raged within my mind .. should I run? Should I press forward?

What was the right choice?

I stayed rooted there for an eternity, until the strange fluctuations in aura from above began to shift—clear proof that something was about to happen.

Something massive.

Most likely... this was what Frey wanted me to witness.

But reaching this point, continuing any further felt like suicide.

And yet, I couldn't turn back.

Step by step...

I crawled through the shadows, climbing those stairs.

One threshold after another, slowly drawing closer to the truth.

Whatever awaited me up there... it was ominous.

The pressure from the aura surged to insane levels with every step I took.

To be honest, I wanted to flee. I wanted to retreat.

But I couldn't. .not really. It was like something else was driving me forward... like someone else had seized control of my body from afar.

I was forced to continue—and so I did.

And then, after what felt like an eternity...

I reached the top.

“...Frey, what kind of curse have you placed on me?”

How the hell did you even get me to come this far?

I wondered.

But whatever spell this was—it ends here. No force in the world could compel me to take one more step now.

Because what stood before me... was beyond comprehension.

At the center of a massive platform, a colossal gate stood .. its surface radiating an ominous crimson glow.

Around it, kneeling in reverence, were dozens of creatures.

Filthy creatures, twisted with horns and monstrous features.

Demons.

All of them... waiting.

Waiting for something.

Something terrible.

And they didn't have to wait long.

The gate blazed to life .. its light blinding . while the pressure crushed me where I stood.

I don't know what expression I wore, but I knew for sure... it wasn't a pleasant one.

The fear gripping me in that moment was unlike anything I had ever experienced in my life.

From within the gate...

A wretched demon emerged .. his body hovering effortlessly above the ground, his red eyes scanning the kneeling hordes with complete indifference.

Four twisted horns spiraled from his skull, and though his frame looked frail, only a fool would believe it.

The pressure he unleashed was beyond anything I had ever encountered.

But even then, he wasn't the truly terrifying one.

No... it was something else.

My gaze stayed locked on the still-glowing gate, even as the first demon arrived.

Because I felt it.

He was coming.

The one who made my heart sink deep into my chest ..the one who nearly made me scream as my very soul threatened to flee my body.

That aura...

That pressure...

It was greater than anything I'd ever known. More lethal than any beast I'd ever faced.

That... that thing ..

That was death itself.

A colossal body.

Two dark, monstrous horns.

Violet, glowing eyes.

And hundreds of grotesque protrusions sprouting from his flesh.

Strange black lines carved through his face...

He looked terrifying. Majestic. Like a walking embodiment of filth .. of death .. formed in the darkest corner of this vast universe.

The second demon stepped through the gate, a bored look on his face.

“So this is the world our Lord has chosen?”

He glanced around with obvious disappointment, only to be answered by the first demon with a soft, restrained laugh.

“The Lord’s motives have always been a mystery... but the results are always spectacular. This time won’t be any different.”

“I know that much already. I’m the one doing all his dirty work.”

With an annoyed wave of his hand...

The demon released a devastating surge of energy .. erasing every other demon present in an instant.

“How many times must I tell you, geppetto? Armies are meaningless when I am around.”

He growled, as the other demon .. geppetto ..chuckled softly.

“Sorry, sorry. I sometimes forget you inherited the King’s reincarnation soul.”

The two exchanged a few more words—words I heard clearly—and with every syllable, my condition worsened.

Because I realized their identities from what they said.

The 13th-ranked High Demon... Jebito.

And the other...

The one who made my breath vanish—

The 10th-ranked... one of the strongest demons to ever exist...

Zibar.

Knowing who they were only made it all worse.

What stood before me wasn't just one, but two demons with enough power to end this war in an instant .. with catastrophe for the human side.

And the only thing I felt beyond fear... was despair.

Especially when I saw Jebito glance in my direction with that deranged grin of his.

"So... what should we do about our little eavesdropper over there?"

There was no doubt now.

They had known about me all along.

With a strange pulse of pressure, geppetto erased all of my shadows in an instant, exposing me.

"Hmph... that insect? He's so weak I didn't even register his presence."

Zibar stepped forward .. and with it, a colossal wave of pressure crashed down.

It felt like he'd just dropped the entire sky onto my head.

He advanced slowly, his massive shadow swallowing everything in its path.

Seeing his partner move unprompted, Jebito sighed in mild annoyance.

"Don't forget, Zibar. ..we're not allowed to participate in this war. Not yet."

Their master's orders were absolute.

But Zibar clearly didn't care.

"So what if one little insect dies?"

Ah...

So that's what I am to them.

An insect.

A crawling bug before a whale... a monstrous beast capable of shaking the entire world.

Watching him tower over me, watching my breath vanish.

I realized then and there...

I'm going to die.

Zibar raised his hand.

And I... stood frozen, waiting for the end.

But the end never came.

What happened next shattered all expectations.

Zibar's hand ..

was stopped.

Blocked by a black sword I knew all too well.

Zeibar's horrifying eyes narrowed with interest at the intruder who had appeared from nowhere.

The moment he arrived, he unleashed his aura to the limit . miraculously pushing back Zibar's overwhelming pressure.

"Well, well... would you look at that?" geppetto laughed. "His aura... it's almost like ours."

Zibar simply stared at him with growing curiosity.

And as their auras clashed in silence... the first collision occurred.

Between Zibar ..

And the man who had come from the void—

Frey.

Chapter 486: A Game Set in Shadows (1)

When Nightmares Become Reality. A Tangible Reality.

That seemed like the perfect description of what unfolded in the High Blood Province of the Ultras ..there, in Shezclar.

The grand edifice, the wondrous gate built with difficulty by the Ultras, witnessed the first clash.

A clash between humans... and those who stood above.

The entities Frey had always tried to escape from .. now, one of them stood before him.

The first was Geppetto, a vile demon who looked like a 14-year-old boy ..if you ignored his devilish features. Who would've guessed he was the 13th-ranked Archdemon?

But Geppetto wasn't the worst one.

No, that title belonged to the monster standing directly in front of Frey now.

A filthy, cursed demon ..one who held the 10th highest rank.

Zibar, the man known as the One-Man Army, and the bearer of Agaroth's Reincarnation Soul.

This being had nearly devoured Ghost, until Frey arrived at the last possible second, pulling his friend away from the demon's jaws.

Zibar made no effort to conceal his power. His SSS rank aura continued shaking the entire place.

Frey could barely stand. He was facing an opponent who completely outclassed him, and the only reason he hadn't crumbled was because he had pushed his explosive aura to its maximum limit.

But even after going beyond his limits, his strength felt lukewarm compared to the monstrous presence in front of him.

The Lord Starlight, who had gained both restraint and overwhelming power, was now struggling.

His expression had darkened. Even he couldn't hide his true emotions before such a being.

"Ghost... no matter what happens .. don't move.

Don't breathe.

Don't even think about doing anything."

Shielding his friend behind him, Frey's body flared with a blinding violet light. His eyes never left Zibar ... not for a second. Any delay could mean catastrophe.

Then, something ominous crept into the air...

A sinister force slithered like serpents across the ground, wrapping around Frey and Ghost's necks like quiet nooses. The two froze in place.

As if some kind of curse had bound them.

Ghost didn't understand what was happening, but Frey knew.

He understood clearly .. whatever these things were, they came from the demon before him.

And just when everything was about to explode ..

A cheerful voice interrupted the tension from behind.

“Now, now, Zibar. You know you’re not allowed to do that.

Especially not in front of that boy.”

Geppetto floated calmly in the air, drifting closer with a cold smile.

“That’s Frey Starlight ..the one Beatrice told us about.”

Stopping his comrade, Geppetto took control of the situation.

“There’s no need for all this hostility, Frey Starlight.

We’re not here to participate in your pathetic little war.

Please relax .. there’s nothing to fear.”

He said this with the same playful tone he’d been using since he arrived. Frey responded with a half-smile ..one that couldn’t hide his unease.

“Not here to participate in the war?

That’s hard to believe.”

“Why wouldn’t you believe it?

You know full well we possess enough power to wipe you and everyone with you off the map.

There’s no point in deceiving you.”

For a moment, Geppetto’s words sounded almost reasonable.

If the demons could send monsters like them... then this entire war was meaningless.

But Frey saw things differently.

“Forgive me, but I don’t believe you.”

“I know you both have the strength to end this war in an instant.

And that’s exactly why I can’t trust you.”

Geppetto tilted his head, intrigued.

“Go on...”

Frey gave them both a quick glance before declaring:

“Zibar. Bearer of the Reincarnation Soul.

A demon who can create countless clones of himself .. each one nearly as strong as the original.

That’s why he’s called the One-Man Army.”

” Geppetto .. you, on the other hand, are a cursed demon who commands a filthy ability.

You can manipulate the dead and force them to fight for you.

Both of you are specialists in large-scale warfare.

The top war generals among all high-ranking demons.”

” And you want me to believe that creatures born for war .. will simply refuse to join one?”

Frey laid his cards on the table. His words rang with truth, and he had just revealed undeniable facts.

He was right .. and that’s why the reaction he got was explosive.

Even Geppetto abandoned his playful tone for the first time... and revealed his other face.

“I see. So that’s what Beatrice meant.”

The strange human Beatrice spoke of...

This was him. Frey Starlight.

A bizarre human, full of surprises.

“You know quite a lot already.

I wonder... where did you get all that knowledge from?”

Geppetto couldn't figure out how Frey knew so much ..especially about their abilities and their roles in the demon army.

Earth was supposed to be completely isolated. There was no way a human should've known any of this.

And yet... somehow, he did.

"Will you tell me?

Or maybe you won't?"

Raising his hand toward Frey, Geppetto's body flared with a deadly gray light that made the void itself tremble.

"I wonder... if I cracked your skull open, would I find the answer?

If I killed you and turned you into one of my puppets... would you whisper your secret to me? Hehehe..."

Geppetto laughed softly.

As the pressure surged ..

The nightmare had only just begun.

Whether it was Zibar or Geppetto, both were monsters of the legendary tier...

A rank that had long been lost to time ..

The SSS tier.

Although Frey's aura was on the same level, it barely covered a small space in front of them, giving him and Ghost who stood behind him .. a sliver of a chance to remain standing.

One could say Ghost took the worst of it.

He hadn't breathed since the strange confrontation with the high-ranking demons began.

But unlike him... Frey held himself together far better.

Facing Geppetto, he raised his middle finger toward him, a terrifying grin stretching across his face.

"If you want answers, then go ask your damned King for one."

He chuckled mockingly, scoffing.

"I'm sure both Agaroth and Wesker already know.

What's the matter? Didn't they tell you?

Haha... I guess you're not that important after all, Rank 13 Demon.

How pitiful."

Standing behind him, Ghost stared at Frey in horror.

He couldn't speak ..

But his face said everything.

What he wanted to say in that moment was simply:

“Frey... have you lost your mind?”

Had he finally snapped?

Where did he even get the nerve to say something like that to those creatures?

Was he brave? Or just stupid? Or both?

Ghost couldn't understand him.

But one thing was certain ..

Frey had achieved exactly what he intended.

He'd pissed them off.

Chapter 487: A Game Set in Shadows (2)

It happened in less than a breath.

In a single breath, Zibar appeared right before them, reaching out toward Frey's face.

The demon moved with terrifying speed ..

A speed that few in the world could even perceive.

But Frey did.

At the very last moment .. before Zibar's hand reached him ..

Frey unleashed a vertical slash at the speed of light, A devastating strike forged from every part of him.

Every cell in his body, every muscle, every drop of his aura ..

While provoking them, he'd already been preparing for it.

His strongest attack ..

The peak of his limits ..

Everything he had, in a single blow.

"Ten Thousand Steps of Shadow: Frey Starlight's Style – Nameless Judgement."

That was Frey's pinnacle.

A strike that released a massive beam of violet aura that threatened to swallow the world whole.

The pressure was insane.

And this time...

The blow carried even more power than the one he had unleashed back in Shizclar Bay.

Ghost was certain of that.

He had witnessed it himself, after all.

Frey's strike erased the gate entirely, along with both Zibar and Geppetto, swallowing them within its vast reach .

And it kept going, Continuing forward until it devoured the sky itself.

All the Ultras nearby saw it clearly ..

And could do nothing but stare in dread.

It held enough power to kill any one of them.

But... even against a force like that...

The great demon Zibar didn't even flinch.

He stood exactly where he was, as everything around him was obliterated.

Geppetto, too, had formed some sort of strange shield around himself to survive.

But unlike him, Zibar took it head-on ..

With his body.

Frey didn't seem surprised, And Ghost could only stare in shock from behind.

True, Zibar hadn't moved an inch...

But a deep, vertical cut had clearly appeared on the right side of his chest.

A long wound, leaking black blood that dripped onto the earth beneath him.

With his filthy fingers, Zibar touched the wound.

He showed no particular reaction .

Simply stared at the blood...

Then looked back at Frey.

“Not bad.”

That was all Zibar said.

His honest opinion of the strike he had just endured.

Frey's peak ..

His ultimate attack ..

All of it summarized in two cold, dry words.

“Not bad, huh?”

Frey laughed, then sighed in annoyance.

He'd kind of expected this,

But it still pissed him off.

So that was the worth of all his struggle?

Just those bland words...

And a few drops of blood.

"You managed to wound me, Frey Starlight," Zibar said.

"So let me reward you with something worthy of your efforts."

Unlike Geppetto, Zibar was impossible to read.

He was one of the Ten High Demons—

And those ten were unlike all the rest.

"You were half right in your earlier guess.

Yes, we're here for the war, just as you said.

But we won't be joining it now...

We won't interfere in any way.

In other words...

The day you see us on the battlefield will come .. But not yet.”

Between humanity and their first true clash with the ones seated in the top ten...

Only time stood in between.

But how much time?

Days? Weeks? Months? Years?

It was impossible to say.

But one thing was certain...

The time they had been granted... wasn't long.

“That’s the reason we won’t kill you both right now,” Zibar said.

“And the reason I came here as a clone ..

Not in my true body.”

Hearing those last words...

For the first time...

Frey’s eyes widened.

Then, he calmed.

“So that’s how it is.”

He muttered.

Realizing...

That the one he had just wounded...

Wasn’t even the real body.

At that moment, Frey began to grasp the true scale of the monsters he had aimed to one day defeat.

He was finally starting to measure the distance between him and that unreachable ceiling...

And what a vast distance it was.

“I look forward to our next meeting... on the battlefield.”

As his body lit up with a blinding purple light, Frey wrapped both himself and Ghost in his aura, activating his teleportation ability.

From the beginning, he had been preparing an escape route for himself and his friend. But transporting two people at once required time .. which was exactly why Frey had baited his opponents earlier, buying enough time to complete the process.

But in the end, his efforts were meaningless.

Zibar had never intended to kill him in the first place.

Instead, he had cleverly tested Frey's limits without ever truly harming him.

Even someone like Zibar wouldn't dare disobey the orders.

This was the only way.

Their eyes met .. a gaze sharp enough to pierce through steel ..

And then, Frey and Ghost vanished from the platform, leaving the high-ranking demons behind.

Whether it was Frey, or Zibar...

Both of them were looking forward to it ..

That inevitable battle in the near future.

"...Good grief~

Can't the two of you ever show up without destroying my precious gateway every single time?"

While Zibar and Geppetto remained fixated on the spot where Frey and Ghost had disappeared...

A third demon made her entrance behind them.

Wearing her elegant black dress and a witch's hat, she finally arrived.

Zibar barely acknowledged her, but Geppetto's eyes lit up the moment he saw her.

He darted toward her at lightning speed, joy radiating from his face.

“Beatrice!!! I missed you so much! Beatooo!!”

Judging by his reaction, Beatrice had clearly anticipated this and opened her arms wide, welcoming Geppetto with a warm embrace.

Zibar could only sigh as he watched the scene unfold.

Geppetto ... despite his true nature now looked like a teenager no older than fourteen, while Beatrice appeared as a graceful and dignified lady.

Their embrace resembled that of a mother holding her child, or an older sister comforting her beloved little brother.

“You’re still as troublesome as ever, Geppetto.”

“No way, Beato! Zibar was the rude one this time! He wouldn’t even talk to me, even though he’s only three ranks above me! Isn’t that just disrespectful?!”

Geppetto kept whining, while Beatrice calmly ran her fingers through his gray hair.

“Yes... That’s certainly rude.”

With a faint smile, Beatrice raised her head to meet Zibar’s gaze.

He returned the look with a nod.

“It’s good to see you well, Lord Zibar.”

“My apologies about the gateway. We weren’t the ones who blew it up, anyway.”

The magical portal .. one that enabled travel across vast distances between planets .. wasn’t easy to create.

It had required a witch of Beatrice’s caliber in the first place.

But Frey had obliterated it with his previous attack.

Now that Beatrice had joined them, there were three high-ranking demons of Wesker’s black faction gathered in one place.

And the dynamic between them was... strange.

Even though Geppetto was far more powerful than Beatrice, he clung to her like a child.

As for Zibar, he treated the woman before him with sincere respect.

It was clear that Beatrice’s status was deeply rooted within the ranks of the demons ..

Not just due to her power, but because of many other factors as well.

“What do you think of him, Lord Zibar?”

She asked.

Zibar took a few seconds before answering.

“He’s... different from the rest of the humans. That much is clear.

But I have yet to see anything that truly makes him worthy of Wesker's attention."

Frey had knowledge he shouldn't possess. His power was immense by human standards ..

But still far too little in Zibar's eyes.

He didn't yet see what made this young man special...

But he had piqued his interest enough.

"I'll find the answer... when we face each other once again."

Zibar said, as he touched the wound Frey had left on his body.

And just like that ..

The wound vanished entirely without a trace.

Beatrice nodded lightly.

"I hope you continue to stay dormant until the right time comes, Lord Zibar.

I may not know our lord's true intentions, but I'm sure you understand them better than I do."

She wasn't wrong.

And Zibar didn't seem to object.

“Though we’re both part of the Ten Great Demons, I’ve never once understood what Wesker is thinking.

Even though I’m older, he climbed the ranks faster than anyone in history...”

Except for Crimson — the Red Moon — Wesker had been the fastest demon to ever rise through the ranks.

That alone made him worthy of being the king’s Eye.

“Forgive my rudeness, Lord Zibar... but do you have any idea where he is now?”

Wesker had never once shown himself ..

Not even to Beatrice, who had set up the entire Witch’s Game for him.

He only ever contacted her through his shadow.

For someone on Beatrice’s level, locating him was simply impossible.

But she still held on to a faint hope ..

Because Zibar might be strong enough to even stand against Wesker.

Zibar, however, shook his head.

“Even my real body would struggle to track Wesker down, let alone a weak clone like this.”

“I see.”

Beatrice looked somewhat disappointed, though she didn't let it show.

Wesker hadn't bothered to appear ..

Even with beings like Zibar present.

Whatever the Rank 4 Demon was planning...

He was pouring all of his time and energy into it .. So much so that he no longer cared about his own faction.

"He'll come to us when the time is right.

So there's no need to rush things, Beatrice."

As he walked past her, leaving her to comfort Gibetto, Zibar left the area.

The witch nodded, fully trusting his words.

"In that case...

Let's keep playing the game...

Just a little longer, shall we?"

Chapter 488: Echoes Before the Storm (1)

— Frey Starlight's POV —

The wheel had finally begun to turn, and there wasn't much time left...

Using my teleportation ability, I managed to escape the enemy's land alongside Ghost without incident.

The moment we got far enough from that death zone, I was finally able to exhale, relieved after that unexpected clash against opponents who vastly outclassed us.

Ghost, in particular, had endured the worst of it. As soon as we reached safe ground, he collapsed to the ground, panting heavily and unable to compose himself.

He was drenched in sweat, his hands trembling uncontrollably...

It was the first time I'd ever seen Ghost in such a state. The shadows of what he had just experienced had hit him violently.

That's what it meant to stand before two of the strongest demons in existence.

Unlike me, he didn't have an SSS-rank aura reserve that could keep him standing in front of beings like that.

I spent a few long seconds watching him silently, then turned my gaze toward the Empire's military camp, a few hundred meters away.

I had deliberately teleported a distance away to avoid drawing attention with a sudden appearance.

But now, as I observed them more closely—the human forces .. I couldn't help but ask myself:

'How are they supposed to survive, exactly?'

Clutching my head and pulling my hair back, a pounding headache took hold the moment I thought about the sheer scale of the catastrophe we were about to face.

Geppetto, also known as Thanatos... some named him the King of Death.

And Zibar, the Tenth Seat .. a demon capable of ending wars on his own, for he was an army by himself.

How exactly were we supposed to deal with beings like that at our current level of power?

I've met Sir Alonne before. I know the power Maekar holds.

Compared to them, I might very well be the strongest human alive on this planet.

And yet, even at full power, all I could do was leave a shallow wound on one of them...

What exactly are we hoping to accomplish?

Not to mention .. Zibar didn't even come in his real body.

I don't know the exact limits of the clones created through Agaros' Reincarnation soul , but from what I do know, each clone caps out at about 80% of the original's power .. and the more clones, the weaker each one becomes.

In other words, at best, I was facing only 80% of the real Tenth Demon's power—and even then, all I managed with my strongest technique was a mere scratch.

"Damn it..."

For the first time in a long while, that feeling came back.

That suffocating sense of powerlessness .. as if my strength meant nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Just how much more cursed power do I need if I'm to stand against monsters like that?

What must I do? What must I sacrifice?

Should I let go of my humanity? My very soul? Should I sell myself to one demon in order to kill another?

I don't know...

Against beings like Zibar, I truly don't know what I'm supposed to do.

The gap in strength was overwhelming.

"Frey..."

After a few minutes, Ghost finally managed to compose himself. It seemed he, too, shared my sense of dread.

"Do... do we even stand a chance of winning .. no, surviving?"

He asked. And it was unlike him.

But it was the right question.

"Let's see..."

Holding my swords—Dark Sister and Balerion—I gave them a long look before answering.

“Our chances are zero. For now.”

Ghost immediately caught the key part.

“For now?”

I nodded, then gently tapped his shoulder.

“Our enemies are tougher than ever before, Ghost. If they join the war now... we’re going to die. Without question.”

To defeat an SSS-rank warrior, you need another of the same level.

Even with all my cheats, only my aura had reached that rank. The rest of my stats are far below.

Meaning, I can’t defeat a true SSS rank warrior.

Let alone the Tenth Demon, who had already reached the higher stages within that rank.

Because SSS isn’t a single tier .. it’s divided into seven stages.

The problem is, I don’t know which level Zibar and Geppetto stand at. Their full strength is still a mystery to me.

But...

“They won’t participate in the war just yet. Something is forcing them to hold back, which means they’re here for another reason. A reason that compels someone like the Tenth Seat himself to descend upon Earth.”

So the real question becomes...

Why are beings like them here in the first place?

I'm certain there are countless battlefields across this vast world that require their presence .. far more than this one. Humans pose no real threat to them, unlike certain other species.

Maybe that's why Zibar came only as a clone, not in his true body.

But that doesn't change the fact that he still came .. with Geppetto no less.

'A reason that makes this war we're fighting against the Ultras look like a trivial matter in their eyes...'

'Think...'

Why would they come here? What task could beings of their level be entrusted with?

Deep in thought, I tried to unravel their mystery...

"Geppetto and Zibar... they're part of the Black Faction. The group that follows Wesker. In other words, they're acting under that damned demon's orders."

Wesker.

The Fourth-Ranked Demon who had lurked in my shadow for so long.

The one responsible for my father's death. The vile entity stalking us from the corners of existence. The true embodiment of what it means to be a demon...

Wesker.

Just thinking about him made a sudden realization strike me.

A realization so sharp I immediately pulled up my system interface.

'If my assumption is correct... it should appear now.'

Ignoring all the other system functions and my chaotic stats, my eyes locked straight onto the mission tab.

—

Main Quests

– Kill 10,000 Ultras: 5,000 Achievement Points. (Completed)

– Defeat one of the Ultras' main powerhouses: 5,000 Achievement Points. (Completed)

Final Mission Unlocked: Eliminate Wesker's Shadows.

Mission Description:

Wesker's shadows are spreading across the world, and the hunt has already begun. This is a race against time .. who will hunt who first?

The catastrophe is inevitable. Your blade may be the deciding factor in the war to come.

Before it's too late, eliminate Wesker's shadows.

The First Shadow: The Eternal Witch, Beatrice.

The Second Shadow: The Death King, Thanatos .. also known as Geppetto.

The Third Shadow: The One-Man Army, the Tenth-Ranked High Demon, Zibar.

The Fourth Shadow: ???

Reward for Completion: Unlock advanced phases of Shadow Adaptation. (One phase will be unlocked per defeated Shadow.)

Penalty for Failure: Humanity's extinction and total defeat in the war.

System Note:

I know, I know .. you're probably wondering who I am, aren't you? Who is this snarky system that keeps mocking you all the time? Let me tease you a little... if you manage to complete the mission, I'll tell you who I really am! Exciting, isn't it?

But let's be honest... this mission is harder than anything you've ever faced, and your chances? Paper-thin. Will you hunt them... or will they hunt you?

Personally, I'm betting on the latter. But hey, who knows? Maybe you'll surprise me.

I'd love to call you a frog at the bottom of a well, but let's admit it .. your strength has grown a lot lately. Let's just say... you're barely decent now. But not nearly good enough.

Do your best, Frey Starlight.

Chapter 489: Echoes Before the Storm (2)

Reading those vile words from the system again and again, I felt a dry, involuntary laugh escape my throat.

'That damned system...'

My assumption was right.

More or less, I was beginning to understand why those cursed demons had come.

"The real game has begun."

We humans... and even the Ultras... we're just pieces on a giant chessboard.

And now, the real players .. the ones moving the pieces from behind the curtain .. were finally stepping onto the board themselves.

"Hunt them, or be hunted."

That's likely the reason for their arrival now—orders straight from Wesker himself.

"They're here to take down the big fish. In other words, those standing behind the humans on this board."

Maybe they're targeting the Engineer... or the other mysterious humans who were with him.

In short, while we fight our war against the Ultras on the frontlines, there's another war about to erupt .. one that will take place in the shadows, between beings powerful enough to tear apart the sky and crush mountains.

Understanding this terrifying truth, part of me was gripped with dread about the future ahead... while another part lingered on the final words of the system.

If I manage to complete the mission... it'll reveal its true identity to me.

Then there are Wesker's shadows.

Four in total, but the fourth is still unknown.

With each one I slay, I'll unlock a new phase of Shadow Adaptation. Beatrice is the easiest. Zibar—or the fourth shadow—will be the hardest.

Whoever that fourth one is, it doesn't change the fact that this is the toughest mission I've ever received.

There's no explicit time limit... but judging from how things are moving, it's safe to say I have until the end of the war.

They want me to reach the peak of the High Ten demon's... in this short a window?

Clenching my fist so tightly my fingers nearly dug into my palm, I turned back to Ghost.

"The countdown has begun, Ghost. This time... we might actually all die."

I chuckled quietly, as my eyes blazed with a radiant violet light.

"But even if we do, make sure of one thing.. I'll take down as many sons of bitches as I possibly can."

The mission the system just issued didn't really change anything.

The goal had always been the same since the very beginning.

I still needed power... much more of it.

And I would pursue that power .. the overwhelming might capable of tipping the balance.

As I renewed my resolve, I walked alongside Ghost toward the imperial encampment.

"Ghost, for now... keep the appearance of the high-ranked demons a secret. Don't report it."

I spoke seriously, causing Ghost to hesitate, uncertain if that was truly the right decision.

"Hiding something like this could bring disaster on all our heads later."

"There's no point in informing the Empire's commanders. It would completely shatter troop morale. Many might surrender on the spot just to preserve their lives."

I needed the imperial soldiers to fight longer. I couldn't let them give up so easily.

Ghost gave me a firm nod.

"I understand your reasoning. To be honest, I never planned to inform the general public .. only a few in command. But if keeping this between us is what you want, Frey... then so be it."

"Thank you."

I thanked my assassin friend before casting a brief glance toward the shadows behind me.

"You too, Sansa."

The moment I said her name, Ghost's eyes widened in surprise at the sudden emergence of our shadowy demon ally. He hadn't sensed her presence at all.

Sansa didn't look pleased.

"Frey... don't tell me you're thinking something reckless like handling this on your own."

She frowned as she spoke.

"I felt their presence the instant their feet touched the ground .. and they sensed mine in turn. They're not like Beatrice. They're unlike any enemy we've faced so far. Frey... if you fight either of them now... you will die."

She had already sensed the power of our new foes, which explained why she rushed to me immediately after our skirmish with them.

I figured I'd alarmed her by vanishing earlier when I charged off to save Ghost.

Sansa had always been able to read my intentions. She spent so long watching me from the shadows, always close ..even before I was aware of her.

And that was how she knew... that I had intended to fight them.

She reached out to me instinctively, and I could do nothing but take her hand in mine.

"Don't worry. I don't plan to fight them alone. This isn't my war to fight alone... We'll face it together."

I reassured her .. and Ghost, who stood beside her.

The three of us returned to the camp, our hands still linked, as none of us wanted to let go.

Feeling her warm touch... sensing her true emotions toward me... I couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt.

'Sorry... Sansa. But I lied.'

With my expression darkening, I looked ahead as the gears of my mind began forging the path forward.

In this world, nothing mattered but power .. overwhelming power and nothing else.

The only thing that would never betray me. The only thing I could rely on.

Was myself... and my own strength. Nothing else.

I was already prepared to move forward ..

To kill every last one of my enemies.

The days passed, one after another, since Frey returned with Ghost .. both having realized that foes greater than ever before awaited them.

The imperial camp, its numbers reduced to barely two thousand, had tightened into a defensive formation along the shores of the Demonic Sea.

For the past few days, the mages had worked tirelessly, night and day, in a desperate push to complete the massive teleportation array...

The array that would serve as the gateway for the Empire's real forces.

At this point, the vanguard was vulnerable to an ambush at any moment. If the Ultras somehow breached them and destroyed the array, all the mages' efforts would be lost, and they'd be forced to start over from scratch.

To prevent such a catastrophe, the vanguard's strongest warriors took turns standing guard around the clock .. 24 hours a day.

Frey Starlight, in particular, spent each entire day seated at the frontmost ridge of the camp, gazing into the distant horizon.

With his full aura unleashed, there wasn't a chance that any enemy could slip past him unnoticed.

It could be said that much of the Empire's current confidence stemmed from his mere presence nearby.

Whatever showed itself ..Frey would obliterate it on the spot.

That was what the imperial soldiers believed, and it was a belief growing stronger by the day, alongside Frey's rising status.

He had brought back the era of miracles, sparing them countless tragedies.

Ghost Umbra, on the other hand, had reported the truth about the Ultras' use of nightmare creatures, along with the overwhelming armies he had seen firsthand.

His intelligence gave the Empire a true strategic advantage.

What he uncovered was immediately passed on to the high command, who had already begun working on their countermeasures.

And as the mages neared the completion of the teleportation gate ..

The Empire's forces waited.

Waited for the Ultras to strike.

Waited for round two... to officially begin.

Clustered behind Frey Starlight and the vanguard unit, many soldiers were once again prepared to put their lives on the line and follow Lord Starlight .. just as they had in the previous battle.

Many of them longed to return to that state .. when they thought of nothing but killing the enemy before them, driven forward by an invisible force.

It had been the first time they ever felt truly significant.

As if they'd achieved something... something worth remembering for the rest of their lives. Something that would etch their names into the pages of history.

They all wanted to fight again.

But no matter how many hours or days passed... the enemy they so desperately waited for never showed.

So much so that the teleportation gate was completed without them even realizing.

"It seems that our enemy this time isn't Gavid Lindman... but Beatrice."

With those weighty words, Frey stepped down from the frontline and returned to the camp.

Unlike Gavid Lindman ..the military commander who led from the front .. Beatrice, the demoness, preferred manipulating her enemies from the shadows.

The complete absence of enemy forces, and the fact that they were allowed to summon their reinforcements without interference... was most likely her idea. Gavid Lindman would've never allowed something like that to happen.

All the Imperial side could do now... was wonder what kind of game the Eternal Witch had prepared this time.

Chapter 490: Echoes Before the Storm (3)

As the clock's hands ticked slowly ..but steadily forward...

Imperial forces began pouring through the colossal magic formation that had taken days and sleepless nights for the mages to complete.

Though the formation was massive .. allowing many to pass at once .. bringing through the full army still took a tremendous amount of time.

In the end, once the Empire obtained a clear overview of the enemy's forces, including the nightmare creatures and high-blood warriors...

They sent 70,000 troops ..an overwhelming army comprised of the Empire's greatest elites and warriors.

Great family's leaders, guild masters, and renowned champions were all present.

Such a massive army quickly spread across the eastern shore of the continent, and the ground trembled beneath their feet.

The only ones left behind were 30,000 soldiers deliberately held back by Aegon .. reserved for his special plan later on.

Meanwhile, none of the SS+ rank powerhouses—such as Sir Alone and Maekar Valerion—had made a move yet. They remained behind, waiting for the enemy to reveal their full might.

The moment they entered the war... it would mark the beginning of the final battle.

To fully transport all 70,000 soldiers... took three full days and nights.

The vanguard camp, which had barely held 2,000 men previously, had now expanded dramatically .. covering a massive stretch of the Shizclar region.

The Empire had finally secured a foothold in the enemy's lands for the first time in ages, and now it was only a matter of time before the second clash between both sides erupted.

...

...

...

The atmosphere of war was always... unique ..especially the nights that came just before a battle.

During nights like these, humans would often try to forget, even for a moment, the pressure and dread that threatened to crush their shoulders.

You'd see them passing the time with friendly sparring matches scattered across the camp, or simply spending quiet moments with those they held dear .. perhaps sharing what might be their final moments.

On the other hand, some simply couldn't push the echoes of war from their minds ..especially those who had already experienced its brutal depths.

Some would isolate themselves completely, striving to keep their minds sharp for the perfect start to battle.

And then, there were those with... far different ambitions.

That small group that ventured out in search of one man... was a perfect example.

Inside one of the tents, set apart from the rest...

The man everyone had been talking about—Frey Starlight—spent his final days in near-total seclusion.

Not by choice, but because most didn't dare to approach him.

He would occasionally step out to meet with important figures and military leaders, discussing the strategy and preparations for the coming assault.

It was said that Frey had chosen, of his own volition, to remain at the frontlines .. intent on facing the enemy and bearing the weight of the war alone.

In truth, most of the Empire's forces—and even its citizens—had heard whispers of what Frey had accomplished in the last battle.

Though many dismissed it as exaggeration or outright fiction, it didn't change the fact that Frey had become an existence that could no longer be ignored.

And so, approaching him became a problem.

If the rumors were true, and he really was that extraordinary... then how could ordinary soldiers even interact with such a miracle?

But if the rumors were lies... then he was still Frey .. the criminal many still hated, the one who was supposed to be executed.

Caught between awe and resentment... most chose to simply stay away from him entirely.

But for one particular group... that was no longer the case.

A group that chose to stay close to him... more than anything else.

Frey felt their presence, so he stepped out of his tent naturally .. almost as if he had anticipated their arrival.

Outside the entrance, he found dozens .. no, hundreds of soldiers gathered around his tent, their eyes fixed on him.

Most of them weren't in good shape; some of their wounds were still bleeding through the tightly wrapped bandages.

Frey recognized them immediately.

"You're still here, huh?"

Walking toward them, Frey stopped right in front of the girl named Selene, who stood at the front of the group.

They were the same ones who had fought alongside him before .. the vanguard troops who survived because of him.

"We deeply apologize for disturbing your rest, Lord Starlight."

Selene bowed low in apology, followed quickly by the others behind her.

But Frey made them all stand tall again with a silent surge of aura that forced their bodies upright.

"There's no need to apologize. It pleases me to see the faces of those I once trusted to guard my back," he said with a smile. "Honestly, I thought you had all already left."

The soldiers' expressions eased slightly, prompting Selene to take the first step and make her request.

"Forgive me... Lord Starlight! But... may we fight by your side again in your next battle—no, in every battle that follows?!"

She stuttered near the end, making her request sound foolish, and immediately regretted taking responsibility for voicing it.

But the other soldiers quickly backed her up, voicing their true desires.

"Let us fight beside you again, Lord Starlight!"

"We want to stay with you, Lord Starlight!"

They repeated the same words again and again.

Frey's expression darkened.

And then, with a terrifying pressure, he released his aura.

The suffocating force silenced them all as fear overtook their faces.

Coldly, Lord Starlight spoke, subduing them with nothing but his presence.

"Do you even realize what you're about to commit to... soldiers of the Empire?"

He stepped forward, eyes scanning each of their faces, one by one.

"I told you before. I may not know your names, but I witnessed your struggle, your perseverance. You were given a single mission .. and you completed it flawlessly."

The vanguard's mission had been the hardest. Many died, and those who survived were given the rare privilege of withdrawing from the frontlines ..a chance most soldiers never got.

Many took that chance.

But some... some foolishly rejected it. And those fools were the ones standing before Frey now.

"Has your confidence blinded you just because you won once?"

"Has surviving death dulled your sense of reality?"

"Do you think you're special... just because you lived while others died? Do you think it will always be like that?"

Pressing them further, Frey declared:

"Are you afraid of my aura? Does my power scare you? Let me tell you .. battlefields are full of people like me. Some may even be stronger."

"I made my decision long ago .. to fight this entire war, to kill and tear down as many of our enemies as possible. And for that... I'm prepared to stake my life. Are you?"

"Will you follow me to your death just because I told you to? Will you throw away your lives just to chase that fleeting feeling of glory? Wake up! This is war! And here, all that awaits you... is death."

Frey took one last step forward ..and unleashed his killing intent without restraint upon the soldiers.

Within seconds, most of them had turned and fled.

One after another, those men who swore to fight by his side until death ..ran.

Their false resolve shattered.

Their empty dreams collapsed under the weight of the grim reality Frey forced upon them.

His killing intent was thick, heavy, and horrifying ..something he had forged through the slaughter of countless humans and monsters alike.

In less than a minute... they were gone.

Frey watched their backs as they disappeared—but he couldn't ignore the few who remained.

Still standing.

Upright, despite the crushing aura that weighed on them.

Only eight people.

Five men, three women.

Three looked young.

Two were his age.

Two more were middle-aged.

And one was an old woman, appearing to be in her sixties.

It was a bizarre lineup.

One of them even wet herself from sheer terror.

But she didn't move.

That was Selene.

Her legs trembled. Her blue hair hid her eyes.

But she forced herself to remain where she was.

That made Frey smile ..and he withdrew his aura.

"I meant every word I said," he admitted. "But I acknowledge the will of those who remain. Fighting by my side means living each day with nothing but a threadbare veil between you and death. And today... you've proven that you're capable of facing death itself."

Glancing at them once more...

Frey concluded.

"I'm sure each of you has your own reason for following me. Whatever those reasons may be... you've all earned my respect."

With his back turned, Frey walked away.

"We move out tomorrow. Be ready by then."

And the moment he said that ..

All eight of them shouted in unison, without thinking.

"Yes, sir!!"

In that moment, Frey gained the first members of his personal unit.

The unit that would follow him for a long time.

A unit that lived only for him...

And for the goals he had set long ago.